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Quiet Nature and a buzzing Tourist Town: Spending a Weekend in Gatlinburg, Tennessee



An Overview of Gatlinburg, Tennessee in the Fall.

From famous attractions to beautiful nature, there are a lot of things that make Gatlinburg, Tennessee special. Because of this, you may feel overwhelmed and have no idea where to start. Don't worry, I am here to help! My name is Shan Patel, and I have lived near Gatlinburg my entire life. I am from Morristown, Tennessee, a city of about 30,000 people. Morristown is about an hour away from Gatlinburg, which is why the tourist town was my

family's go-to vacation destination growing up. Also, a few years ago when I was in high school, my friends and I would take a trip to Gatlinburg at least once a month, so I've seen my fair share of attractions in that town.

Whether you are a lone adult or someone with a family, this guide is for you. People who are looking for a nice, quiet vacation typically travel to Gatlinburg to visit the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. On the other hand, people who are looking for more of a tourist town will visit downtown Gatlinburg. Fortunately for you, I have done both multiple times and can give you the best of both worlds. Alright, let's jump right into it! Here is a guide from a frequent visitor on how to spend a weekend in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.



Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies during the day.

Friday:

1. Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies, 2 P.M.

Once you're settled, I first suggest visiting downtown. Luckily, there are plenty of parking lots available throughout downtown, so finding a spot to park your car shouldn't be too much of a hassle. Although Downtown Gatlinburg isn't huge, there are several attractions in the

town center that you may enjoy. I recommend Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies. The aquarium holds thousands of sea creatures, such as sharks, sea turtles, and penguins. Furthermore, some sea creatures like jellyfish and stingrays can be physically touched by visitors! Ripley's is a family-friendly attraction that even offers lower prices for kids. All-in-all, it's a place that can easily create life-long memories for everyone.

2. The Village Shops, 4 P.M.

After a couple of hours at the aquarium, you may want to switch things up a bit. You can do this by visiting some of the local shops. I recommend The Village Shops. This fan-favorite destination is located within walking distance of the aquarium and has a variety of different shops all in one spot, including a candy store, a hiking store, and a clothing store. Among these stores, there is a donut shop called Donut Friar, which has been voted as the best donut shop in the state of Tennessee. If you happen to be visiting around a holiday, The Village Shops will typically host an event for the holiday. Some famous holidays they celebrate are Christmas, New Year's, and Valentine's Day.

3. Smith & Son Corner Kitchen, 6 P.M.

After a day of walking and exploring, you'll probably be hungry in the evening. For dinner, I recommend Smith & Son Corner Kitchen, which is located right in the heart of downtown Gatlinburg. From ribs to fajitas, burgers to catfish, its menu is packed with a wide variety of choices. My personal favorite item is the Queso Quesadilla. It consists of a layer of Pico de Gallo that is mixed with both cheddar and pepper jack cheese. Then, the quesadilla is topped off with tomato salsa and sour cream. The prices are also reasonable. The average

price per person is between \$10 and \$20. However, I highly recommend you have a reservation, as wait times can be long without one.



An overview of Anakeesta, one of Gatlinburg's most popular attractions.

Saturday:

1. Crockett's Breakfast Camp, 8 A.M.

You know what they say, breakfast is the most important meal of the day! One of the most popular breakfast spots in Gatlinburg is Crockett's Breakfast Camp. The building's interior and exterior will make you feel like you're in an authentic mountain town. Named after frontiersman David Crockett, Crockett's Breakfast Camp offers traditional breakfast items with a country twist. A few of the things they are known for are the giant cinnamon rolls, delicious biscuits, and unique dishes that are designed to look like cast iron skillets.

Fortunately, you don't have to worry about breaking the bank here, since the average price per person is \$10-\$20.

2. Anakeesta, 10 A.M.

Arguably the most popular tourist attraction in town, Anakeesta is a must-visit for anyone who comes to Gatlinburg. Anakeesta is a small theme park nestled in the mountainside that

can be reached via a chondola ride (a lift that combines a gondola and a chairlift). At the top, you'll officially enter Anakeesta! There are several activities to enjoy, including:

- Sightsee from the AnaVista observation tower
- Duel on the zip-line
- Walk on the treetop skywalk
- Experience the Astra Lumina lightshow
- Ride the mountain coasters

These are just a handful of the numerous things the theme park offers. Anakeesta's general admission tickets cost \$34.99 for adults (ages 12-59), \$22.99 for children (ages 4-11), and \$27.99 for seniors (ages 60+). A tip that may prove useful: be sure to arrive in the morning. The park tends to get much busier around noon, so it's a good idea to experience some of its luxuries before the crowd forms.

3. Clifftop Restaurant, 1 P.M.

While at Anakeesta, you may as well experience what it's like to eat on a mountain. The Clifftop Restaurant is one of Anakeesta's iconic restaurants. It serves American cuisine that most people are familiar with such as burgers, salads, steaks, and desserts. You can also unwind at the bar with a drink while enjoying the stunning mountain view. Prices range from \$20-\$30 per person, which is a bit on the higher side, but the food won't disappoint!



An image of the SkyBridge at the Gatlinburg SkyPark.

4. Gatlinburg SkyPark, 4 P.M.

It's time to head back to downtown, because next up on the list is the Gatlinburg SkyPark.

The SkyPark was first opened to the public in 1954, making it one of Gatlinburg's oldest attractions. The SkyPark is known for the SkyLift and the newly built SkyBridge. The SkyLift is a chairlift that guests use to get to the SkyPark. Fun fact: the SkyLift was the first chairlift to be built in the south (don't worry, it's been modernized quite a bit). Once you buy your ticket in the booth downtown, the chairlift will take you to the top of Crockett Mountain, where you can cross the SkyBridge. Located 1,800 feet above sea level, the SkyBridge is the longest pedestrian suspension bridge in North America, at roughly 700 feet. At the halfway point, you'll reach the glass floor where you can look down at the deep valley below. The price for Gatlinburg's SkyPark varies by age group. A single visit ticket costs \$37.95 for adults (ages 12-64), \$30.95 for seniors (65+), and \$23.95 for children.

5. Tom and Earl's Back Alley Grill, 7 P.M.

After visiting the SkyPark, take a stroll down to Tom and Earl's Back Alley Grill for dinner. This pub-style restaurant offers a wide variety of menu items. These items include burgers, quesadillas, Philly cheesesteaks and much more. It also has a bar with drinks that are known for their delicious taste and Gatlinburg-themed names such as "Bearhama Mama and Smoky Mountain." With the average price per person being around \$20, it's quite affordable.



A picture of Gatlinburg's Space Needle.

6. Gatlinburg Space Needle, 9 P.M.

End your day with a nighttime view of Gatlinburg at the Gatlinburg Space Needle. This 407-foot observation tower in the heart of downtown will allow you to get a bird's eye view of Gatlinburg while the vibrant town glows at night. At the base of the Space Needle, there is a laser tag course, an arcade, a theater, and an escape room for you to enjoy. To get to the top, there are glass elevators that consistently carry guests up and down the tower. Once at the top, you'll see the beautiful mountains and the town below. Free viewfinders are provided so

you can get a closer look at the incredible sights around you. If you're worried about the cost for this exquisite view, don't. Tickets range from a reasonable \$10-\$15 per person.

Sunday:

1. Pancake Pantry, 8 A.M.

Begin your final day in Gatlinburg with breakfast at Pancake Pantry. Located near The Village Shops, this restaurant is famous for its delicious pancakes (hence the name). In fact, almost every meal comes with a side of pancakes. Other tasty meals offered include French toast, crepes, and eggs. Like Crockett's Breakfast Camp, the average price per person is \$10-\$20 at Pancake Pantry. A quick tip: this place gets busy fast so it's important to arrive early. Otherwise, you may end up spending more time waiting than you planned.



A picture of the infamous Great Smoky Mountains.

2. Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 10 A.M.

It's borderline criminal to leave Gatlinburg without visiting the Great Smoky Mountains. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is Gatlinburg's most distinguished landmark. It's the largest park on the East Coast that's known for its diversity of plants and animals, beautiful mountains, and mountain culture. The park is estimated to be between 200 and 300 million years old. Because of this, there are countless historical structures to be seen including houses, churches, and schools. There is a long list of activities you can enjoy at this park.

Some of the things you can do are:

- Hike one of the 150 trails, including part of the Appalachian Trail
- Ascend the highest point in Tennessee: Clingmans Dome
- Drive through the scenic valley of Cades Cove
- Visit one of the many waterfalls
- Explore the Oconaluftee Mountain Farm Museum
- Set up a tent and camp in the woods

These are just a handful of many things that you can do at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. For all of this, you must be thinking it's quite expensive. However, there is no entrance fee to the park. If you're going to be parked for more than 15 minutes, the only thing you must pay for is the parking pass, which only costs \$5. One important thing to keep in mind when visiting the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is to beware of the wildlife! Black bear sightings are common throughout the park and it's important for all guests to treat the sightings with extreme caution.

Lodging:

For lodging, I recommend renting a cabin rather than staying in a hotel. The tranquility you get from staying in a cabin in the mountains is a one-of-a-kind experience.

Here are a few options depending on what you're looking for:

Cabin for singles/couples: **Mountain Hideaway** (1430 Zurich Rd; Hotels.com), located just minutes away from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies, this one-bedroom, two-bathroom cabin is perfect for a single or couples looking to be secluded, but still near the attractions. From \$95.

Cabin for a small family: **Gatlinburg Treasure** (Address available after booking; ColonialProperties.com), located right outside of downtown Gatlinburg, this two-bedroom, three-bathroom cabin is perfect for families that want to have their own space but stay close to the action. From \$131.

Cabin for a large group: **Highlands View Lodge** (Address available after booking; Vrbo.com), located in downtown Gatlinburg across from the Gatlinburg SkyPark, this eight-bedroom, nine-bathroom cabin is what every large group of travelers need. With downtown a stone's throw away, you won't waste any time getting to the attractions. From \$789.

Hotel: **Embassy Suites by Hilton** (604 Airport Rd; Google.com), If a cabin isn't your style, this 4-star hotel located in downtown Gatlinburg is a terrific option. Like the cabins, it has several amenities and it's close to most of the attractions in town. From \$171.

Gatlinburg is one of the most popular tourist towns for a reason. It offers various activities you can use to create new memories. This guide only touches on a handful of things in the town. A weekend is hardly enough time to explore this great town. Be sure to plan another trip soon to create even more memories!

About the Author:

Shan Patel is a student at East Tennessee State University. He is a Business Management major with a concentration in Legal Studies. Shan has lived most of his life in East Tennessee. He enjoys reading, dancing, playing basketball, and spending time with friends and family.

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