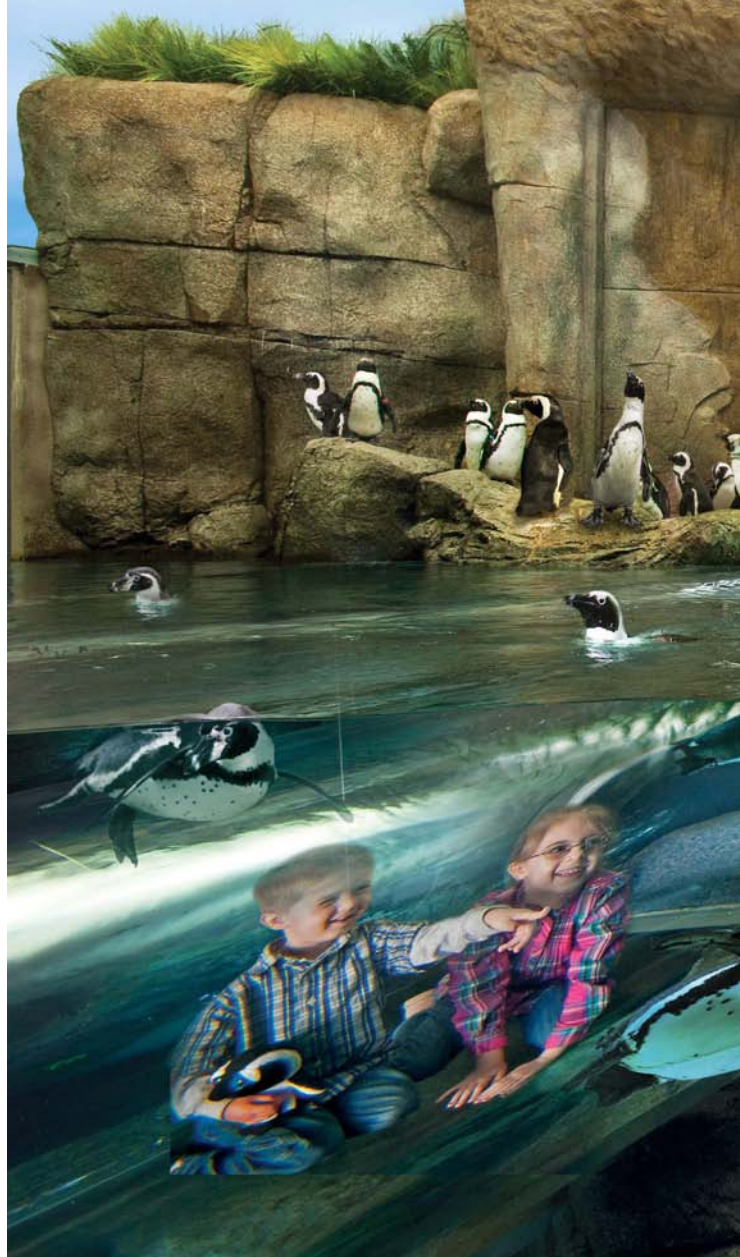


RIPLY'S RULES THE SMOKIES

By Katy Koontz



WALK DOWN THE PARKWAY in Gatlinburg, and you might easily believe you are in a parallel universe with menacing T-Rexes on the loose, grimacing ghouls waving out windows, and major earthquakes causing brick buildings to crack and crumble. Fear not. It's just Ripley's, the most prolific attraction company in the Smokies—with eight properties (seven in Gatlinburg and one in Sevierville).

The dynasty started in 1970 with the opening of the Ripley's Believe It or Not! museum (now the third-oldest still-existing Believe It or Not! establishment in the country). It's now called the Believe It or Not! Odditorium, the moniker founder

Robert Ripley used when the concept debuted at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. After the Gatlinburg building burned down in 1992, it reopened bigger and better three years later.

Almost 20 years after the museum first opened, the company—purchased in 1985 by Canadian entrepreneur Jim Pattison—began expanding. Ripley's Moving Theater opened in 1989, and eight years later, Ripley's broke ground on the Aquarium of the Smokies, a \$50-million investment that became the showcase of downtown when it opened in 2000.

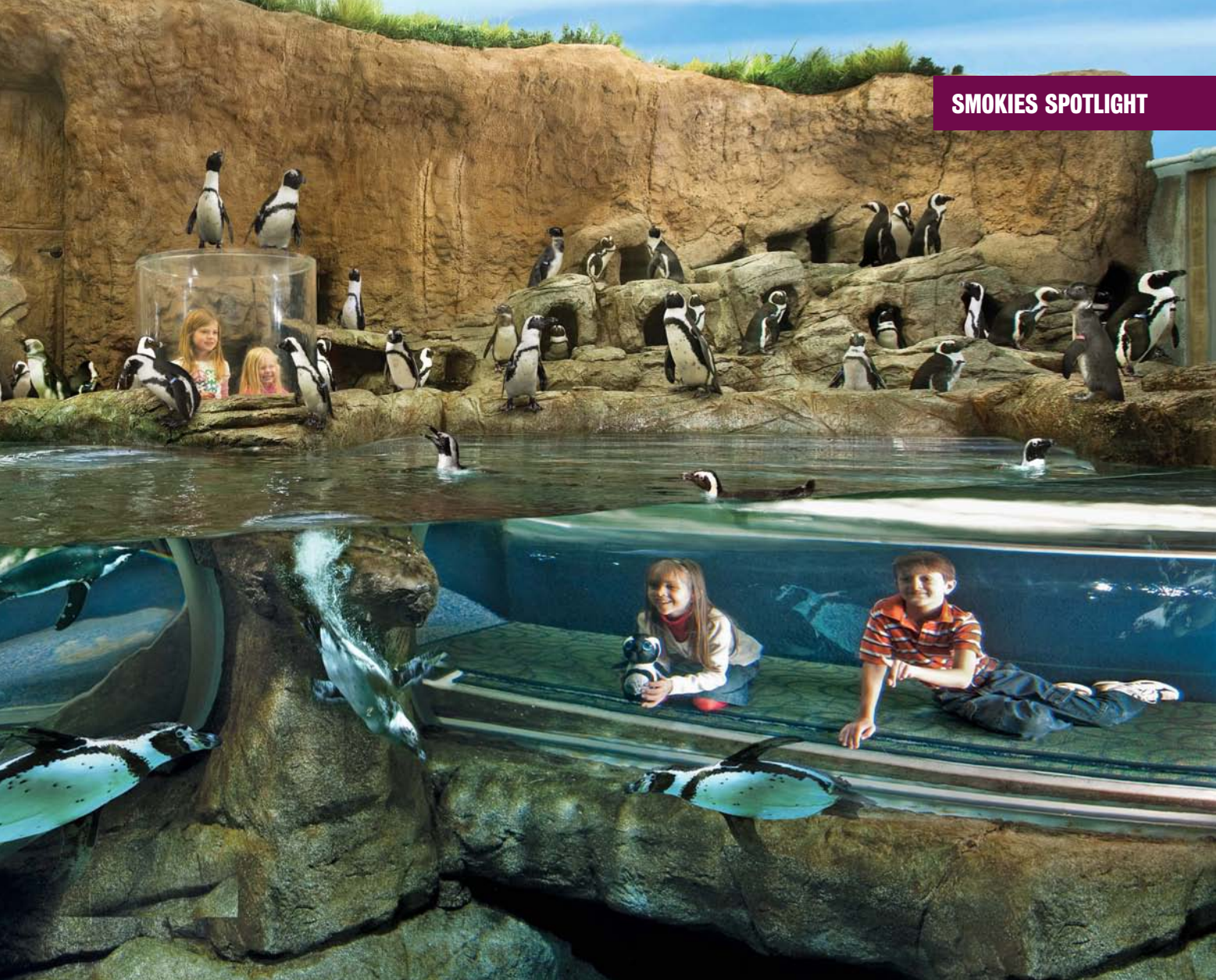
In 1999, the company capitalized on the RIP in Ripley's with its first Smoky Mountain haunted house attraction. Davy Crockett's Mini-Golf followed in

2001, and then a second, larger mini-golf attraction opened in Sevierville in 2005 (the only Ripley's attraction in the Smokies outside of Gatlinburg). The next year, Ripley's acquired the Guinness World Records museum (originally built in the 1970s). The following year, the Marvelous Mirror Maze became Ripley's latest offering.

Here's a look at each of these arresting attractions:

Aquarium of the Smokies

The classic centerpiece of the aquarium is Shark Lagoon. A 340-foot moving sidewalk winds through a tunnel along the bottom of the more-than-one-million-gallon tank. This is home to dozens



of large sand tiger sharks (including one that is almost 14 feet long), nurse sharks, sawfish, green moray eels, tarpon, and sea turtles—like 450-pound Sally, whose shell measures five feet across.

At the Penguin Playhouse, you can pop up into the African black-footed penguin habitat from the safety of acrylic tubes. In Touch-A-Ray Bay, choose between petting a stingray from dry land or donning a wet-suit to hop in the water with the creatures. For more hands-on fun, the Discovery Center offers a new jellyfish touch exhibit. All together, the aquarium displays some 10,000 creatures representing more than 350 species. The new temporary exhibit is themed to the 75th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Information: 865-430-8808; ripley-aquariums.com/Gatlinburg

Believe It or Not! Odditorium

Now housed in a three-story, 17,000-square-foot building that displays some of the strangest items you'll ever see, Believe It or Not! is a Gatlinburg mainstay. Ogle a shrunken head, the taxidermied body of a two-headed calf (born locally), strands of George Washington's hair, a piece of the Wright Brothers' plane, and the mask from *Silence of the Lambs*. See how you measure up to a model of the world's tallest man (8'11" Robert Wadlow). You'll even find a colorful portrait of pop star Eminem made

out of M&M candies. The interactive displays on the third floor include a giant Lite Brite set. Download the new scavenger hunt app for additional interactive fun in each of the museum's 13 galleries.

Information: 865-436-5096; ripleys.com/gatlinburg/#odditorium

Moving Theater

The double-feature here lasts only about 15 or 20 minutes, the films don't include big Hollywood names, and you won't be munching on any popcorn during the show. But at this Gatlinburg theater, you'll feel like you're in the middle of an action movie because your seat will move in synchronization with



the high-resolution, 70mm film. After you click your seat belt and don 3D glasses, you will have the roller-coaster-like experience of riding four-wheelers and whizzing down a hill on an inner tube as your seat moves right, left, up, down, forward, and back, all while the soundtrack blares from a six-channel digital sound system. You'll also feel water splashing or maybe a light spray of snow—depending on the movie.

Information: 865-436-9763; ripleys.com/gatlinburg/moving-theater

Haunted Adventure

This Gatlinburg attraction is true to Ripley's roots since company founder Robert Ripley first worked as a polisher for a tombstone engraver. By the time you're done here, you'll be wishing for the peace and quiet of a graveyard!

The freaky fun begins in the funicular that carries you to the third-floor entrance of what's billed as an aban-

doned casket factory. A 20-minute jittery journey through inky blackness awaits, punctuated by 10 terror-filled rooms. (Purchase a fiber-optic flashlight or keep your hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you.) Ghouls jump out regularly, but none of these freaky fright masters will actually touch you—although you never know what *else* might. The show changes every year (usually in time for Halloween).

Information: 865-430-9991; ripleys.com/gatlinburg/haunted-adventure

Old MacDonald's Farm Mini-Golf

Known for being the place “where pigs do fly,” this is Ripley's only Sevierville attraction. The three 18-hole courses (each offering a different challenge level) all have a barnyard theme with talking animatronic animals including cows, ducks, sheep, pigs, goats, horses, and heckling crows. Creative farm equipment includes clever inventions such as a toilet plunger

labeled as a “bee extractor.” The recently renovated Super Fun Zone arcade out front uses a new slide card system that replaces the old tokens and tickets.

Information: 865-428-1699; ripleys.com/gatlinburg/mini-golf

Marvelous Mirror Maze and Candy Factory

The highlight of this 2,000-square-foot maze is its infinity room, where mirrors cover the walls, ceiling, and floor, allowing you to see yourself reflected an infinite number of times. Techno music pulses as you try to outwit dead ends, the revolving-mirror door, and side paths that circle back on themselves. New this year are color-changing floor lights that double the disorientation. All guests wear disposable plastic gloves to keep the walls fingerprint free.

The lobby houses a candy store selling 144 varieties of chocolates, gummy worms, nostalgic hard candy, and jelly beans displayed in clear acrylic bins. You

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Information: 865-430-1834; ripleys.com/gatlinburg/mirror-maze

Davy Crockett Mini-Golf

The two 18-hole courses here include one resembling an old-fashioned village with buildings like a blacksmith shop and an outhouse and the other featuring a large pioneer-style log fort complete with a cannon. Like its Sevierville kin, it features animatronic animals such as raccoons, crows, bears, frogs, owls, chipmunks, and mice that have plenty to say. The outhouse flushes when you hit your ball through it—and sometimes even squirts water. Get a hole in one at the end and a bluegrass critter band performs.

Information: 877-475-3974; ripleys.com/gatlinburg/mini-golf

Guinness World Records Museum

Interactive opportunities throughout this museum let you see how far you can kick a soccer ball, for example, or how fast you can type or send a text message. The music room displays records by Dolly Parton, the Beatles, and Michael Jackson, among others, while elsewhere you can view exhibits on the world's tallest woman and the world's oldest living man. The world's largest button collection (millions of buttons collected over 73 years by a woman in Iowa) and the world's largest afghan (about 45' by 24' and weighing more than 300 lbs., crocheted by a Colorado woman) are housed here, while show cards give information about other record holders not actually on display. The lobby includes the world's largest rubber band ball, made by a Florida man who spent five and a half years winding 788,000 rubber bands together to form a 7-foot-tall ball that weighs 9,400 lbs.

Information: 865-430-7800; ripleys.com/gatlinburg/guinness-world-records ✕

Katy Koontz, author of *Family Fun in the Smokies* as well as the *Smoky Mountain Travel Guide* app for smartphones, writes regularly about the Smokies for *Cityview*.

photo: Chris Hatfield

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