



Outside the Lodge at Buckberry Creek, overlooking the Smoky Mountains.

'Tis the Season in Gatlinburg

Snow sports, shopping and holiday events bring magic to a Tennessee town

BY NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

EMBRACED ON THREE SIDES BY

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the town of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, can be as much fun in winter as it is in summer. Ober Gatlinburg Ski Resort & Amusement Park, only three miles from downtown, offers skiing, snowboarding, snow tubing and year-round ice skating. By contrast, the national park presents serene winter landscapes that you can reach by car or on foot. And when you're ready to come in from the cold (the average December high is 50 degrees), you can visit an acclaimed aquarium, a vaudeville-type theater and a range of shops and galleries. There's also Smoky Mountain Winterfest, a holiday event that lights up Gatlinburg with tens of thousands of glittering lights.

NONSTOP FUN

Entertainment abounds in and around downtown, much of it on the Parkway, the main thoroughfare. The **Sweet Fanny Adams Theatre** (461 Parkway; 865-436-4039; sweetfannyadams.com; adults \$24) offers original shows that are a mix of comedy, music and dance. Ride 400 feet to the top of the **Space Needle** observation tower for a 360-degree view (115 Historic Nature Trail; 865-436-4629; gatlinburg.spaceneedle.com; adults \$7.50); down below there's an arcade and laser tag fun. On New Year's Eve, the Space Needle serves up great fireworks and a ball drop.

In other seasonal events, November 10 brings the **Gatlinburg Winter Magic Kickoff & Chili Cookoff** (eventsgatlinburg.com). Chili cooks compete in a town that's

virtually blanketed in energy-efficient LED bulbs. The lighted displays depict snowmen, snowflakes and toy soldiers, as well as 40-foot swans beside illuminated archways, a cupid hovering over a "Smoky Mountain Romance" sign, and animated teddy bears dancing, painting and working in woodshops. December 3 is this year's date for the **Fantasy of Lights Christmas Parade** (attractions-gatlinburg.com). The 1½-hour procession, which draws as many as 80,000 people, has dozens of floats, marching bands, helium balloons, decorated cars and, of course, Santa.

Ripley Entertainment wins the prize for the most town attractions, including the namesake **Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum** (88 River Rd.; 865-436-5096; ripleysgatlinburg.com). But the scene-

stealer in Ripley's repertoire is the **Aquarium of the Smokies** (ripleysaquariumofthesmokies.com; adults \$22), the state's second most popular attraction (after Dollywood, Dolly Parton's theme park in neighboring Pigeon Forge). Videos and hands-on displays, such as the one about the surprising horseshoe crab—did you know this aquatic creature bleeds blue?—keep visits interesting. "I defy you not to learn something here," says the aquarium's director of marketing, Karl Thomas.

The soothingly dim and cool interiors are sure to lower your blood pressure. To subtly keep crowds moving forward and headed in one direction, the aquarium uses "glide paths" (moving sidewalks). Temporarily misplaced kids (called "jellyfish" by employees) are reunited with parents faster than you can say *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

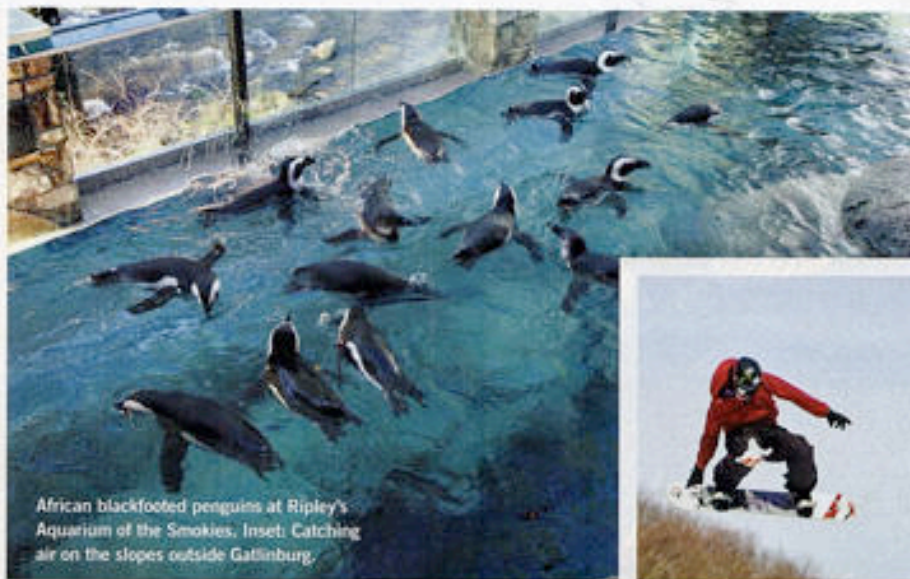
Shark Lagoon, a serpentine acrylic tunnel that allows more than 100 sharks to swim above and around guests, is a favorite. Karl's believe-it-or-not claim: "I've actually 'burped' a shark." When new sharks arrive, he explains, air gulped in transit must be eliminated using a Heimlich-type maneuver.

The Penguin Playhouse is the latest aquarium addition. Here, tuxedo-clad African blackfooted penguins swim expertly (as fast as 12 mph) through a clear tunnel running beneath guests' feet, passing from indoor to outdoor habitats. Visitors can crawl through another tunnel to view the birds "nose to beak."

APPALACHIAN MEMENTOS

If you're looking for holiday gifts, meander through the **Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community** (Hwy. 321N; 800-568-4748; gatlinburgcrafts.com), an eight-mile trail of shops and galleries about three miles east of downtown. You'll find glass-blowing, broom-making, pottery, painting and more. The community holds an annual holiday show at the Gatlinburg Convention Center (this year, November 23–December 5).

Another good source of gifts is the recently opened **Carousel Gardens** (458 Parkway; 865-430-7334;



African blackfooted penguins at Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies. Inset: Catching air on the slopes outside Gatlinburg.

shopsatcarouselgardens.com), a two-story gallery selling work by about 50 of the same A&C artisans. One caveat: Expect wall-to-wall crowds around Thanksgiving and during the holidays.

FROSTED PEAKS

Ober Gatlinburg (865-436-5423; snow report line, 800-251-9202; obergatlinburg.com) is Tennessee's only ski resort. ("Ober" is German for "upper.") Typically, the ski season lasts from December through mid-to-late March. Last year, Ober Gatlinburg had an impressive 100 days of snow on its eight ski slopes and tubing and snowboard areas. Also offered: an alpine slide (a dry-track, simulated bobsled ride), shops, a restaurant and a small zoo of native animals, including raccoons, skunks, flying squirrels, turtles, snakes, river otters and black bears.

To get to Ober Gatlinburg, you can drive three miles up Ski Mountain Road or take the aerial tram—worth it for the views alone (adults \$10). "My name is Suzanna, like the song 'Oh, Susanna,'" says a tram operator with a real-McCoy mountain accent, thick as molasses. She points out the sites along the way, such as Mt. LeConte (at 6,593 feet, the third-highest peak in the national park) and a chalet that resembles a life-size dollhouse ("They call that Barbie's house").

Be prepared for snow when you drive on any of the mountain roads in winter. "We recommend four-wheel drive or tire

chains," says Kay King of Mountain Laurel Chalets. "Leave the little sports car at home." Guess that eliminates Barbie's convertible. . . .

If you're looking to spend some relaxing time outdoors, consider taking in the national park's beauty with an outfitter called **A Walk in the Woods** (4413 Scenic Dr. E.; 865-436-8283; awalkinthewoods.com). Vesna and Erik Plakanis and their crew conduct nature hikes such as "A Stroll Back in Time" (covering one of the park's first settled areas), "Old Settler Walk" (a wagon trail), "Natural Pools and Waterfalls" and "Exploring Nature with Children."

The guided hikes are run year-round (minimum two people; from \$20 per person), and vary in length and location. "You can go for miles in the winter without seeing anybody," says Vesna. Once the leaves have fallen, remnants left by the 7,000 people who once lived here stand out sharply: rock walls, chimneys and cemeteries. More visual drama comes from waterfalls and streams, often frozen mid-flow.

The footprints (and occasional appearances) of raccoons, squirrels, foxes, coyotes and deer hint at the abundant animal life roaming the hillsides. Alas, the area's iconic black bears mostly snooze in winter. One local describes the bears' winter pattern as more akin to deep sleep with occasional sleep-walking episodes than true hibernation. Still, best to let sleeping—or sleep-walking—bears lie.

GATLINBURG



EAT

Pancake Pantry

"Oberindulge" at Tennessee's first pancake house, with 24 varieties, from Swiss chocolate chip to sweet potato to "wildberry" (five berries). 629 Parkway; 865-436-4724; breakfast for two, \$30*

No Way Jose's Cantina

Great Tex-Mex located beside the Pigeon River and across the street from the aquarium. 555 Parkway; 865-430-5673; lunch for two, \$25

Park Grill Steakhouse

Only 200 yards from the national park entrance, offering down-home charm, hand-cut steaks and moonshine chicken (with white lightning liquor). 1110 Parkway; 865-436-2300; dinner for two, \$60

Calhoun's Village is a gated area at 1002 Parkway, with specialty shops and the following restaurants:

Calhoun's

A good-time place serving baby back ribs, steaks, prime rib, grilled chicken and fried catfish. 865-436-4100; dinner for two, \$30

Smoky Mountain Restaurant & Brewery

On-site microbrewery, as well as steaks, pizzas, sandwiches and burgers. 865-436-4200; lunch for two, \$30

Cherokee Grill

Mountain cuisine with a contemporary twist, including herb-crusted trout and Boursin-stuffed filet mignon. 865-436-4287; dinner for two, \$50

*Prices are for a meal for two without drinks, tax or tip.

STAY

RCI-affiliated resorts in and around Gatlinburg include:



HOLIDAY INN CLUB VACATIONS SMOKY MOUNTAIN RESORT

Located downtown within walking distance of shops, restaurants and attractions. Units have fireplaces for getting cozy after outdoor adventures in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, just a half-mile away. 404 Historic Nature Trail

Member Review:

"Close to everything but far enough away for quiet at night."

GATLINBURG TOWN SQUARE

Two- and three-bedroom condos with full kitchens, washers, dryers and in-room whirlpools make this a perfect family getaway. The heart of downtown is about four blocks away. 414 Historic Nature Trail

Member Reviews:

"Our room was very cozy. It overlooked a stream and had a nice fireplace."
"Can ride the trolleys and don't have to drive anywhere if you don't want to."

TREE TOPS RESORT

Just a mile from town in a secluded woody area with hiking paths and a trout stream, this is a convenient base for outdoor enthusiasts or those looking to relax. 290 Sherman Clabo Rd.

Member Review:

"Great to hike in the Smokies all day, then come back to Tree Tops and relax

on the balcony, have a cocktail and cook dinner on the gas grill."

WYNDHAM SMOKY MOUNTAINS

Just off Highway 441 about 10 miles north of Gatlinburg, this property has two indoor pools. It's perfect for exploring the area by car—close to hundreds of hiking trails, outlet shopping in Sevierville, and restaurants in Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. 308 Collier Dr., Sevierville

Member Review:

"Resort is close to many restaurants, mini-golf, go-carts and shopping."

For more information, including complete member reviews (as member reviews have been condensed), visit RCI.com or call

Weeks: 800-338-7777

Points: 877-968-7476

Club Members, please call your specific Club or RCI telephone number.

NON-RCI-AFFILIATED RESORTS:

Lodge at Buckberry Creek

The 44 rustic yet elegant suites are in Adirondack-lodge-style buildings with views of Mt. LeConte. Some have original art and antiques; all have fireplaces and balconies. 961 Campbell Lead Rd.; 866-305-6343; buckberrylodge.com; suite for family of four from \$180 per night, with continental breakfast

Bearskin Lodge

Rooms at this hotel near the Parkway have log-burning fireplaces and views of downtown or the Pigeon River. 840 River Rd.; 877-795-7546; thebearskinlodge.com; doubles from \$70 per night

Mountain Laurel Chalets

This family-owned business manages 150 private residences for rent on Ski Mountain, from a cozy one-bedroom to a roomy 12-bedroom. 440 Ski Mountain Rd.; 800-626-3431; mtnlaurelchalets.com; average for family of four, \$130 per night

Highlands Condominiums

These condos grant easy access to Ober Gatlinburg, downtown and the national park. The one- to three-bedroom units have balcony views, fireplaces, whirlpools and kitchens. 855 Campbell Lead; 877-877-1377; highlandscondos.com; one-bedrooms from \$129 per night

PHOTOS, OPPOSITE PAGE: THE LODGE AT BUCKBERRY CREEK; PREVIOUS PAGE: RIBBY ENTERTAINMENT; ALL PHOTOS THIS PAGE: COPPER CELLAR CORPORATION