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## 48 Hours in Great Smoky Mountains National Park

by [Katy Koontz](#)

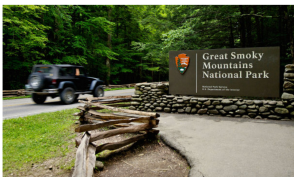
Posted Sep 19th 2013 03:53 PM

Updated Sep 20th 2013 03:10 PM

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The most visited national park in the country, [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#) offers an unusual combination of natural beauty and Appalachian culture. The 800-square-mile wilderness area straddling the Tennessee/North Carolina state line is both a United Nations International Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. It is the most biologically diverse national park in the continental U.S., with an estimated 100,000 species of plants and animals. Some creatures, including the Jordan's salamander, can only be found in the Smokies.

Until 1934, when the park was established, several Appalachian communities dotted the hills and hollows here. Although most traces of those towns were removed when the government bought the land for the park, more than 100 homes, mills, schoolhouses, barns, outbuildings and churches remain to tell the story of the region's hearty mountaintop folk.

The park is within a day's drive of one-third of the U.S. population, and access is free, making the Smokies a great weekend destination. Since there are no hotels in the park itself, make your home base a hotel, cabin or condo in one of the gateway communities -- Gatlinburg is the closest, but you will also find great accommodations in Pigeon Forge and Sevierville.

### Day 1: Evening

Start out with a bird's eye view of the area from the new [Great Smoky Mountain Wheel](#) in Pigeon Forge. Next take some time to explore the non-natural attractions in town, including the [Titanic Museum](#), the [Hollywood Wax Museum](#) and [WonderWorks](#). For a particularly memorable dinner, eat at the [Peddler Steakhouse](#) in Gatlinburg (just to the south near the entrance to the national park), where meat is grilled on Tennessee hickory charcoal. Pigeon Forge and Sevierville (just to the north) also have good dining options.



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### Day 2: Morning and Afternoon

Start out in downtown Gatlinburg, where you can order a picnic lunch to go at [Old Dad's General Store](#) (a biscuit lover's heaven), right outside the park entrance. Once inside the park, stop at the Sugarlands Visitors Center. Here you can watch a film about the park and spend some time in the little museum showcasing the area's plant and animal life. Also check out the non-profit [Great Smoky Mountains Association](#) book and gift shop in the lobby; proceeds help support the park.

Drive deeper into the park on Newfound Gap Road, stopping at the Chimneys Picnic Area to take in the Cove-Hardwood Self-Guided Nature Trail on the way. It's short -- ¾ miles round trip -- and quite pleasant, especially in spring wildflower season. After walking the trail, eat your picnic lunch here and continue on to Newfound Gap. This overlook offers unparalleled views of the Smokies' well-known landscape: layers upon layers of hazy blue ridges. Take a moment to set foot on the Appalachian Trail, which crosses the parking lot.

Backtrack slightly to take the short road to Clingmans Dome, where you can walk a half-mile trail to the 6,643-foot-high Clingmans Dome tower, the highest point in the park. Head back the way you came, and if you have time, stop at the Sugarlands Valley Self-Guided Nature Trail, a half-mile paved loop right before the visitor center.

### Day 2: Evening

Head back into Gatlinburg and check out the [Arrowcraft Shop](#) to peruse an excellent selection of Appalachian crafts. Eat at one of the many restaurants along the Parkway -- local favorites include the casual [Smoky Mountain Brewery](#) and [Best Italian Café](#). After dinner, take in a vaudeville-style comedy show at the [Sweet Fanny Adams Theater](#).

### Day 3: Morning

Drive along the one-way, 11-mile loop road through Cades Cove, a 6,800-acre valley. It's the best place in the park to spot wildlife, especially whitetail deer and the occasional bear. Stop to check out the various pioneer homesteads and churches along the way. (You can bike the loop from early May to late September; it's closed to cars before 10 a.m. on Wednesday and Saturday mornings.) If your time is limited, drive along the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail instead, another one-way loop road that's generally less crowded and that also features several historic structures.



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*Katy Koontz is a Knoxville-based freelance writer and creator of the [Smoky Mountain Travel Guide](#) smartphone app.*

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