



# Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Graze blueberry patches, explore swimming holes, and tag the South's high points in America's favorite park.

DON'T BE FOOLED—though the Smokies can be busier than a NASCAR stadium, the lush peaks and hazy mist that give the park its name hide a lifetime's worth of adventure. Packed into the park are verdant groves of tulip poplar and wind-whipped spruce-fir forests where elk and black bears roam. Three-foot salamanders swim beneath clouds of fireflies blinking in unison. On a typical multiday hike, you could pass more than 10,000 plant and animal species (though scientists believe 90,000 could live here). In this Eastern oasis, in the shadow of 300-million-year-old moun-

tains that once soared as tall as the Rockies, life explodes in a shock of blooming, buzzing, slithering, and chirping—a rare escape where hikers can leave civilization and lose themselves in deep wilderness.

## THE STATS

- Acres** 521,086
- Miles of trail** 800+
- Website** nps.gov/grsm
- Phone** 865-436-1220 2007
- Visitors** 9.4 million (70,215 backcountry)

## Entrance Strategy

### Getting There

The nearest airports are Knoxville's McGhee-Tyson (45 miles) (1) and Asheville Regional (60 miles) (2). Head to the Oconaluftee Visitor Center (3), on US 441 just north of Cherokee on the North Carolina side, to avoid Tennessee's Dollywood traffic. If you must approach from the north, save time and frustration by taking the Gatlinburg Bypass (4) (just north of town) straight to the park.

### Season

April for wildflowers and low humidity; June for synchronous fireflies; July and August for blueberries and blackberries; late September through mid-October for brilliant foliage, easier creek crossings, and solitude.

### Best Frontcountry Campground

Hemlock-shaded Big Creek Campground (5), in the park's northeastern corner, is as close as you can get to backcountry tranquility without having to sweat for it. Arrive by 11 a.m. to snag one of the walk-in creekside spots—this 12-site, tent-only campground is first-come, first-serve. (\$14; 865-436-1230)

### Pre-Trip Breakfast

Carbo load Southern-style with hash browns, grits, and 24 kinds of flapjacks at Pancake Pantry (6) in Gatlinburg, Tennessee (865-436-4724). From North Carolina, get your coffee with an apple-currant muffin on the side at Annie's Naturally Bakery (7) in Sylva (828-586-9096).

### Gear Shop

The Happy Hiker (8), just outside the park border on River Road in Gatlinburg, has camp towels (for swimming), Duraflame logs for pre-hike camping, and more. (865) 436-6000; happyhiker.com

### Permits

The farther you get from popular trails and shelters, the less you need advance reservations. The majority of backcountry sites in the Smokies only require that you self-register for a free permit in person before you go. Get trail beta and permits at Sugarlands Visitor Center (9) in Tennessee or Oconaluftee Visitor Center in North Carolina. If you're headed for one of the 17 reservation-only sites or 14 trail shelters (also free), call (865) 436-1231 at 8 a.m. EST one month before the first day of your trip.

## Exit Strategy

### Clean Up

Arrow Creek Campground (10) (865-430-7433; arrowcreekcamp.com) on your way to Cosby on Highway 321 has \$3 showers.

### Pig Out

The Front Porch (11) (423-487-2875), on US 321 in Cosby, serves Mexican cuisine with a backwoods Appalachian twist—Cokes come in Mason jars, the band plays bluegrass, and, if you're lucky, one of the locals will slip you a flask of moonshine (a must-sip in the South) under the table. (If you're North Carolina-bound, stop at Nick & Nate's (12) in Sylva for the classic post-hike pizza-and-beer combo.)

## You're A Tourist, Now Act Like One

Every iconic park has its Old Faithful. In the Smokies, it's synchronous fireflies. In mid-June, the only species of lightning bugs in the country that flash in unison are at the peak of their group-blinking frenzy. Park at Sugarlands Visitor Center and catch the \$2 shuttle to Elkmont Campground (13) for a front-row seat for this two-week show; check nps.gov/grsm for dates and times.

## Three Secrets for a Perfect Visit

Swollen streams and aggressive rodents are your biggest threats here. Avoid them—and nab the perfect shelter—with these tips.

**[1] Avoid big water** Don't get stranded behind a bulging creek. Check both the forecast and the last few days' weather—streams can stay impassably high for three days after heavy rains. And call the backcountry office a day before your trip.

**[2] Hang it all** Fact: The park's plentiful mice, raccoons, and bears are drooling over your trail mix. Thwart them like the rangers do by hanging your entire pack—not just your food bag—from your campsite's cable system. Stash the pack in a garbage bag to protect it from summer showers.

**[3] Gimme shelter** Appalachian Trail lean-tos within eight miles of the roads to Newfound Gap (14) and Clingmans Dome (15) fill up fast. Reserve ones that require a longer approach, like Mollies Ridge (16) or Pecks Corner (17), for the best shot at a night free from snoring strangers.

## How to Get a Fire Started

The Smokies average 85 inches of rain annually, making this a mossy, soggy place. Follow these tips for a faster spark.

**[1]** Pack firestarter like dryer lint or Coghlan's Fire Sticks, which light even when wet.

**[2]** Rig a tarp, which will shelter your tent or cooking spot from wind and rain.

**[3]** For tinder, whittle away wet bark to get to dry wood at the core.

## Five Classic Smokies Adventures

### DAYHIKE: Mt. Cammerer

The views from atop the stone firetower on Mt. Cammerer (18)—of the lush Cosby Valley, Big Creek, and row upon row of rolling peaks (including, no joke, Rich Butt Mountain)—are simply the best in the park, says ranger Pam Rogers. The prettiest, least crowded route to the top is the 12-mile roundtrip from Big Creek campground. Climb sharply on the Chestnut Branch Trail, then pass under black oak, birch, and red maple heading south on the Appalachian Trail. Look out for young American chestnut trees—which were almost wiped out by a devastating blight in the 1920s—as you switchback up to the Mt. Cammerer Trail and the 4,928-foot summit. The octagonal, CCC-era tower is one of only a handful of that style in the country.

### OVERNIGHT: Charlies Bunion (19)

Get away for a night or three on this moderate 12.8-mile lasso loop, which delivers you to the high reaches of the Great Smoky Mountains—and some of the park's best vistas. For details on this route, plus an interactive map and downloadable GPS data, go to backpacker.com/smoky1.

### OVERNIGHT: Noland Divide to Newton Bald (20)

This strenuous 16-miler packs big vertical change and diverse landscapes (from grassy campsites to mountain summits). Give it at least two nights to get the most out of it. backpacker.com/smoky2

**WEEK: Fontana Dam to  
Newfound Gap (21)**

Multiple peaks, steep climbs, quiet trout streams, open meadows, and rare Southern solitude highlight this 40.6-mile trek through some of the park's least-traveled backcountry. [backpacker.com/smoky3](http://backpacker.com/smoky3)

**MOUNTAIN BIKE THE TSALI**

The riding in the Tsali Recreation Area (22), just southwest of the park, is some of the best in the East. Forty-two miles of singletrack wind through pine and hardwood forest, passing deer-filled meadows and winding over steep, rugged ridges. Zoom past old homesites as you trace the edges of hilly peninsulas and glimpse the Smokies' rolling peaks reflected in Fontana Lake. (828-479-6431; [cs.unca.edu/nfsnc](http://cs.unca.edu/nfsnc))

**Essential Gear  
For The Smokies**

*A complete checklist, plus five picks our testers won't leave home without*

**Mountain Hardware Typhoon shell**

The Typhoon's impeccable waterproofing, butt-covering length, and stiff-brimmed hood repel relentless rain—the kind that falls many summer afternoons in the Smokies (and sometimes continues for days). Gore-Tex Paclite fabric and easy-to-operate pit zips keep you dry on the inside. \$199; 15 oz. (men's large); men's and women's S-XXL; [mountainhardware.com](http://mountainhardware.com)

**Royal Robbins Zip 'N' Go Pants**

Made of Supplex nylon, these soft and tough pants are loose-fitting for hot weather. \$65; 1 lb (men's M); men's and women's sizes; [royalrobbins.com](http://royalrobbins.com)

**Outdoor Research Nimbus Sombrero**

Smokies hikers need waterproofing before style. A CoolMax headband pulls sweat off your brow and a thin layer of closed-cell foam keeps the brim umbrella-stiff. \$40; S-XL; 4 oz (L); (888) 467-4327; [orgear.com](http://orgear.com)

**Chaco Women's ZX/1 River Sandals**

After a soggy day of hiking in the Smokies, sandals are more than a luxury—they're also good blister prevention. We like to dry our dogs in the ZX/1, a simple yet sturdy model with two narrow straps that conform to the curves of your feet. \$95; women's sizes 5–12; [chacousa.com](http://chacousa.com) (Note: Chaco makes several similar men's models.)

**Firestarter**

The hardest thing about hiking in the Smokies? Creating a flame. Pack dryer lint, cotton balls pre-coated in Vaseline, and maybe even a Duraflame log before you go. There are many commercial firestarters on the market; we've tested nearly all of them and found that most work just fine—so long as your matches or lighter work. In our experience, a backup source of flame is a surer bet than any “guaranteed” super-lighter.

**CLOTHING**

Outerwear

- waterproof/breathable jacket
- waterproof/breathable pants
- fleece jacket or wool sweater
- waterproof gaiters
- synthetic or soft-shell hiking pants
- synthetic shorts

Baselayers

- midweight long john top
- midweight long john bottoms
- long sleeve T-shirt
- synthetic briefs
- synthetic sports bra
- synthetic T-shirt

Accessories

- wool or fleece hat
- midweight wool or fleece gloves

Footwear

- waterproof hiking boots
- sandals for stream crossings (optional)
- camp footwear (optional)
- wool or synthetic socks (3)
- liner socks (2)

Extras

- rain hat
- bandanna

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**GEAR**

- internal or external frame backpack
- waterproof pack cover
- three-season tent
- synthetic sleeping bag (10° to 40°F)
- inflatable sleeping pad
- trekking poles
- stove and fuel
- lighter and waterproof matches
- cookset
- eating utensils, bowl, insulated mug
- headlamp w/extra batteries and bulb
- 32-ounce water bottles (2)
- water treatment (filter, tablets, drops)
- pocket knife or multitool
- compass or GPS (and map)
- sunglasses
- first-aid kit with personal medications
- stuff sacks (waterproof recommended)
- assorted zipper-lock bags
- insect repellent (optional)
- sunscreen (SPF 15+)
- lip balm (SPF 15+)
- toilet paper and trowel
- personal locator beacon (optional)
- bear-bagging rope (or canister)
- compact retractable umbrella (optional)