

A  
**FALCON**  
GUIDE®

# Hiking

## Great Smoky Mountains National Park

WHERE TO HIKE SERIES



**AHS** American  
Hiking  
Society

KEVIN ADAMS



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# Hiking Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Second Edition

Kevin Adams

**FALCON** GUIDES

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Every effort has been made by the author and editors to make this guide as accurate and useful as possible. However, many things can change after a guide is published—trails are rerouted, regulations change, techniques evolve, facilities come under new management, and so on.

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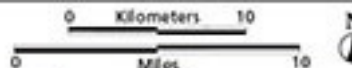
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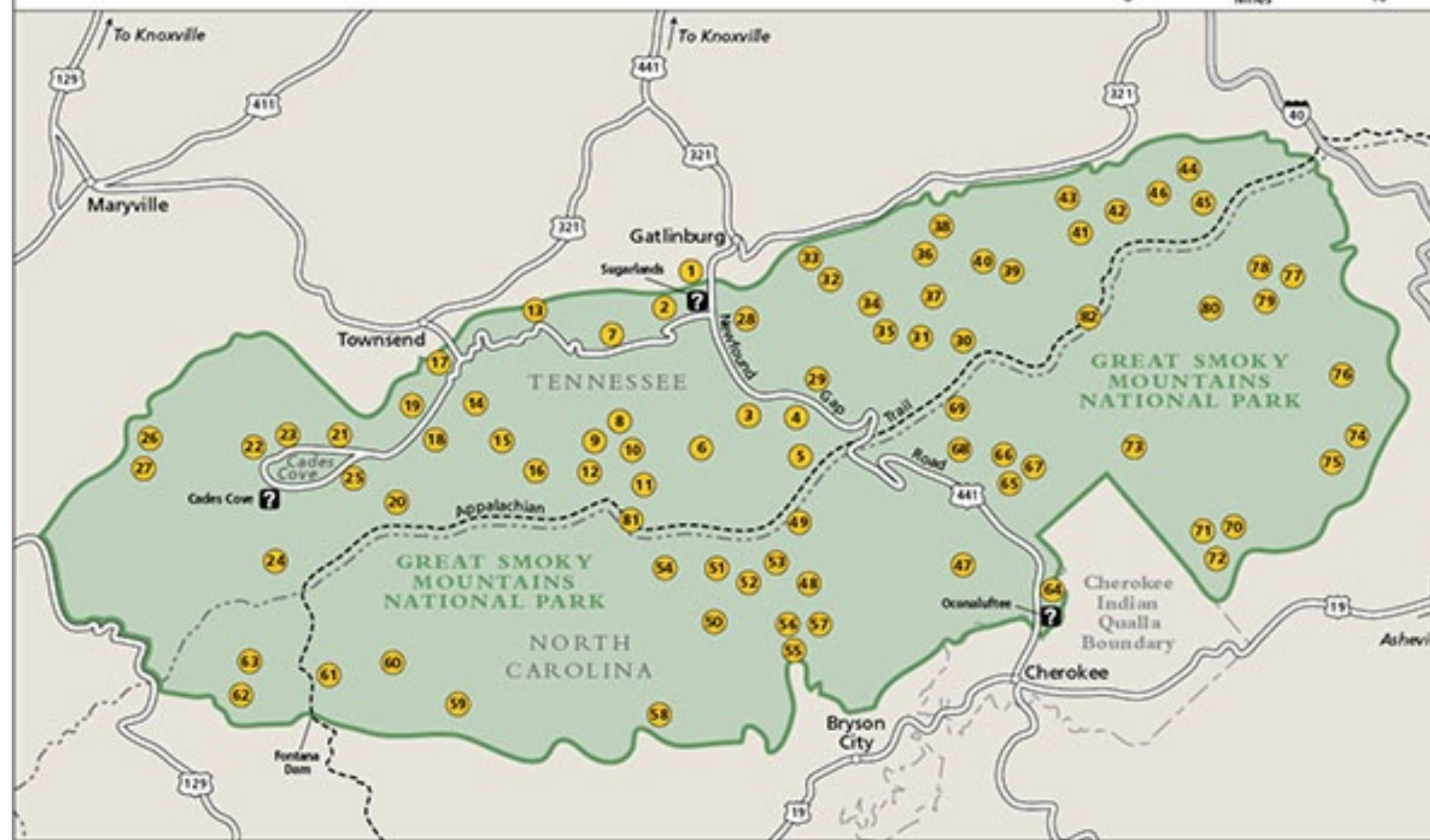
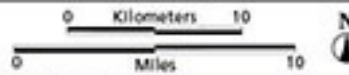
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# Regional Divisions



# Overview



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# Acknowledgments

Great Smoky Mountains National Park as an ecosystem is the sum of many parts, each of which is vital to the whole. Similarly, as a national park, it exists because of the contributions from countless individuals, most of whom the average park visitor never encounters. The reason you are able to hike trail in the Smokies without having to climb over fallen trees is because someone hiked the trail carrying a heavy saw and removed it for you. Despite operating on a shoestring budget, park employees and volunteers somehow are able to manage more than half a million acres for some ten million annual visitors.

In preparing this book I talked to dozens of these people—park rangers, interpretive volunteers, resource administrators, biologists, carpenters—even trash collectors. Each of them helped generously and with a smile. Just as they are vital to the Smokies, they were instrumental in helping me create this book. Thank you all. And thanks to everyone who works for the well-being of the Smokies.

I want to give a special thanks to my favorite trail companion: my lovely wife, Patricia. And to Titan, our crazy gray cat, for keeping my lap warm while I sat at the computer, even though he is a Fuzzy B.





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# Introduction

We've always known that the Smokies are special. The Native Americans who took game here knew it. The early settlers who used the hollows to conceal their moonshine stills knew it. Even the loggers who stripped the mountainsides of their trees knew it. Today, millions of people discover, or rediscover, this special place every year.

You won't find the country's highest peaks here, nor its biggest waterfalls, widest rivers, or deepest canyons. No lakes, seashores, glaciers, volcanoes, or geysers exist within the boundary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. They aren't needed here.

"The trees." That's the answer you often hear when asking first-time visitors what impresses them the most about the Smokies. Except for a few mountaintop balds and a few fields in lowland valleys, trees cover nearly the entire park. Living beneath all of these trees is an amazing variety of flora and fauna. Flowing underneath the trees are hundreds of miles of cascading streams, from tiny branches to small rivers.

An experience here is different from those in many other national parks. It is more intimate, more down-to-earth.

It is . . . great!





## How to Use This Guide

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The **Distance** heading gives the length of the hike, in miles, and the type of hike, as explained below. The mileages used in this book come from National Park Service information that is accurate and up-to-date as of this writing. The distances listed on the many trail signs and maps, however, are sometimes incorrect. (The Trails Illustrated maps and the official park trail map are generally up-to-date.) A **loop** hike starts and finishes at the same trailhead, with no (or very little) retracing of your steps. If you have to hike for some distance before beginning the loop part, it is a **lollipop** hike. A **reverse lollipop** is a loop hike with a tail along the loop, like the string on a Hershey's Kiss. On a **point-to-point** hike, you start at one location and end at another, without backtracking. Most point-to-point hikes require two vehicles (one left at each end of the trail) or a prearranged pickup or drop-off. One way to manage the logistical problems of shuttles is to arrange for another party to start at the other end of the trail. Trade keys when you meet that party on the trail, and each of you drive the other's vehicle home. Some point-to-point hikes make good **split-party** hikes. This is where your group drops you off and you hike back to meet them at the town or front-country campground where you're staying. On an **out-and-back** trip, you hike to a specific destination and then retrace your steps to the trailhead.

**Hiking times** are approximate and based on educated guesses. Everyone hikes at a different pace, and everyone spends a different amount of time smelling the roses along the way, so use the listed times with caution. As a rule, they are based on hiking a little over 2 mph, along with added time for enjoying the features along the hike. (Experienced hikers can cover more ground than this on most trails in the Smokies.) Also in this heading is the manner in which most hikers will do the trip, from day hike to backpacking trips of various lengths.

**Difficulty** ratings serve only as a general guide. What is difficult to one hiker may be easy to another. In this guidebook difficulty ratings do not take into account how long a route is, although generally the longer the hike, the more likely it is that it will be difficult. An **easy** hike is suitable for any hiker, including children and the elderly. Easy trails have no serious elevation gains or hazardous sections. Note, however, that couch potatoes may find the going tough on even the easy trails of the Smokies. **Moderate** hikes are for people who have some experience and at least an average fitness level. They may not be suitable for children or the elderly. The hike usually includes some hills and may include unbridged stream crossings. **Strenuous** hikes are only suitable for experienced hikers and those with an above-average fitness level. They can have substantial elevation gain and possibly some hazardous conditions. Some of the strenuous routes in this guide are crowded with hikers who probably should have chosen an easier trail. They crawl back to their cars and grumble about how rugged and inhospitable the park is.

Leashed dogs are permitted on only two trails in the park and bicycles on only four, all noted in the **Other trail users** heading. This heading is intended mainly to alert you to trails where horses are allowed. Trails that get a lot of horse traffic tend to be muddy and more eroded than hiker-only trails and they suffer from the inevitable horse pies. However, you'll miss a lot of good hiking in the

Smokies if you avoid horse trails. To make the experience more enjoyable, stop at a few of the horse pies and watch the dung beetles do their thing.

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The **Maps** heading indicates on which of the U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps (USGS quad) the hike is located. These maps show incredible detail with landscape features and terrain. Unfortunately, many of them are horribly outdated regarding trail routes. In fact, they are so bad that you are advised against using them for that purpose. A number of the trails in this guidebook are not even shown on the USGS maps. Also included are the applicable Trails Illustrated maps, which are made of waterproof and tear-resistant plastic. Map #229 covers the entire park; Map #317 covers the eastern half of the park; Map #316 covers the western half of the park. These maps show contour lines and other features and are generally up-to-date. Another good map is the official park trail map, available for a small fee from park visitor centers and backcountry permit stations. It's smaller than the Trails Illustrated maps and serves well for a quick overview of all the trails in the park and for planning hikes. However, it is made of paper and is not well suited for trail use.

## What It's Really Like

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**Prime season:** Different seasons offer different experiences. In spring the park's famous ephemeral wildflowers bloom, with mid-April being about peak time. As the tree leaves start to come out, the wildflowers fade, but the vibrant hues from the emerging foliage create a show rivaling the autumn colors. Summer can have horrific traffic jams and the smog often severely restricts the distant views. But in summer the forest is ablaze with rhododendron blooms and the cold mountain streams provide a refreshing break for sweaty hikers. Autumn in the Smokies is unrivaled, with mid-October the normal peak for autumn leaf color. However, depending on the elevation, you can usually find good color throughout the month of October and even into November. October is insanely crowded, but most of the leaf peepers never stray far from their car so you can still find solitude on some of the trails. Winter is delightfully free of traffic jams and provides the clearest long-range views, but winter hiking in the Smokies requires extra planning.

**Weather:** Snow is common in the higher elevations from November through March, and you should also expect it in October and April. Spring is fickle, with warm sunny days changing to cold snowy ones in a heartbeat. Summer is hot and hazy, and afternoon thunderstorms are common. Autumn has wonderful weather, with a good number of warm blue-sky days and clear crisp nights.

**Black bears:** The Great Smokies have many black bears and seeing one is always a possibility—and a thrill. Keep that encounter safe by reading *Make It a Safe Trip*, below.

**Bugs:** Mosquitoes are typically not a problem in the Smokies since there is little standing water for them to breed. What *is* irritating are no-see-ums and blackflies. In warm weather they can drive you nuts. See *Make It a Safe Trip* for more information about nasty insects in the park.

**Finding solitude:** Some trails are overcrowded; others receive little use yet offer a hiking experience just as rewarding as the crowded trails. The Trail Finder lists some of the most popular trails. Avoiding hordes of people is simple: Don't hike the most popular trails except on winter weekdays, when your experience will range from seeing a few people to having the hike to yourself.

**Thieves:** Thieves may prowl the remote parking areas looking for vehicles left overnight or during the day. Even vehicles parked within plain sight of major roads have been broken into and vandalized. The hike descriptions alert you to places that have recurring problems, but you should be careful no matter where you leave your vehicle. Don't leave anything in sight and don't leave a note on the dashboard saying how long you're going to be out. Using a blanket or jacket to cover up stuff is like displaying a sign for thieves that you're hiding something valuable. Valuables are best left at home, or at least in your trunk.

**Large furry things on the road:** When hurrying to get to the trailhead in the early morning hours or when feeling anxious while driving home in the evening, be especially watchful for white-tailed deer, elk, and other wildlife on the roadways. Hitting a deer will ruin your day—it's even harder on the animal.

**Small flat things on the road:** It's sad to see all the roadkill in a place such as the Smokies—or anywhere, for that matter. Avoid adding to the flattened fauna by slowing down and watching the road. Box turtles and frogs like to come out after a rain in warm weather, and on a warm, wet night, the frogs are very active.

**Water, water, everywhere:** Water is everywhere in the Smokies, and nearly every drop of it started out as rain or condensation. You're likely to have to hike in rain no matter when you visit the park. In winter it can rain solid for days. Summer can bring a thunderstorm every afternoon for weeks. If hiking for more than a few hours, you should carry rain gear with you, regardless of the weather conditions when you set out.

## Getting to the Park

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It's estimated that two-thirds of the people in the United States are within a day's drive of the Smokies. The park is located on the North Carolina–Tennessee border, near the northern border of Georgia. The major interstate accesses are I-40 from the east and west, I-81 from the north, and I-75 from the north and south. Both I-40 and I-75 pass through Knoxville, Tennessee, just northwest of the park. Knoxville is the nearest major city. I-81 joins I-40 east of Knoxville. I-40 also passes through Asheville on the North Carolina side, about an hour from the park. A major access highway from the south is US 23 from Atlanta, which joins US 441 northeast of Atlanta. US 441 is the only transmountain highway in the Smokies, with a large network of smaller roads providing access from all directions. Study a road map to determine the best route from your location.

On your first Smokies trip, you'll likely enter the park at one of two main entrances: Cherokee, North Carolina, or Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Newfound Gap Road (US 441) connects the two towns, crossing over the Smokies' crest at Newfound Gap and essentially splitting the park in half. The main park visitor centers are located a short distance from each town: Oconaluftee Visitor Center for Cherokee, and Sugarlands Visitor Center for Gatlinburg. Two other visitor centers are located within park boundaries: a center located at the Cable Mill area in Cades Cove and one on Clingmans Dome. Numerous ranger stations and campgrounds provide additional sources of information throughout the park.

If you are flying to the park and renting a car, you will fly into either Knoxville, Tennessee, or Asheville, North Carolina. (Atlanta is an option as well, especially since many flights to Knoxville or Asheville will connect there.) Knoxville is a little closer and has a larger airport. If heading to the park's Gatlinburg entrance from Knoxville's McGhee Tyson Airport, you will take US 129 (Alcoa Highway) north to I-40 in the heart of Knoxville. Take I-40 east to TN 66 at exit 407 (you will see the signs for the park). Follow TN 66 south to Sevierville, where you'll pick up US 441 and follow it south through Pigeon Forge and into Gatlinburg.

If heading to the park's Townsend entrance in the western end of the park, take US 129 south from the Knoxville airport and pick up US 321/TN 73 in Maryville. Follow US 321 north to Townsend and continue straight instead of turning left to remain on US 321 (you will see the signs for the park). The Townsend entrance is becoming increasingly popular. It is the closest access to Cades Cove, one of the most popular locations in the park.

From Asheville's Regional Airport, you will take I-26 north to I-40 and head west on I-40 to US 23/74 at exit 27. US 23/74 is called Great Smoky Mountain Expressway and it offers numerous approaches to the park. Most visitors will follow one of the two main routes from the expressway: US 19 through Maggie Valley and into Cherokee or US 441 into Cherokee. All routes are well signed.

The 469-mile-long Blue Ridge Parkway terminates at Newfound Gap Road, between Cherokee and Oconaluftee Visitor Center.

If you don't already know something about the park, one of these accesses is likely to be your entry point. There are many additional vehicle entrances to the park, but a first-time visitor will want to drive the main roads initially to get a handle on the park before branching out.

Finally, a word of warning. First-time park visitors are often startled by the juxtaposition of the park and ultra-touristy Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge (home to Dollywood), and to a slightly lesser extent, Cherokee. Although they don't exactly offer a wilderness experience, these towns do provide valuable services, including accommodations for those who aren't into camping or backpacking.

## Supplies and Services

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Unlike many other national parks, Great Smoky Mountains National Park does not have any public lodging, food, or fuel services within its borders. (LeConte Lodge on Mount LeConte is the only lodging exception, but you have to hike 5 miles to get there. The Cades Cove Campground store has basic food and camping supplies, but the store closes in winter.) The surrounding towns offer everything you need, but the services are seasonal at many places. The following closely surrounding towns have basic year-round services: Cherokee, Maggie Valley, Waynesville, and Bryson City in North Carolina; Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Townsend in Tennessee. Other small communities have gas stations and small stores that are open year-round, but most other services close for the winter. Many businesses close for the season even in some of the larger towns, such as Bryson City and Cherokee.

Other than Cades Cove, park front-country (vehicle) campgrounds offer minimal services, such as

ice, firewood, and vending machines. Drink vending machines are available at Sugarlands and Oconaluftee Visitor Centers.

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See appendix B for a list of commercial shuttle services.

## The Trails

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In the Smokies, unlike at some other parks, you can't just strike out and hike wherever you want. The rugged landscape and dense vegetation are not conducive to much off-trail hiking. Besides, doing so can harm the ecosystem, and with more than 800 miles of maintained trails in the park, it's just not necessary. You can have an intimate experience and see everything you'd want to see right from an official trail. Every hike in this guidebook uses only official trails. Some of the routes follow one trail only; others use a combination of several trails. One advantage to remaining on official park trails is that you don't have to worry too much about getting lost—as long as you carry a map showing the trails. Every trail junction is signed, and the park does a good job of keeping the signs up. (Bears sometimes chew them up and some of the older ones are rotting away.)

This guidebook includes all of the short self-guiding nature trails in the park, but it does not include any of the “Quiet Walkways.” You'll see signs indicating these walkways along the main park roads. They have small parking areas so that only a few people can use the trails at a time. All of them are short and lead to some feature, such as a stream or an old homesite. Part of the charm of these paths is not knowing what's in store until you hike them. So no clues here. Discover them yourself.

In some areas of the park, particularly Sugarlands, Smokemont, Deep Creek, and Cades Cove, you may encounter wide, unsigned trails that obviously are being used regularly. These are usually bridle paths, and while they may be “official,” they don't make the best hiking trails. Horses are allowed on many of the official hiking trails, but these unsigned bridle paths are intended primarily for horses. You can hike them if you want, but it is not recommended. Stick to the official hiking trails.

Everywhere in the park, you'll encounter unsigned side paths branching off from the official trails. Some of these paths are heavily traveled, while many of them are old trails that are mostly overgrown. Regardless of the condition, very few of these paths are maintained by the park, and hiking them is discouraged. Again, with over 800 miles of maintained and signed trails in the park, you can experience everything you want right from an official trail.

It is very important that you check ahead to make sure the trails for the hike you are planning are open. Trails may be closed temporarily for a number of reasons, including bear activity, storm damage, and maintenance.

## Backcountry Campsites

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The park is currently working on a new online system for managing backcountry camping. Permits and reservations will be required for all overnight stays and a small fee will be charged. All backcountry shelters and campsites will be rationed. The park hopes to have the new system

implemented sometime in 2013. You should contact the park to find out if the system is in use before making your trip. The following information will apply until the new system is employed.

In the Smokies you must camp at a designated backcountry campsite unless you obtain a special cross-country permit, available only from designated park rangers. The rules for these permits are very strict and applications are not automatically approved. Unless you are working on a scientific research project or something similar, it is highly recommended that you stick to the main trails and campsites just like everyone else. (See The Trails, above.)

All backcountry campsites in the Smokies are numbered and all shelters are named. The sites have names too, but only the numbers are referred to on trail maps and when obtaining permits. All locations that provide backcountry permits have a map showing the location of sites and a listing of rationed sites. (Rationed sites require a reservation.) In addition, both the official park trail map and the Trails Illustrated maps list all of the backcountry campsites and shelters. While the list of rationed sites remains fairly constant, it can change in response to use patterns and bear activity.

All sites and shelters have a water source nearby, either a spring or a stream. Springs are not always dependable, and it's a good idea to check ahead before beginning an overnight trip in dry conditions. Rangers may not know whether a particular spring is dry, but they can give you a general idea of conditions.

Another consideration is that the park closes campsites occasionally due to bear activity or other reasons. The park posts these closings where permits are obtained, but you don't want to find out at the last minute that the site you've planned on is closed. Call the permit office at (865) 436-1231 to make sure your site is open before you head out.

At the time of this guide's publication, the following backcountry campsites are rationed and require a reservation in addition to a permit:

### **All shelters**

- 9 Anthony Creek
- 10 Ledbetter Ridge
- 13 Sheep Pen Gap
- 17 Little Bottoms
- 20 King Branch
- 21 Mile 53
- 23 Camp Creek
- 24 Rough Creek
- 29 Otter Creek
- 36 Upper Walnut Bottom
- 37 Lower Walnut Bottom
- 38 Mount Sterling
- 46 Estes Branch
- 47 Enloe Creek
- 50 Lower Chasteen Creek

55 Pole Road  
57 Bryson Place  
60 Bumgardner Branch  
61 Bald Creek  
71 CCC Camp  
83 Bone Valley  
84 Sugar Fork  
85 Sawdust Pile  
86 Proctor  
90 Lost Cove  
113 Birch Spring Gap

## Backcountry Permits

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Read the opening paragraph of Backcountry Campsites, above, for information about the park's new permit system. The following information applies until the new system is implemented.

In Great Smoky Mountains National Park, you must have a permit for any overnight stay in the backcountry, regardless of whether the campsite is rationed. The Backcountry Camping Permit system is designed to protect the park's natural and cultural resources, as well as to provide the best backcountry experience for hikers. See the introduction for Hikes 81 and 82 if you are doing a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail.

Permits are free and can be obtained from Oconaluftee or Sugarlands Visitor Centers, ranger stations, most front-country campgrounds, and at some trail information boards. The permit is obtained through a self-registration process. If the site where you wish to camp is not rationed, simply read the instructions on the permit, fill it out, and place one copy in the permit box. If you choose a rationed site, you have to call the Backcountry Reservation Office to obtain a reservation. (Be prepared with alternative dates if you call at the last minute.) The Reservation Office will give you a number to write on your permit. The office is open seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET. Call (865) 436-1231 for reservations. The general backcountry information number is (865) 436-1297.

## Backcountry Use Regulations

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These regulations apply to *all* backcountry users, including Appalachian Trail thru-hikers.

In the Great Smokies, *do*:

- Have a permit to camp in the backcountry.
- Follow all instructions on the permit, and keep the permit in your possession while hiking.
- Camp only at designated campsites and shelters.
- Build fires only in established fire rings at designated campsites or shelters.
- Use only wood that is dead and down to build fires. Backpacking stoves are encouraged.
- Suspend your food and odorous items from the provided suspension cables.

- Carry out all trash. If you can pack it in, you can pack it out.
- ~~Have a valid state fishing permit from either North Carolina or Tennessee if you fish in the park.~~ permit from either state allows you to fish anywhere in the park. Be sure to obtain specific fishing regulations from the park before you fish.

In the Great Smokies, *do not*:

- Feed, harass, or intentionally disturb wildlife.
- Cut, carve, or deface trees or buildings.
- Take non-service pets into the backcountry. (Non-service pets are allowed *only* on Oconaluftee River and Gatlinburg Trails.)
- Make campsite “improvements” such as fire rings, rock walls, or drainage trenches.
- Use a wheeled vehicle or cart on hiking trails. The exceptions for bicycles are Gatlinburg and Oconaluftee River Trails and the lower portions of Deep Creek and Indian Creek Trails. The exceptions for wheeled carts are the lower sections of Hazel Creek, Forney Creek, and Noland Creek.
- Cut switchbacks.
- Wash dishes or bathe (with soap) in park streams.
- Pitch a tent at backcountry shelters. Appalachian Trail thru-hikers may camp outside shelters if there is no bunk space available. See the introduction for the Appalachian Trail at the beginning of Hikes 81 and 82.
- Dispose of human waste within 100 feet of a campsite or water source or within sight of a trail. You should bury feces in a 6-inch-deep hole.
- Gather ramps. The park no longer allows picking these onion-like plants.
- Stay more than one night in a row at a shelter or more than three consecutive nights at a campsite. (This may change with the new fee system.)

## Leave No Trace

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If you turned around and backtracked the hike you just made, would you see any evidence that you had been there? Did the animals and plants feel any effect from your visit?

Going into a national park such as Great Smoky Mountains National Park is like visiting a world-renowned museum. You wouldn’t want to leave your mark on an art treasure, would you? If everybody going through the museum leaves one little mark, the piece of art will quickly be destroyed—and of what value is a big building full of trashed art? The same goes for an environment such as the Smokies, which is as magnificent as any masterpiece by any artist. If we all leave just one little mark on the landscape, the wilderness will soon be despoiled.

The park can accommodate human use if everyone behaves responsibly, but a few thoughtless or uninformed visitors can ruin it for everybody. All visitors have a responsibility to know and follow the rules of Leave No Trace hiking and camping. Today, most people want to walk softly, but some aren’t aware that they have poor manners. Often their actions are dictated by the outdated habits of a previous generation of campers who cut green boughs for evening shelters, built campfires with fire rings, and dug trenches around tents. In the 1950s these “camping rules” may have been acceptable,



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sample content of Hiking Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Regional Hiking Series)

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