

TRAVEL

# Spend springtime 'On top of Old Smoky'

BY DOUG JOHNSON  
STAFF WRITER

The sun dapples water rushing over ancient rocks, and white flowering dogwood blooms under the green canopy of the forest.

It's spring along the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail in the Great Smoky Mountains. You can stop many places along the trail and see the scenery from your car - the "motor" trail was designed to do just that.

April is a great time to take the day-long drive to the Smoky Mountains, America's most-visited national park - more than 10 million visitors a year make the journey.

The park is popular because of its wild countryside and because it is within a day's drive of about two-thirds of the U.S. population.

Most travelers from Michigan would go down I-75 to Knoxville, over I-40 and down Tennessee 441 into Pigeon Forge.

Pigeon Forge has boomed since the advent of Dollywood; country singer Dolly Parton usually opens the spring and summer season with a dinner-time parade down the main parkway in Pigeon Forge.

Many tourists are forsaking the crowded town of Gatlinburg and staying in one of Pigeon Forge's 8,000 motel rooms.

Along Little River Road and out to the dramatic Sinks you can fish or picnic, hike, or watch for kayakers.

Beyond lies Cades Cove, a huge valley surrounded by the mountains; the one-way loop takes you past an old church and pioneer farms and grazing herds of deer. On the way there you might be lucky enough to see one of the park's 600 black bears.

Traversing the park by car doesn't take long; the drive from Gatlinburg to Cherokee takes about an hour or so, longer if you make the side-trip over to Clingman's Dome to see the highest point in the park. There, too, you will see extensive insect damage to the trees.

Much of the park is wilderness and hiking trails. Earthwalk Press's topo map is one of the best for getting around, and has great detail on park animals and blooming times for flowers.

## Fun things to do

One worthwhile fun thing to do in the evening is to take in the dinner and show at the Dixie Stampede in Pigeon Forge. You are served a basic meal by a highly efficient staff, and at the same time treated to a horse show, complete with trick riding and buckboard races. If you enjoy sophistication this might not be for you; but if you enjoy all-American entertainment with a country flavor and a friendly North and South "competition" thrown in, then give it a try.

Other attractions near the southern edge of the park include the town of Cherokee, and their casino, and the start of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad in Dillards. The railroad in its 14th year, offers a variety of day and dinner excursions. It has been used in contemporary movies including *The Fugitive*.

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), a park advocacy organization, last week named Great Smoky Mountains National Park to its annual list of America's Ten Most Endangered National Parks for the fourth consecutive year.

**Environmental threats**  
"Air pollution continues to be the biggest threat that the park and its visitors face, but a series of development issues along with inadequate funding are also putting park resources at risk," said Greg Kidd, NPCA's Southeast associate director.

Coal-fired power plants are the largest source of emissions affecting the park. Ten years ago, the Department of Interior asked both Tennessee and North Carolina to examine new sources of air pollution since the park was greatly threatened by haze, smog, and acid deposits, according to a recent NPCA press release.

The park is nearly 70 years old, a legacy of both local citizens working to raise money, and John D. Rockefeller, who gave \$6 million to the cause.

It might be a good idea to visit the park sooner rather than later, before it is damaged too badly to be worth the trip.

## If you go

The conservation group's Web site is very helpful: [npca.org](http://npca.org).

Other Web sites include:

■ [roadsguide.com](http://roadsguide.com), a very good private site that has details on lodging and the park as well.

■ Another site, [allthesmokies.com](http://allthesmokies.com), is good because it links to dozens and dozens of other sites.

■ The train ride site is [gamr.com](http://gamr.com).

For places to stay try the Fairfield, the Holiday Inn Express or Music Road Hotel, which has a quiet location and nice pool and grounds.



PHOTOS BY DOUG JOHNSON



Over and under: A car crosses a bridge near an area of rushing water known as The Sinks (above) while the motor trail (below left) gives a close-up view of plenty of mountain streams, both big and small. Kayakers (below) love springtime in the Smokies because of the high water volume.



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	19 Anne Murray	6 Linda Ronstadt	23 Get Back! The Cast of Beatlemania
	22-23 Fine Art at Meadow Brook Juried Art Fair Tickets just \$1 donation to charity	7 Widespread Panic w/ moe. & Les Claypool ON SALE SAT. APRIL 20	
	26 Magic School Bus Live presents "The Traveling Sound Show"	10 Christopher Cross, Ambrosia, Gary Wright	<b>SEPTEMBER</b>
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