

SEVIERVILLE, TN

THE SMOKIES PLAYGROUND

Photos by Melissa unless otherwise noted

By Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

Nestled in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee are a few small towns that attract thousands of tourists each year. Curious to find out why firsthand, we flew into Knoxville and drove through the countryside to Sevierville (population 13,000) at the foot of the Smokies. We chose this town because of its central location to all the area attractions. Indeed, as we were to find out, there is a very short driving distance between some of the most varied family attractions you will find in the U.S. These attractions are also a mere day's drive from one-half of the U.S.

We checked into "Tara" (at least it felt like it) at the Clarion Inn Willow River. Owner, Catherine May, built the 89-room inn in 1995 in the ante-bellum style. Ms. May is a very sweet and gracious lady with great care for her employees. She keeps them all employed all year, even during the few slow winter months when most hotels let their staff go. The inn is simply spotless everywhere you look. We had a lovely suite, very roomy and comfortable, with a jacuzzi and fireplace. Guests receive complimentary continental breakfast in a pretty open-air dining area. The inn even offers a convenient in-room therapeutic massage service, through Beneficial to Life, which we greatly welcomed during our visit. One afternoon at the inn we were treated to a period costumed story-teller, Millie Sieber, who relayed heart-warming and amusing stories of her own Civil War era ancestors passed down through the generations.

As always, we like to start our visit to an area with the welcome center to learn a bit about what there is to see and do. The Sevierville Welcome Center is new, bright, and cleverly laid out, with plasma TVs on the walls continually showing different attractions and bringing them to



Clarion Inn



Millie Sieber

life. We were surprised to learn that the number 1 reason people come to Tennessee is for the shopping outlets. Number two is the mountains (11 million folks per year) and number 3 is Dollywood. In addition to static displays, the center brings in different crafters on the weekends to entertain and educate visitors. We saw an interesting pottery demonstration by Tim Kerns, from Pigeon River Pottery, during our stop.

While we were at the center we noticed some marvelous paintings on the wall, and upon inquiring about them, we found they



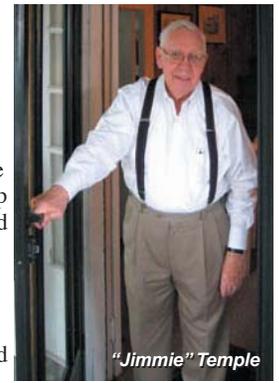
Robert Tino in his gallery, with a Lewis Buckner sideboard in the background.

were by a local artist — who has gained national recognition — Robert Tino. Since his gallery is located nearby, we decided to check it out. His stunning paintings are housed in an 1844 home surrounded by 350 acres of land, which has been in Robert's wife's family for generations. The elaborately carved woodwork in the house was done by a former slave, Lewis Buckner, whose wood carving is well-known and prized in the area. In addition to Robert's paintings being beautiful, they also capture Tennessee as we know it today for future generations. He paints mostly regional landscapes, historical farms and houses, and the mountains in oils and watercolors.



Artisan Tim Kerns

Seeking lunch in town we picked out quaint Taulbee's Restaurant (a former bus station which serves as the Sevierville bus stop today), and enjoyed some over-stuffed sandwiches and a most delicious mandarin-orange pie with pecans and whipped cream.

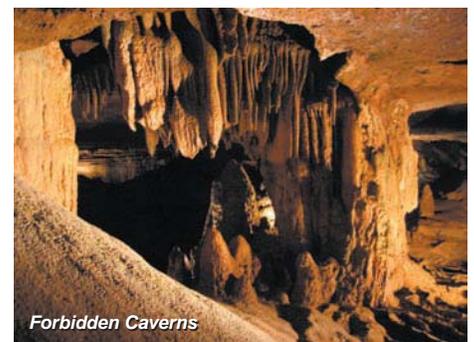


"Jimmie" Temple

Roaming around the town, we were introduced to one of the area's more interesting people, County Commissioner James "Jimmie" Temple. Mr. Temple is well-known for performing marriages. He has married over 15,000 people since 1966. He used to own a feed store, which is where he performed most of the marriages. He doesn't take any money for himself, but has a donation box on his desk for a church building fund, and has collected \$185,000 total to date, which has done a lot of good for the church. He gives every couple he marries a card with four points on it for success in marriage: love, trust, friendship, and respect. He asks the couple to hold hands and read back the four points, and promise to keep the card forever. People run into him years later and tell him how important his four points were, and that they still have his card. He has quite a few colorful wedding stories to tell, a few of which we were privileged to hear.

As we mentioned earlier, there are so many diverse attractions in this one area, which makes it so appealing to families — there's definitely something for everyone. If it took us more than a 15 minute drive between any of the attractions we visited, we would be surprised.

Located beneath the Smoky Mountains are the Forbidden Caverns, a fascinating ancient natural attraction. This is a "live" cavern (a term indicating it still has water and is still changing) filled with interesting limestone formations as well as Indian legends and the remnants of 1920's bootlegger's operations. Stalagmite and stalactites inches from each other will still take 150 to 200 years to join. Can't remember which one is which? Stalactite is stretched "tite" by hanging from the ceiling. Stalagmite



Forbidden Caverns

pushes up with all its “mite” from the floor.

After being underground, we went for the opposite theme — to the sky — with the Tennessee Museum of Aviation. The three-year old museum is home to aviation history and technology exhibits, and living aviation history demonstrations. They have warbird aircraft from WWII, Korea and Vietnam, the James Doolittle Medal of Honor, aviation uniforms throughout the years, and a roadster that was made for Amelia Earhart — complete with needlepoint seat covers.

One of the most interesting — and popular — stores in Sevierville is the Smoky Mountain Knife Works. It’s more than a store, it’s also a showplace and museum. The 45,000 sq. ft. store (soon to add 30,000 more sq. ft) actually has 10,000 different knives in stock. What started as a little retail shop with a small catalog in the 1970’s, has mushroomed into a destination for more than 1.2 million annual visitors, and a 5.5 million circulation for their catalog. Inside the store is a three-dimensional mountain waterfall with a water mill and streams, along with a collection of Native American and Civil War displays and relics. In addition to a successful website, they even have their own TV show twice a week on the Dish Network.

An unlikely attraction for a small Tennessee town is the Great China Acrobats, but there they are! The show is housed in it’s own stand-alone theater, and the performers are as good as any Cirque du Soleil acts you’ve seen, but without all the elaborate sets. The shows are action-packed and full of colorful costume changes. A new cast and show comes over from China every season. The audience loved the show, and the kids were especially amazed.

Another terrific evening attraction is “Come Celebrate America,” a stirring tribute to our country with a cast of more than 50 talented young singers and dancers.



Come Celebrate America

photo courtesy of Come Celebrate America

The show takes you through all the states, either by state or city song, or by region, using large video screens with beautiful images of America. This spiritual show even includes musical fountains.

Three fun attractions that are steps from each other by the Tanger Five Oaks Mall are: Ripley’s Old MacDonald Mini Golf, NASCAR SpeedPark, and Rainforest Adventures. The newly opened Old MacDonald Mini Golf is just about the cutest mini-golf we’ve ever seen. The 18-hole putting courses are so clever with entertaining animatronic farm life. They have 3 courses, 2 of which are handicapped accessible



Old MacDonald Mini Golf

At NASCAR SpeedPark, we had waaay more fun than people “of a certain age” should! It was raining the day we visited, so we were not able to experience any of their 8 outside tracks



NASCAR SpeedPark race cars

photo courtesy of NASCAR SpeedPark

which are created for different age levels. Tracks range from the kid-friendly

Baby Bristol to the Smoky

Mountain Speedway, where you must be 16 years old with a driver’s license and be at least 5 ft. 3 in. tall. We did however, have a great time in their state-of-the-art arcade, with NASCAR Speedway Simulators. Six drivers compete in 80% scale, 750 hp, NASCAR race cars, complete with motion action — even simulating a bumpy ride when you hit the wall or roll over. It is a real adrenaline rush! The arcade has many different video games and a rock climbing wall — a huge complex. Real NASCAR drivers are known to drop by now and then.

The unassuming building nearby is home to Rainforest Adventures. They’ve managed to transform a warehouse into a rainforest setting, with trails past colorful parrots and other tropical animals. Upon entering the attraction you receive a “passport” which lets you come and go throughout the day. A highlight of the experience is the animal show, where the curator brings out different animals and lets the audience get a close-up look and, in some cases,



Jim Dykes with a Cockatoo

touch. The show we saw consisted of a macaw, cockatoo, baby alligator, sugar glider snake, ball python, and a tarantula. Trying to be open minded, we both let the tarantula crawl on our hands, but still couldn’t get past the whole “there’s a spider crawling on me!” thing. Never the less, it was very interesting. Curator Jim Dykes informed us that 6,000 acres of rainforest are destroyed every hour around the world, and 50,000 species of plants and animals are lost every year due to rainforest destruction.

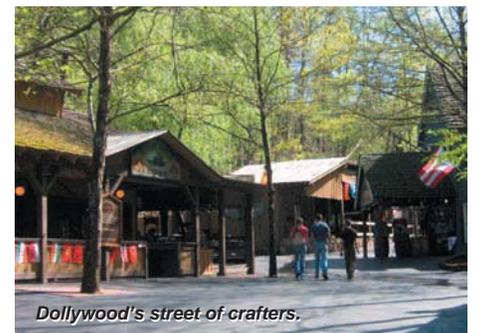
Floyd Garrett’s Muscle Car Museum is another one of the diverse attractions in Sevierville — a real “guy magnet.” There are 90 American muscle cars worth over \$5 million on display in the vast showroom. You can also stroll past a nostalgic 50’s display as you ogle the cars. Mr. Garrett is a nationally known muscle car expert, considered an authority on 60’s and 70’s high performance autos. If you happen to catch him at the showroom, he is more than happy to answer any question you may have on muscle cars. There is also an



Elvis’s 1st limousine at the Muscle Car Museum.

18,000 item gift shop on site.

Of course, Sevierville’s most famous attraction happens to be a person — Dolly Parton. Her love for Tennessee is boundless, as reflected in the many songs she has written, and contributions she has made to her community and state. Concerned about literacy, she started a program for children called



Dollywood’s street of crafters.

“Imagination Library”, where every child in the state gets a book a month until age 5. The successful program has expanded to 39 states now.

Located near Sevierville is the town of Pigeon Forge, where Dolly set up the amusement park in her name, Dollywood. We expected to see a cement-slabbbed honky-tonk covered with rides, and were quite amazed instead to find a lovely tree-filled park with rides that are integrated into the mountains.

The park may be called Dollywood, but you're not inundated with Dolly everywhere. It's very subtle and tasteful, with a mountain country theme.

Dolly fans shouldn't fret though, as there is a Dolly museum on site, and a full-size replica of the tiny log cabin she grew up in. Also, Dolly makes several appearances throughout the year in the park's theater. Even

though there are 40 rides and attractions at the park, one could just enjoy an afternoon strolling through the park without ever going on a ride. There are a lot of very interesting working craftsmen throughout to observe and chat up. We particularly enjoyed the wagons that are totally hand-crafted to order and sold all over the country. They are able to build about 30 a year. Also at the park is the largest aviary for bald eagles in the world. They have a breed and release program. The eagles that live there permanently are injured or have been imprinted with humans. The Dollywood staff is extremely friendly and helpful — and happy, as most of them are long-termed employees.

Pigeon Forge itself is a charming little town with an 1825 working Grist Mill, and some great crafts shopping. Located in the Old Mill Square, the water-powered Grist Mill is one of the most photographed in the country, and is still actually milling corn. Across the street is Pigeon River Pottery, where you can watch artisans at work, and purchase unique pieces.

One of the reasons Sevierville, Pigeon Forge, and surrounding towns have kept their "small town" look, is the "5-story rule", that no building can be taller than 5 stories high. When your up the mountain it is so nice to look down on a little town nestled in the mountains, rather than giant monolithic structures competing with them. Let's hope corporate greed doesn't move in and destroy what these folks have managed to hold on to.

Needless to say, this area is tops for "good ol' Southern home cookin'." We had some super dining experiences on our trip.

Up the Creek Fish Camp and Grill is a relaxed family-style seafood restaurant that serves wonderful Crusted Talapia that is flaky and fresh, among it's nice selection of seafood dishes.

Before one evening out, we had dinner in one of Sevierville's best steak places, the Chop House Restaurant, located in one of the popular outlet malls. We enjoyed a fabulous filet with peppercorn sauce and sweet potato with cinnamon butter. For dessert, the creamy New York style cheesecake was baked twice, and was probably the best we'd ever had.

An unusual restaurant worth mentioning is the rustic Rocky River Grille which served us



Pigeon Forge's 1825 still working Grist Mill

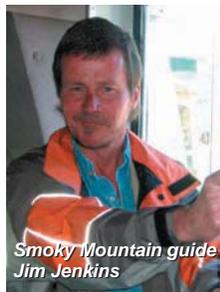
tasty Bourbon Chicken and Wild Rice, and the biggest piece of cheesecake we've ever seen. The "unusual" part is the restaurant's decor, which is a taxidermist's dream. If you can get used to a grizzly greeting you at the door, and a bobcat looking over your shoulder while you eat, the food is worth it!

One of our favorite meals of the whole trip had to be at the Applewood Farmhouse Restaurant. Breakfast at this old farmhouse complex automatically starts out with wonderful apple fritters, apple butter, and apple julep, then on to what ever you choose from their expansive menu. Once breakfast is over, you are not through with your Applewood experience, as the complex is huge. There are 4,000 apple trees on the property, and a barn (original to the farmhouse) serves as a fabulous gift shop with all things apple! It is amazing the amount of things you can do with, make from, and design with apples. This is not your run of the mill tacky gift shop, the items are high quality. The complex also has a winery, candy store, and an ice cream store.



A display in Applewood's gift shop

The true star of Tennessee is the Great Smoky Mountains National Park — with over 9 million visitors each year. We started our trip to the park with a visit to the Sugarlands Visitor Center, with a nature museum and a film on the park. The park is breathtaking, with 1,500 flowering plants and 130 different species of trees. Our guide, Jim Jenkins, was very entertaining, and really laid out the "good ol' boy" act for us, but was really

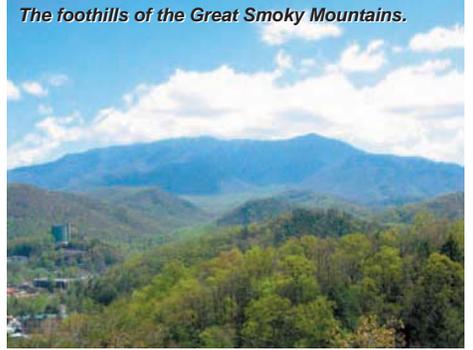


Smoky Mountain guide Jim Jenkins

college educated and very knowledgeable. He said the higher up the mountains you go, the species of trees keep changing. We also learned that the mature white-tailed deer buck's antlers do not reflect his age, but rather the quality and quantity of food available to him.

The truly adventurous traveler can book a cabin at the bare-bones LaConte Lodge on the top of Mt. LaConte — the highest lodge in Tennessee. The only catch is you can't drive, you have to hike 5 1/2 (steep) miles to get there. A llama pack brings in the lodge's supplies. Needless the say, with no electricity and no showers (sponge baths) we did *not* visit the LaConte. And yet, people actually have to book the place a year in advance to get a spot!

Still adventurous but less arduous, would be to visit the down-to-earth Five Oaks Riding Stables with 80 horses and 250 beautiful mountain-side acres to explore. They have



guided trail rides and are open to ages 6 and up.

Sevierville has a lot of easily accessible and well-appointed rental cabins and chalets in the mountains at Hidden Mountain Resort, surrounded by wildflowers and beautifully landscaped — and reasonably priced. Yes, with electricity, running water, and all the comforts of home!

It's coming into fall now, and we cannot think of a better time to visit Sevierville to capture the splendor of the changing leaves in the mountains, and have a romantic get-away or a fun-filled family vacation.

If You Go...

- Applewood Farmhouse Restaurant** - www.applewoodfarmhouserestaurant.com
- Beneficial to Life** - 865-924-1111; www.beneficialtolife.com
- Clarion Inn Willow River** - 800-610-0565; www.clarioninnwillowriver.com
- Come Celebrate America** - 800-826-2933; www.governorspalace.org
- Delta Airlines** - 800-323-2323; www.delta-air.com
- Dollywood** - 800-DOLLYWOOD; www.dollywood.com
- Forbidden Caverns** - 865-453-5972; www.forbiddencavern.com
- Floyd Garrett's Muscle Car Museum** - 865-908-0882; www.musclecarmuseum.com
- The Great China Acrobats** - 865-774-8980; www.chinaacrobats.com
- Hidden Mountain Resorts** - 800-452-5992; www.hiddenmountain.com/
- James "Jimmie" Temple** - 865-453-3341
- LeConte Lodge** - 865-429-5704; www.leconte-lodge.com
- Millie Sieber** - 865-980-5985
- NASCAR SpeedPark** - 865-908-5500; www.nascarspeedpark.com
- Old Mill Square** - 888-453-6455; www.old-mill.com
- Rainforest Adventures** - 865-428-4091; www.rfadventures.com
- Ripley's Old MacDonald Mini Golf** - 865-428-1699; www.ripleys.com/oldmac/
- Rocky River Grille** - 865-908-3686; www.rockyriverriverr.com
- Robert Tino Gallery** - 828-526-0667; www.roberttino-gallery.com
- Sevierville Welcome Center & Chamber** - 865-453-6411; www.visitsevierville.com
- Smoky Mountain Knife Works** - 800-251-9306; www.eknifeworks.com
- Taulbee's Restaurant** - 865-453-2782
- Tennessee Museum of Aviation** - 866-286-8733; www.tnairmuseum.org
- Up the Creek Fish Camp and Grill** - 865-908-9424