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## ***Stop 4. Great Smoky Mountain***

Arrival datetime: Friday April 5, 3:30PM  
Sites visited: Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountain National Park  
Accommodations: Park Vista Hotel  
States traveled: South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee

Back on the Blue Ridge Parkway, the views were still as serenely beautiful as before. The peaks were closer together, folding into one another in V-shaped clusters. There were more layers of mountain ranges, which translated into finer granularity between the hues of deep blue on the horizon. We stopped at

Devil's Court for a half-mile hike that was mostly paved but a very steep uphill. The overlook at the top was almost 360°. The Great Smoky Mountains beckoned.

We arrived at the Great Smoky Mountain National Park at lunchtime. There were no facilities in the park, so we had to go to



*An overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway.*

the town just outside, Cherokee, North Carolina. The concentration of Cherokee-craft tourist shops was so dense it was hard to distinguish the few eating establishments between them. Like the gift shops, the eating establishments offered standard fair of low quality.

In the Park, we headed for Clingman's Dome. The early spring was more lush and green here than it had been on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Varieties of evergreens were punctuated with tiny

pink blossoms. To our right, a shallow but wide stream flowed beside us, splashing with light that revealed multicolored rocks and green lichen.

Clingman's Dome offered another half mile hike that was a very steep but paved uphill. At the top, a helix-shaped ramp led up a tower where the 360° panoramic views were impossible to capture with a camera. Each frame, however, presented a pattern of mountain tops worthy of canvas. On the hike down we passed an



*View from observation deck at Clingman's Dome.*

Appalachian Trail backpacker. He had started in Georgia, as per the routine, and was headed for Maine. He looked about

5'10" and his pack looked to weigh as much as he did.

The Park Vista is unfortunately past its prime. It was bustling with a Women Preacher's convention, but there were no bellboys or concierge in evidence. We had to wait 15 minutes to check in, only to be told our room was not ready, and advised to wait at the bar. We played pool. When our room was ready, the front desk did not find us at the bar. When we asked why, they said they forgot what we looked like. Was there no paging system? The bar was small enough to shout across. Besides our wait to check in (and out), the adult pool was full of kids and the Jacuzzi was not hot enough. The dining room had fantastic view, but the windows were dirty and the dinner buffet was uneven.

But we were happy just to be staying in a place where Jennifer could get email and Michael could watch television. Jennifer had gotten a formal leave of absence from work. While it was not a condition for her leave, she had promised to be available for questions from those who were trying to fill her shoes. She spent an hour advising her staff which portions of the company security policy were relevant to the technical problems they were facing.

In the morning, we hiked Laurel Falls, yet another steep uphill, but paved walkway.



*Upper Laurel Falls.*

The falls were very special, and just a bit crowded. The paved trail ended in a bridge between the upper and lower falls. We continued another mile or so up the trail to see some “old growth” forest. The big trees were scattered few and far between, some deciduous, some evergreen. We kept expecting to see a grove with a bench in front and a sign at the side telling us what kind of trees they were and how old. But all we saw was green, pristine wilderness. It got very cold. As we descended, we felt the warmth hit our bodies as if we were scuba diving and hit a thermocline in the water.

Back at the falls, we ventured to climb down to the base of the lower falls. In sharp contrast to the paved walkway above there was no trail. The rocks were not particularly easy to navigate. In fact it was quite dangerous. Michael actually scraped his shin. We were amazed to see toddlers being encouraged to stone-step across the stream and looked around for a sign warning of the annual number of fatalities. Again, just wilderness.

We were quite tired when we arrived at the Sugarlands Visitor Center and opted for a mile loop nature trail, complete with signs and an interpretive brochure. To our surprise, this too turned out to be a wide path that was a steep uphill, and it was not even paved. Along the trail was an old cabin that well represented how harsh life was for mountain men that had to build their own houses from local materials.

In the afternoon, we shopped till we dropped in downtown Gatlinburg. Jennifer cannot resist a fine arts and crafts store. We toured a Thomas

Kinkadee gallery because we had seen the 60 Minutes episode on it. The light in the painting was certainly attractive. Less expensive copies of the same print had less light paint on them. But we agreed with Morley Safer (or was it Mike Wallace) that the factory-like productions should not lay claim to first edition prices. When approached by the salesperson, we admitted that we were just browsing because of what we had seen on 60 Minutes. From her happy chatter in response, we gathered that the sales staff was trained to treat the episode as an endorsement.

To drink in some local culture, we went to the Dixie Stampede. The bluegrass pre-show sported professional musicians, very entertaining if you could ignore the tasteless jokes between songs. Dinner was less entertaining, as the Stampede’s idea of a vegetarian entree was to leave in the corn and potatoes and replace the chicken and ham with fruit and raw vegetables. There was no alcohol. To liven up the mood, they tried to get the audience involved with a North-South rivalry that the rest of the country wishes the world would forget. But the horseback riding staged with acrobatics

and music proved to be a worthwhile cultural treat.

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Miles traveled: 227  
Departure datetime: Sunday April 7, 9:20AM (DST)  
Departure weather: Sunny 41°