

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD



Walk behind a waterfall at Grotto Falls in the Smokies.

TENNESSEE

HIKE, SWIM, OR JUST WATCH FIREFLIES IN SMOKY MOUNTAINS

By Gina Vercesi
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT
One in a series of occasional stories marking the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service.

GATLINBURG, Tenn. — Just a few yards past the last of the traffic lights on Highway 441, downtown Gatlinburg’s candy-coated vice — Cupid’s Chapel of Love, Fanny Farkle’s arcade, and Ripley’s-You-Can’t-Believe-the-Tackiness — fades from sight in the rearview mirror. The breeze through my open windows suddenly takes on

different feel, a different smell — cool and fresh, damp and heavy, infused with ripeness of humus-rich earth. Lush forest lines both sides of the Newfound Gap Road as it winds through the park, opening up from time to time to reveal dramatic views of the misty-blue specters of the Smoky Mountains.

It was a welcome rush of nature. I’d been in the car for close to 13 hours at that point, having left New York before sunrise on a mission to reach the park by dusk — in time for the fireflies.

A staggering 307.2 million visitors

in 2015 enabled Great Smoky Mountains National Park to defend its title as the most popular in the country. Of those, just about 11,000 have the good fortune to score a ticket to the park’s annual, seven-night firefly party.

Each year in early June, seemingly by magic, an enormous concentration of adult Photinus carolinus fireflies appear in the Elkmont section of the national park. The insects use a synchronous pattern of flashing in order to attract mates, filling the entire forest with rhythmic waves of dazzling light.

But the light show doesn’t begin until nightfall, leaving plenty of daylight hours open for adventure. Great Smoky Mountains National Park is home to a half-million acres of forested trails, cascading waterfalls, and mountain vistas and one easily could spend a lifetime roaming its Appalachian hills and hollers. Since most travelers will visit for just a few days, here are some of the best ways to experience the allure of the Smokies.

Hike a waterfall

Waterfalls are the epitome of Smoky Mountain magic. Abundant natural rainfall means the park spills with streams, creeks, rivers, and cascades and the only factor that comes into play when deciding which falls to explore is how much time you have. Most waterfall hikes are moderately strenuous, though the Smokies are some of the highest mountains on the East Coast, so expect uphill travel on most trails. One of the best is Abrams Falls, which starts a half-mile off the Cades Cove Loop Road. The hike is five miles round-trip and leads to a dramatic cascade with a fantastic swimming hole. If you’ve ever wanted to walk behind a waterfall, Grotto Falls is the spot and provides the opportunity to tour the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail. Find the Rainbow Falls trailhead off Roaring Fork as well.

Bike Cades Cove

The early bird catches the worm, or perhaps even the bear, when it comes to biking in historic Cades Cove. Though often clogged with slow-moving cars, the 11-mile loop remains blissfully traffic-free until 10 a.m. on Wednesdays and Saturdays. An early morning ride offers the best chance to glimpse park wildlife including white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, and a couple of the 1,500 resident black bears — cub sightings provide a special thrill. Pick up a bike at the Cades Cove Campground Store — the earlier you arrive, the better — and pedal past rolling green pastures and flower-filled meadows framed by remarkable Smoky Mountain views. A smattering of preserved homesteads offers a peek into the valley’s early Appalachian pioneer history.

Explore Elkmont

Walking through this former logging town turned resort community, imagine it full of families — kids romping through the woods to wade in the creeks while folks stop to chat with neighbors on the wide, covered porches. The 74 charming cabins were populated until 1992 when the park appropriated the town and they fell into disrepair. Now the area is sometimes thought of as a creepy ghost town, but knowing Elkmont’s back story helps visitors understand that the vibe is more quiet melancholy than haunted scariness — though I have heard tell of a ghost named Did-dy. Elkmont is home to a lovely, self-guided nature trail that is less than a mile around. For a longer hike, try the loop from the Little River trail to Cucumber Gap and back down to Jakes Creek.

Scale a mountain

For views that extend across the park, these two Smoky Mountain summits provide easy access off Newfound Gap Road. Find the first one — the Chimney Tops trail — about seven miles from Sugarlands. Chimney Tops is not for the faint of heart but is popular with everyone from young kids to older adults. The hike to the Chimneys is about four steep miles up and back with plenty of switchbacks and a steep rock scramble at the end. Brave that and you’ll be rewarded with one of the best views in the Smokies. If that image induces jelly legs, 360-degree vistas can also be found at Clingman’s Dome, a one-mile out and back hike up a paved road to the Smokies’ highest peak.

Take a dip

Few images harbor sentiments of carefree summer days like jumping off a rock into a cool mountain pool and plenty of down-home swimming holes are tucked throughout the park. A favorite is the one locals refer to as the Townsend ‘Y’ at the intersection of the Little River and Middle Prong where Laurel Creek Road meets Route 73. A wide, grassy slope begs for a picnic blanket where you can watch the kids bomb off the rocks into the river below. Requiring a bit more effort (but totally worth it), hike to Mouse Creek Falls along the Big Creek Trail. The falls are two miles from the trailhead and Midnight Hole, the ultimate swimming hole, is along the way.

See the light show

There are pockets of synchronous fireflies along the East Coast from northern Georgia to New York, but nowhere do the critters rival the display found in Elkmont. Beginning at around 9:30 in the evening, thousands of Photinus carolinus fireflies light the dark woods with a dazzling display of rhythmic flashing that bears little resemblance to the isolated blinks seen in suburban backyards. Park officials announce predicted peak firefly-viewing dates in late April.

Rest for the weary

There’s no need to forgo the misty blue peaks of the Smoky Mountains during your downtime. When you need to rest your tired dogs after a day of hiking or pedaling, kick back in style at the Lodge at Buckberry Creek, a plush-yet-rustic haven roosting atop 90-private acres adjacent to the national park. Reminiscent of the gilded age camps of the Adirondacks, each of the 44 inviting suites features a private balcony with glorious Smoky Mountain vistas, deep soaking tubs, and stone fireplaces. Rejuvenated? A rocking chair on Sundowner’s Porch is the perfect place for an early evening cocktail. Dinner on the deck features gorgeous sunsets over Mount Le Conte along with seasonally inspired creations like coffee-crust-ed tuna and pan-seared duck breast with jalapeno polenta. Rooms start at \$180 per night. www.buckberrylodge.com

Gina Vercesi can be reached at gdivercesi@gmail.com.

HERE

SKATE WITH SANTA AND AN OLYMPIAN AT STOWE

Ice skate with Santa and Olympic-medalist Nancy Kerrigan at Stowe Mountain Resort’s outdoor ice-skating rink, Dec. 17 and 18. The rink is part of the resort’s new \$90 million Spruce Peak Village Center, which also includes a new Adventure Center with a rock-climbing gym, a movie theater, a family-friendly dining area, and the Stowe Children’s Ski and Ride school. Ski with Santa and watch a performance by the Northern Bronze Bells Ensemble (a bell-ringing troupe) at 1 p.m., and stick around for the tree-lighting ceremony at 4 p.m. Buy Vermont-made crafts at the Artisan Showcase in Stowe’s Pavilion Building both days, and get your photo taken with Santa. Bring your own skates or rent skates for \$16; skate for free. 800-253-4754, www.stowe.com.

EAT COOKIES FOR A GOOD CAUSE

Savor snickerdoodles, maple sugar cookies and more on a “cookie crawl” that takes you to inns, boutiques, and attractions across New Hampshire’s Monadnock region, Dec. 10. The self-guided 12th annual

Currier and Ives Cookie Tour includes more than a dozen venues in Troy, Jaffrey, Rindge, Peterborough, and Fitzwilliam. Buy a ticket and get a homemade cookie, drink, and recipe card for the treats offered at each location. Visit 10 or more cookie stops and be eligible to win a \$150 gift certificate for any of the participating locations along the way, including the Swanzey Historical Museum (Swanzey), Inn at East Hill Farm (Troy), and the Terrapin Glassblowing Studio or Newfoundland Pony Sanctuary (Jaffrey). Tickets: \$12 per person. Proceeds benefit My Neighbors House in the town of Troy, which provides assistance to local residents in need during winter. www.currierandivescookietour.com.

THERE

A BARGAIN WAY TO SEE BARCELONA

Follow in the footsteps of soccer superstar Lionel Messi, discover the works of master architect Antoni Gaudí, and go on walking and boat tours with the new Barcelona Pass, which offers visitors access to many of the city’s top sites, attractions, and tours. The pass, available as a two-day or three-day op-

tion, provides entry to 15 of the city’s top attractions, including fast-track access to four sites, such as Camp Nou stadium, where the Barcelona soccer team plays, and L’Aquàrium, which is Europe’s only oceanarium, with 450 different species. The pass also offers access to the hop-on/hop-off Barcelona sightseeing bus, and an 80-page guidebook on the Catalan capital. Prices: \$59 for two-day children’s pass (ages 4-12) to \$119 for three-day adult pass. www.barcelonapass.com.

DISCOVER MAYAN SITES IN MEXICO

Fancy yourself a cultural archeologist? Travel to southern Mexico and explore the Yucatán’s most significant archeological sites, including Chichén Itzá with its stepped pyramids and temples; Uxmal, home to the 100-foot-tall Pyramid of the Magician; and Ek Balam, where an arch marks the end of an ancient road that once connected the Mayan kingdoms. Explore these and other famous sites through Go Yucatán’s local tour operators, which offer one-day tours that hit the highlights around Merida to a seven-day adventure that includes a private tour of the three major archeological sites (two of which are UNESCO World Heritage

sites), accommodations at boutique hotels, and bike rides through communities where visitors can meet the Mayan’s direct descendents. Prices range from \$75 (day trips) to about \$1,200 (7-day packages). www.gotoyucatan.com.

EVERYWHERE

TRAINER HELPS BOOST FITNESS, DECREASE STRESS

Hitting the road for business or holiday travel doesn’t mean you need to abandon your fitness routine, whether you’re training for an event or strengthening for overall health and well-being. TRX Training has released a new lightweight and compact suspension trainer that can be secured from a hotel door, a tree, or a rafter at

your in-laws’ house. The TRX Go Suspension Trainer, which was developed by a Navy SEAL to stay fit while under deployment, packs down to the size of a grapefruit and weighs just more than 1 pound. It includes easy-to-adjust straps, door and suspension anchors, a travel pouch, and several short workouts. A handy TRX app provides access to general exercises and stretches to help travelers ease stress and improve mobility (great after a long flight or drive), and sport-specific strength workouts geared to skiers, golfers, and runners, for instance. The redesigned TRX Pro model comes with a dozen workouts and new adjustable foot cradles. \$129.95 (TRX Go); \$249.95 (TRX Pro). 888-878-5348, www.trxtraining.com.



THESE EWriters KEEP KIDS ENTERTAINED

Get your child a Boogie Board before he or she steps onto a plane or crawls into a car seat. These entertaining eWriters keep children occupied for ages, and since there’s no ink involved, you don’t have to stress about damage to hotel couches or airline tray tables. The new Scribble ‘n Play, geared to kids ages 3 and older, has wide, built-in stylus tools for drawing multicolor pictures. Hit a button, watch the text or image disappear, and kids have a clean slate for new creations. Use the mobile app and Bluetooth feature to instantly upload and share images. The slim and compact Jot 4.5 Clearview eWriter measures just 5.75 inches tall so it can easily slip into a small bag or lunchbox. Kids can practice their handwriting, draw pictures, and trace images using the translucent LCD screen. The Jot 4.5 comes with alphabet and math flash cards for tracing, and an attached stylus. \$19.99-\$29.99. 855-224-0888, myboogieboard.com.

KARI BODNARCHUK