

The Great Smoky Mountains: Gatlinburg & Pigeon Forge

by Michelle Clark, PassPorter Guest Contributor

No trip to the Smokies is complete without a visit to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Gatlinburg is currently celebrating its Bicentennial, although much has changed in this small town since its inception in 1807. Located at the northern entrance of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park on U.S. 441, Gatlinburg is jam packed with attractions, shopping, dining, and lodging options. The heart of Gatlinburg is a one mile strip of Highway 441, also known as the Parkway.

There are plenty of lodging options in Gatlinburg ranging from hotels/motels, condos, bed & breakfasts, and cabins and chalets. Many of the hotels and motels in downtown Gatlinburg are established, family owned facilities but most of the well known chains have properties in town. We prefer the Hampton Inn as it is located near many attractions, shopping, and dining. Most of the hotels in the area offer some type of deluxe continental breakfast which can save money on food. There are many time shares in the Gatlinburg area, so if you own a time share you may have Gatlinburg properties in your network. If you are traveling with a larger party you may be more comfortable renting a cabin. Location should be the major factor in choosing your lodging. The easiest way to get to the various attractions in Gatlinburg is walking, so you location is key.

So, what's there to do in Gatlinburg? What's not offered may be a better question! Gatlinburg offers a wide variety of attractions ranging from mini golf to haunted houses to a world class aquarium. Ripley's, best known for their "Believe It or Not" Museums, operates six attractions in Gatlinburg: Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies, Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum, Ripley's Haunted Adventure, Ripley's Moving Theater, Davy Crockett Mini Golf, and Guinness World Records Museum. But Ripley's doesn't have a monopoly on fun in Gatlinburg. You can also find black light golf, indoor go-karts, laser tag, ghost houses, car museums, and other similar attractions. Each of these attractions has separate admission that will range in price from \$8 up to \$18.00 plus tax. Ripley's offers a combo ticket which will save you money if you plan to do several of the Ripley's attractions. Parking is hard to come by in Gatlinburg and will cost you at least \$6.00 per day.

Besides the usual "tourist traps", Gatlinburg has several unique, established attractions. Ober Gatlinburg, located above the town, is a ski resort and amusement park. You can ride the sky lift or aerial

tramway to access Ober Gatlinburg. Non skiers can skate in its large indoor rink or enjoy go-karts, mini golf, or shopping. But the crown jewel of Gatlinburg attractions has to be the Aquarium of the Smokies. This 1.4 million gallon aquarium features over 10,000 difference sea creatures in a variety of settings including a tropical rainforest, ocean realm, and coral reef. The shark lagoon is enclosed in an underwater tunnel with a slow moving sidewalk so you can ride while you take in the 4 different species of sharks in the lagoon. If you plan a morning trip to the aquarium you can watch a diver clean the lagoon by hand while two other divers ward off the curious sharks! The coral reef tank has daily dive shows where you can watch divers interact with over 1,000 fish. You can get "up close and personal" with stingray and horseshoe crabs at Toucharay Bay.

If your favorite activity involves a Visa card, don't worry--there's plenty of shopping available in Gatlinburg. Over 450 shops located along the Parkway in roadside stores and malls offer every kind of souvenir imaginable, from Dixie Outfitter T-shirts to grandfather clocks to Crocs.

All this activity will surely build up an appetite, and Gatlinburg offers a variety of dining options. Pancakes are a local favorite, so you will find a number of pancake houses that serve all day. The Peddler is a locally owned steak house with a unique twist: the "peddler" will push a meat cart to your table so you can choose your specific cut of meat. The restaurant was built around the original cabin of one of Gatlinburg's first settlers and is located on the river. Get there early and request a table next to the river for enchanting views.

Familiar chain restaurants in Gatlinburg include the Hard Rock Cafe, Texas Roadhouse, TGIFriday's, and fast food restaurants such as McDonald's, Wendy's, Subway, and Burger King. Just want a snack? You've come to the right place. Walk along the parkway (or "the strip" as it is often referred to) and you can find fudge, funnel cakes, ice cream, frozen lemonade, and many other treats that will ruin your diet! We like to visit Fanny Farkle's for an original Ogle Dog (a hand dipped corn dog) or grilled sausage dogs. Visit the Old Smoky Mountain Candy Kitchen and watch them make taffy at the front window.

Most travelers combine their Gatlinburg vacation with a visit to Pigeon Forge. Pigeon Forge is located about 6 miles north of the Gatlinburg strip. Like Gatlinburg, the major attractions, dining, shopping, and lodging are all located on or just off Highway 441 or the Parkway. Pigeon Forge is probably best known as the home of Dolly Parton and Dollywood, but there's much more to do here than visit Dolly's theme park. The attractions in Pigeon Forge are similar to what you find in

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neighboring Gatlinburg. The difference is that Pigeon Forge is much more spread out--you don't walk to attractions in Pigeon Forge, and there is plenty of parking.

The majority of the attractions at Pigeon Forge are larger and outdoors, so there are more go-kart and mini-golf type attractions. You will find a wider variety of hotels/motels at Pigeon Forge, and generally the rates are cheaper here than at Gatlinburg. Common amenities at Pigeon Forge motels include free breakfast and high speed internet. Many properties have outdoor pools with slides. The newer lodging facilities are located north on Highway 441 towards Sevierville.

Pigeon Forge is a shopper's dream! Besides the standard souvenir shops, Pigeon Forge is home to several large outlet malls including Belz and Pigeon Forge Factory Outlets. Neighboring Sevierville has the Tanger Outlets. It's so close to Pigeon Forge that you won't realize you left one town and entered another. The Christmas Place is a unique shop which consists of 30,000 square feet of Christmas merchandise.

Dinner shows are popular with Pigeon Forge visitors. Dolly started it all with the Dixie Stampede, a Southern style meal with North versus South entertainment. There are approximately 20 different dinner theaters in Pigeon Forge. In fact the section of Highway 441 where most of the theaters are located is commonly referred to as "music row". Most dinner shows require advance reservations.

A few local favorites include The Old Mill Restaurant and the Applewood Farmhouse Restaurant. The Old Mill is located at a historic 1800's gristmill with a large water wheel on the Little Pigeon River. The restaurant serves classic southern cooking such as country fried steak or chicken and dumplings. Homemade pies and desserts complete the experience. You can purchase cornmeal, grits, or pancake mixes ground onsite as well as homemade jams and jellies in the Old Mill General Store. The Applewood Farmhouse Restaurant is located at The Apple Barn, which has sold apples, cider, apple butter, and many other products for over 20 years. If its apple related, chances are they have it at The Apple Barn. The Apple Barn has expanded to include a Christmas shop, a winery, and a candy factory. Home made ice cream is available at the creamery where you'll find some of the most delicious and unique flavors of ice cream (yes they give out free samples!). The restaurant also serves southern cuisine but is most famous for their delicious apple fritters. Be sure to get a sackful to take home with you after your visit to the Gatlinburg/Pigeon Forge area!

Here are some helpful sites when planning a trip the Smokies:

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National Park Service

<http://www.nps.gov/grsm/index.htm>

Gatlinburg Chamber of Commerce

<http://www.gatlinburg.com>

Pigeon Forge Department of Tourism

<http://www.mypigeonforge.com>

About The Author: Michelle Clark is a confessed theme park junkie and the mother of three teens who share in her thrill ride obsession. She is also a Co-Guide on the PassPorter Message Boards.

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