



# Alone at Last

Almost 10 million people a year visit Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Here's how to avoid them all.

BY TYLER CURRIE  
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If you seek solitude, Great Smoky Mountains National Park is not an obvious destination. Traffic in the park is infamous, often grinding to a crawl in July and October, the two busiest months. More than 9.3 million people visited Smokies last year, by far the most of any national park.

By comparison, Grand Canyon and Olympic national parks combined—both vastly larger western preserves—had fewer than 8 million visitors. Meaning the Smokies are jam-packed, right? Well, not exactly.

According to the National Park Service, 95 percent of visitors to the Great Smoky Mountains stray little from their vehicles. And the bulk of these tourists stick to the small number of paved roads. Yet the park, straddling Tennessee and North Carolina, covers 520,000 acres, or 5.5 million acres, of land. The park, straddling Tennessee and North Carolina, covers 520,000 acres, or 5.5 million acres, of land.

The lesson of solitude seekers is simple: Ditch your car, grab your pack and disappear into what arguably is the most beautiful wilderness in the east—United States.

Our guide in the heart of this wilderness is Vesna Plakanis. She and her husband, Erik, own A Walk in the Woods, an outfitter whose services include guiding backpackers, even novice ones, to the most visited parts of the Great Smoky Mountains.

Carla Lopez, Laurel Johns and I, all city dwellers with limited backpacking experience, met her early on a recent Friday morning at Plakanis' home in Gatlinburg, Tenn. She dresses across as even-tempered, ruggedly athletic and intensely maternal—all cardinal virtues in a guide. She asks how much water we've had today. The humidity is high and dehydration will be a risk. A few cups, we say. She softly commands us to drink more before lying down to assess conditions. They're not good.

Storms have pounded the Smokies for a week. According to reports from the Park Service, a dozen park roads are closed, with some sections washed away. Backcountry trails are clogged with downed trees.

Rivulets have become unfordable walls of white water. But the rains, for now, have abated beneath a brilliant morning sun. Plakanis decides that our trip, with slight adjustments, can proceed safely.

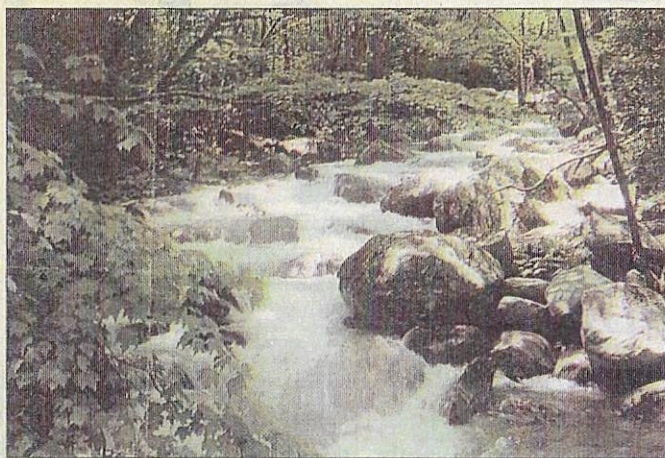
We pick up our requisite but free backcountry permits from Big Creek Ranger Station in the northeast corner of the park. Plakanis has selected this part of the park because it's far from the tourist arteries in the western and central regions. We launch our two-night trip at the head of Big Creek Trail, a quarter-mile beyond the ranger station.

Big Creek itself, which parallels the trail, is swollen from the storms. The creek's rapids and thunderous pounding contrast with our own light pace.

We'll take nearly five hours to hike slightly more than five miles on the first day. But our guide's slow, mile-an-hour progress is purposeful. It seems as if every few minutes we pause to discuss another plant or tree, or the people who once inhabited these woods—first the Cherokee Indians, and later Scotch-Irish settlers. Plakanis, we quickly realize, is more than just a guide. She's a naturalist. A forest guru. A professor in hiking boots.

A recurring theme in Plakanis's lessons is wilderness survival, for which purpose there is no plant more important than the hemlock, she says. In large quantities, hemlock is a diuretic. Its inner bark can be stripped and cooked like noodles or ground into flour. But when Plakanis asks me to nibble on a hemlock needle, I look at her skeptically.

Isn't this what Socrates used to commit suicide? No, she says, Socrates' hemlock was a small plant with white flowers, not the evergreen tree of the same name. Fine. I stuff a pinch of needles into my mouth. Slightly tart. A mixture of rosemary and guava skin. High in vitamin C. Not a bad flavor—for a tree.



PHOTOS BY TYLER CURRIE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Finding beauty spots like Big Creek, above, is one of the payoffs for backpacking into the more remote parts of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the country's most popular national park.

Three miles into our hike, we cross a cluster of fragmented red bricks. These heavy manufactured objects are a jarring incongruity. I'm sweating under the weight of my tent, sleeping bag and a few days' food. What fool would lug bricks back here? Plakanis says they are the remains of an old logging road.

Most of this area, she says, was clear-cut before the park was established in 1934. The landscape as it must have appeared 70 years ago is difficult to imagine—silt-choked streams, bald mountainsides.

Yet today the forest is thick with life. Great Smoky Mountains park is home to an estimated 100,000 species, including more than 130 varieties of trees and 4,000 other plant species. We are surprised to learn that the Smokies are one of the most biologically diverse areas outside of the tropics. Plakanis says the current state of this forest—many trees are more than 70 feet tall—shows the enormous recuperative power of nature.

The more we walk, the more we eat: rock tripe, a delicious papery lichen; toothwort, which tastes like horseradish; birch sticks, which have the minty flavor of wintergreen. Some of the forest's treasures are just bizarre: a centipede that secretes a brown juice that smells like toasted almonds; wolf's milk, a mushroom that pops like a zit when squeezed and oozes a reddish ink. Of course, not everything in the woods is innocuous. We identify poison ivy, stinging nettles and rhododendron, whose toxic parts Cherokeees used to commit suicide.

By the time we reach our campsite under a grove of towering hemlocks, Plakanis has just about finished our crash course in backcountry survival. We now know what to do if we encounter a bear, how to use a snake-bite kit,

how to purify water, how to weather a lightning storm and what to do if we become lost. We pitch our tents, prepare some freeze-dried spaghetti and begin the day's final lesson—how to start a campfire using just one match.

In the morning, we brew coffee and eat granola. Plakanis hands us a map and traces the series of trails that will take us to tonight's campsite on Mount Sterling. It's a steep, six-mile hike that gains several thousand vertical feet.

We're going on without Plakanis. Her husband injured his shoulder a few days before. Although she didn't cancel our trip, she could spare only one night away from home. Now we're on our own. She admonishes us to drink plenty of water, to take care of our feet and to be cautious when crossing streams. "Okay, I'll stop being a mom now," she says. She gives each of us a hug and heads down the mountain. We continue up.

As we gain elevation, the forest changes remarkably. The hemlocks that dominate the lower mountainsides give way to sugar maples and yellow birch trees. Farther up, past 4,500 feet, spruce and fir trees abound. We reach the 5,800-foot summit of Mount Sterling late in the afternoon. There is no wind, and the gnats swarm our heads like a plague. We pitch our tent in a field of stubby alpine grass. Just beyond camp stands an abandoned fir tower.

After dinner I climb the tower as the sun drops behind the western slopes. The panorama is incredible. The mountains look like giants sleeping under green blankets. The wind across the tower top is a cold gale that carries the gnats away.

Solitude. In the country's most popular national park, no sign of man as far as the eye can see.



Backpackers Laurel Johns, left, and Carla Lopez get a nature lesson from Smokies guide Vesna Plakanis.

## ESCAPE KEYS

**GETTING THERE:** Great Smoky Mountains National Park is about 500 miles from Washington. Take Interstate 66 west to Interstate 81 south, to Interstate 40 east. Take Exit 407 to TN 66 south and continue to U.S. 441 south. Follow U.S. 441 to the park. Round-trip flights to Knoxville, Tenn., 50 miles away, can sometimes be found for less than \$200 on US Airways which has direct flights from Reagan National. United flies direct from Dulles.

**BACKPACKING:** For a guided backpacking trip into the more remote parts of the Smokies, Erik and Vesna Plakanis of **A Walk in the Woods** suggest making reservations a month in advance. Info: 865-436-8283, [www.awalkinthewoods.com](http://www.awalkinthewoods.com). Fees for overnight trips start at \$100 for one person, \$160 for two, \$225 for three and \$250 for five. Fees include meals, guide service and naturalist narration. If you prefer an unaccompanied backpacking trip, the Park Service requires that you obtain a (free) backcountry permit when you register at one of the ranger stations or visitors centers. Backcountry camping is permitted only at designated sites (more than 100), some of which require reservations (865-436-1231, free).

**STAYING THERE:** For drive-in camping, the park has 10 car, RV and tent campgrounds, \$12 to \$20 per night (some are closed in winter). Seven are first-come, first-served; reservations required for the others through October (800-365-2267, [reservations.nps.gov](http://reservations.nps.gov)).

Gatlinburg, Tenn., is full of hotels and restaurants. One the guides recommend is the **Grand Prix Motel** (865-436-4561; \$59-\$89, with steep discounts for solo hikers). The Plakanises also own a cottage they rent to hikers for \$65 per night for two people, plus \$5 per night for each additional person.

**EATING THERE:** Surely you'll love the trailside lichens and leaves. Outside the park, try **Big Wally's Grill** (865-217-5511) on Highway 321, between Gatlinburg and Cosby, Tenn.

**INFO: Great Smoky Mountains National Park**, 865-436-1260, [www.nps.gov/grsm](http://www.nps.gov/grsm).



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