



DEEP ROOTS

IN THE SMOKY MOUNTAINS

WORDS: ZOEEY GOTO. PHOTOGRAPHS: SHELL ROYSTER

RISING ALONG THE EASTERN FLANK OF TENNESSEE, THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR HIKING TRAILS, WATERFALLS AND WILD BEARS — THIS IS, AFTER ALL, THE MOST NATURALLY BIODIVERSE POCKET IN THE US. BUT A ROAD TRIP THROUGH ITS OLD-GROWTH FORESTS REVEALS A MORE HUMAN STORY. HERE, TIGHT-KNIT COMMUNITIES ARE PRESERVING ANCIENT APPALACHIAN CRAFTS AND TRADITIONS, FROM POTTERY AND BROOM CARVING TO FOLK DANCING, ALL ALONGSIDE SOME OF AMERICA'S MOST BOMBASTIC RESORT TOWNS

DRIVING THROUGH PIGEON FORGE IS NOTHING SHORT OF EUPHORIC

The small mountain city, deep in the beating heart of East Tennessee, boasts a main drag like no other, all twinkling lights, curious characters, gaudy billboards and eye-popping attractions. The kerbside carousel makes it hard to keep my eyes on the road.

I pass a gaggle of sightseers, among them Amish holidaymakers in bonnets and boaters, craning their heads back to admire a giant King Kong clinging to the outside of a tall building, his jaws frozen in an endless roar, his clenched fist grasping a retro aeroplane. This is perhaps the kitschiest monument in the city — which has marketed itself as a ‘family vacation hub’ since the 1980s — but it’s certainly not alone in vying for that title. There’s a replica of the doomed *Titanic*; a souvenir shop claiming to sell live alligators; and a waffle house boasting no fewer than 100 singing animatronic chickens.

Up ahead, a Bavarian-style mansion appears like a mirage. An actor dressed as Father Christmas stands out front, sweating in the blazing midsummer sunshine next to a colossal, bauble-decked fir tree. This hotel, I gather from a painted sign, celebrates Christmas every single day of the year. It’s a lot to take in.

Yet, beyond this razzle-dazzle main drag of artifice and entertainment, waterfalls cascade in hushed 300-million-year-old woodland and hawks patrol the heavens. A road trip through the Great Smoky Mountains offers up almost impossible contradictions.

I tackle backcountry roads, driving through deep forest towards the neighbouring town, Gatlinburg, until I spot Ogle’s Broom Shop, a higgledy-piggledy wooden dwelling that’s tumbled straight from the pages of a Hans Christian Andersen tale. Inside, David Ogle, a third-generation broom maker, sweeps a pile of corn from a chair and offers me a seat. He tells me how the relationship between tourism and the local mountain communities of Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge and Sevierville has long been a symbiotic one, existing even prior to the grand opening of the popular Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1934.

Behind him, curling sepia photos show David’s grandfather when he was starting the family business from a roadside cabin in the 1920s. “Back then, travellers would drive these backroads on the lookout for handcrafted goods,” says David. “If a couple of visitors stopped by when lunch was ready, my granddaddy would invite them into his home.” He adds that curious visitors often bit off more than they could chew — sometimes literally.

“Granddaddy was heavy into bear hunting, so that was the meat that often ended up on the table!” The plaid-shirted artisan chuckles fondly, surrounded by his creations. Around the shop are brooms with knotted handles carved into the faces of wizardly old men representing his forebears — plus the odd Father Christmas thrown in for good measure.

Like a magician performing a well-practised trick, David takes meticulous care as he binds



Clockwise from top: King Kong atop the Hollywood Wax Museum in Pigeon Forge; a waitress at Pigeon Forge’s Frizzle Chicken Farmhouse Cafe; biscuits and gravy for breakfast at Frizzle

Previous pages: The view from Newfound Gap, the lowest drivable pass through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park





the bristles of a broom. They're considered collector's items, he tells me. "People want me to sign and date them. I have a woman in Florida who has 48 of my brooms hanging in her office. Every one is unique, because Mother Nature don't give you two pieces of wood alike," he says, peering over wire-rimmed spectacles at his handiwork.

It may have started life as one man and his lonesome cabin, but Ogle's Broom Shop is now part of a far heftier collective. The Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community in Gatlinburg's Glades district is the largest collective of its kind in the US — an eight-mile, snaking loop of studios, galleries and independent shops with the common goal of keeping the home fires of traditional Appalachian crafts burning.

Having navigated hairpins that test my driving skills, it's a relief to arrive at Fowler's Clay Works, also on the Gatlinburg craft trail, to try my hand at its pottery wheel. A more idyllic studio space would be hard to imagine: out the back, a creek babbles as stacks of handcrafted ceramics dry alongside it, mirroring the landscape in gentle hues of river rock green and mountain honey. Ceramicist Mike Fowler has been known to plunge himself into this stream during creative reveries to plug deeper into the natural landscape.

Back inside the cool of the studio, under the watchful eye of Mike — a laid-back, ponytailed Floridian who fell in love with Appalachian crafts while here on his honeymoon, and opened his own studio in 2015 — I attempt to tease an oozing fist of clay into something vaguely resembling a vase, while Mike talks of the early European settlers who, in 18th and 19th centuries, spread throughout the vast Appalachian region, a sweeping brushstroke that covers sections of 13 states, from New York down to Mississippi in the Deep South.

"They really came on a wing and a prayer, hoping for a better life," he says. "Everything they produced had to be pared back and utilitarian, including pottery. I still try to continue that tradition here, although I do allow a fancy splash of colour."

A row of gurning 'face pots', all gargoyle expressions and dripping, mottled glaze, catches my eye. It turns out they chronicle the untold stories of these hills and hollows as succinctly as any textbook. "Before the Civil War, enslaved people were involved in the pottery trade, making grain jars and fermentation crocks," says Mike. "But they weren't allowed grave markers to bury their dead. Instead, they used African traditions to create effigy jars to ward off evil spirits." The custom lapsed after emancipation, but the ceramic idols were resurrected in the 1960s as part of the so-called 'craft revival' movement in Appalachia. Potters like Mike have since kept the heritage alive. "I nod back to where they came from, but I also try to flow with the times and add my own flavour," he says.

Lingering around Mike's creations is an unmistakable undertone of Southern gothic, an artistic genre born in the American South in the early 19th century, often involving grotesque characters, irrational desires and twisted humour, drawing from the grotesquery of slavery and the Civil War. It's something I've frequently encountered over the two decades I've been visiting Tennessee's Smokies, a place where the tales can be as tall — and dark — as the mountains. "There's always someone who's seen a ghost in the swamp or the biggest bear in the woods," says Mike, slowly turning a macabre-looking pot in his hands. "Around here, storytelling is a big part of our creative culture."

Weird and inexplicable sightings are part and parcel of life in these ancient mountains. Sasquatch, a mythical, ape-like creature also known as Bigfoot, is 'spotted' with such regularity that its ragged silhouette is celebrated in local merchandise with an enthusiasm only otherwise reserved for Appalachia's most honoured daughter, musician Dolly Parton. Having bid Mike farewell, I drive past countless Gatlinburg gift shops boasting racks of T-shirts and key rings branded with either Dolly or Bigfoot.

To honour the Queen of Country, I head to her 160-acre Dollywood theme park, back in

Clockwise from top left: David Ogle at work in Ogle's Broom Shop, Gatlinburg; face pots at Fowler's Clay Works, inspired by pre-emancipation African-American ceramics; Whaley's Handcrafts, also part of the Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community

Pigeon Forge. Here, in the shadow of arching roller coasters with folksy names such as Wild Eagle and Mystery Mine, a cast of blacksmiths, candlemakers and fast-picking banjo players perform their Appalachian traditions before crowds of cheerful travellers (many licking fingers sticky with the sweet, buttery residue of fresh cinnamon bread, a speciality of the traditional Grist Mill bakery on site).

At Dollywood, these craftspeople share equal billing with Dolly, the great matriarch of the Smokies. Her glittering image is sprinkled lavishly throughout the park, from her all-singing, all-dancing hologram greeting mesmerised fans, to a replica of her hard-scrabble childhood cabin where, according to the lyrics of her hit song My Tennessee Mountain Home, life was once “as peaceful as a baby’s sigh”.

Some visitors might feel uncomfortable about the Disneyfication of Appalachia, but Mike sees it another way. “If we’re talking about cultural preservation and economic growth for the Smokies, I see it as a positive thing for the region,” the ceramist had told me earlier that day, as a pair of potential customers entered his studio. “Dollywood attracts huge crowds and sparks curiosity to keep exploring beyond the gates of the theme park.” After all, crafts in these parts have been entwined with travellers and commerce long before Dolly was even born.

Natural wonder

Bedding down in a remote log cabin in Sevierville, I read a welcome manual that points out I’m now in bear territory, subsequently ensuring a fairly restless night’s sleep. Tennessee’s Smokies are home to two black bears per square mile, making the odds of an encounter fair to middling.

The following morning, adventure guide Dave Harlow, from Smoky Mountains Guides, casually peppers our conversation with a couple of anecdotes of close encounters with bears. It cranks up the anticipation as we strap on walking boots and tightly clasp

hiking poles, venturing past the trailhead and ascending into the wilderness of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Weaving through this lush tapestry of land is the legendary Appalachian Trail. The granddaddy of long-distance hikes marches 2,200 miles from Maine to Georgia and requires up to seven months of gritty commitment to complete. Today, however, we’re tackling its younger sibling, the Alum Cave Trail, which offers all the perks of the park — tumbling waterfalls, stunning panoramas and a haven of biodiversity — within a few moderate miles of terrain.

We pass children playing in a clear-water stream and, further along, poker-faced anglers keeping their eye on the prize while reeling in slippery trout. But we encounter only a few other walkers on our climb, which seems strange given that up to 14 million people visit the park annually, attendance boosted considerably by the lack of entrance fee. Perhaps would-be hikers got the memo about the incoming rain, which pitter-patters down as we walk through this temperate rainforest. Thankfully, we remain mostly shielded by a canopy of red spruce, beech and birch trees, as their tangled mess of roots wrap around boulders to dip languidly into streams.

The pandemic caused Dave to reassess his entire career, trading in a corporate job to instead lead small group tours by day and starlit camping trips by night, sharing his affection and encyclopaedic knowledge of the park. Striding through the light-dappled forest, as an earthy musk radiates from the forest floor, he pauses briefly to point out slithering salamanders and wildflowers bearing curious monikers such as devil’s walking stick and hearts-a-bustin’-with-love, the latter an outrageous peacock of a shrub overflowing with bright orange seeds.

Climbing higher still, we gain altitude before finally reaching the trail’s peak to inhale magnificent vistas as the mountains before us break like shadowy waves on the horizon. It was the Cherokee — who were almost entirely removed by force from this

Clockwise from top left: Candlemaking at Dollywood theme park; a scenic road cuts through the mountains of East Tennessee; picking the banjo at Dollywood; a stream flows through the Alum Cave Trail



land by the US government during the Trail of Tears from 1831 to 1850 — who named these distinctive hills ‘*Shaconage*’, meaning ‘Land of Blue Smoke’. Looking out over the halos of mist crowning the peaks, which is a result of moisture emitted by the dense vegetation below, I forget my disappointment that no bears crossed our path today. With views like this, it’s their loss.

At sundown, I head to Sevierville and pull up a chair at The Appalachian, a hip new restaurant where the menu reads like a passionate love letter to rural cooking. I order frog’s legs covered in a tangy ranch sauce, topped with crumbling rocks of melting blue cheese. They arrive plump and juicy. Manager Dan Estes assures me the dish is an authentic Appalachian delicacy. “My daddy would take me frog gigging by the light of the moon,” recalls Dan. “The frogs would raise their heads above water to catch flies, and then — Bam! — I’d spike them with a three-pronged fork,” he continues, driving an invisible spear through the air with gusto, while over his shoulder the flames of a wood-fire cooker crackle invitingly.

Folk revival

For my final stop, I head 50 miles upstate to the foothills of Norris Dam State Park on crooked country roads hugging creeks and valleys. White clapperboard churches dot the route, while mountains capped with crosses loom large on the horizon.

If I’d quietly hoped to unearth a preserved cove of rootsy, unspoiled mountain culture, arriving at the Museum of Appalachia feels like a welcome reward. Showing me around his family’s 65-acre living history museum is Will Meyer, whose grandfather, John Rice Irwin, the museum’s founder, dedicated his life to collecting artifacts and documenting the vanishing folkways of the southern Appalachian people, a melting pot of immigrants from the UK, Ireland and Germany, among other European nations.

We wander through pastures dotted with historic cabins, including, much to my excitement, author Mark Twain’s childhood shack, which was moved to the museum in 1995. Multiple galleries overflow with colourful curiosities; it would require a lifetime to do all the exhibits justice. An intriguing section showcases items from local death rituals, alongside makeshift children’s toys with dried apples for heads. Elsewhere, there’s the home of a mountain settler who, inexplicably, decorated every surface in a riot of polka dots — like contemporary Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, only a couple of hundred years prior.

Over an unpretentious lunch of fried chicken, okra, pinto beans and cornbread in the museum’s restaurant, Will reveals he’s part of a growing flock of younger Appalachians returning from big cities to the rural setting of their childhood. “As adults, we’re garnering more of an appreciation of and curiosity for



A plate of fried frog’s legs at The Appalachian, Sevierville

Above: Island Home Baptist Church, Norris Dam State Park





Guide Dave Harlow of Smoky Mountains Guides on the Alum Cave Trail

our history and culture,” he says. “It feels good to come home.” I can see why.

Well fed, we follow the sound of music wafting lazily on the breeze and find musician John Alvis sat on a wooden porch playing a fiddle made from a dried gourd. His teenage twin daughters, Kylee and Sadie, accompany him with a spirited display of clogging — the high-kicking cousin of traditional Irish dancing. “We’re keeping our heritage alive by teaching youngsters in the community to dance, but we also mix things up a little by clogging to contemporary pop or ballet,” says Sadie. Between performances, she checks her phone, making graduation party plans for that evening, flitting seamlessly between the old ways and the new.

“When I was growing up, there were programmes like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which poked fun at us,” John tells me, later, deep in thought as he gazes out over the rolling fields, flecked with grazing sheep. He says his people have been dogged by stereotypes, pretty much since the first Europeans set up homesteads here. “Today, you switch on the TV and we’re all snake handlers or moonshiners.” These caricatures miss the nuances of Appalachia, he adds, pushing the brim of his straw hat forward as the sun beats down. “The people of this region didn’t all get off the same boat,

they wound up here from different areas at different times. The mountain folk weren’t, and still aren’t, just one kind of people.”

Now serenaded by a chorus of cicadas, I join John on the porch, the very place where he once learnt songs by ear from elders in the community. I tell him his music feels deeply reminiscent of that of my own Celtic heritage. That’s to be expected, John insists. “The ballads and jigs brought over by early settlers became trapped and reverberated around these isolated, high mountain ridges. I’ve met a lot of people from the old countries — from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales — who come here to study their ancestors’ songs and stories. I guess the appeal is that without outside influences they’ve been kept kind of pure,” he says, his rocking chair slowly creaking back and forth on the buckled slats.

As I stand up to leave, John offers a final, melodic farewell. “I wish I was in London, or some other seaport town, I’ll set myself on a steamship and I’ll sail the ocean round,” he sings from the porch, as I head off on my journey back home to the UK. As the storied old hills become just a smudge in my rear-view mirror, I experience a wave of sadness and longing. It’s surprising how easy it is to put down deep roots in Tennessee’s Smoky Mountains. □



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Aer Lingus, American Airlines, Finnair, Iberia and British Airways fly nonstop from the UK to Nashville, a four-hour drive into the Great Smoky Mountains. Several other airlines fly with one stopover to Knoxville, an hour’s drive to the mountains. aerlingus.com

aa.com finnair.com iberia.com ba.com

Average flight time: 10h.

Car rental is advised, with airports and cities offering multiple hire companies.

WHEN TO GO

Spring is mild and sunny, while autumn brings richly coloured foliage; the seasons average 10C and 17C respectively. Pigeon Forge, Gatlinburg and Sevierville light up as winter wonderlands in the festive season, when the mercury can easily dip below zero. Tennessee summers can feel humid, with average highs of 28C.

PLACES MENTIONED

Ogle’s Broom Shop. oglesbrooms.com

Fowler’s Clay Works.

fowlersclayworks.com

Dollywood. dollywood.com

Smoky Mountain Guides.

smokymountainguides.com

The Appalachian.

theappalachianrestaurant.com

Museum of Appalachia.

museumofappalachia.org

WHERE TO STAY

LeConte Lodge, Great Smoky Mountains National Park. From \$162 (£145). lecontelodge.com

Historic CCC Cabins, Norris Dam State Park. From \$132 (£120). tnstateparks.com

MORE INFO

Tennessee Tourism. tnvacation.com

HOW TO DO IT

America As You Like It has a seven-night fly-drive to Tennessee from £1,295 per person, including return flights from Heathrow, car hire and accommodation. americaasyoulikeit.com