



# *Great Smoky Mountains National Park*

*Photographs by Rolf Brauch  
May & October 2002*



175, planning to pick up the I40 at Knoxville Tennessee. From there it's barely 40 miles to the park entrance. This route turned out to be a mistake --- too many trucks, too much construction and it was way too hot.

About halfway through Georgia we'd enough and sought out secondary highways running east of, and more or less parrallel, to the I75. By this circumstance we approached the park from the North Carolina side.

Route 129 brought us to the Foothills Parkway and from there to route 321 into Townsend, a tranquil community within a few miles of one of the Park's entrances and a major attraction, Cades Cove.

It was just as well we came into the park via this route. Had we come east from

In May 2002, on the return leg of a business trip to Florida, we make a small detour to get a peek at the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Over the years we'd passed by the park on several trips to Crossville Tennessee, but never took the time to stop. We were glad we did this time round.

We left Florida with the thermometer sitting at 37.5 degrees C. We motored up the





Knoxville as we first intended, we would have come through Pigeon (the site of Dollywood) and I'm sure we wouldn't have stopped, but carried right on for home.

The difference is as night is to day. Approaching the Park from the North Carolina side you have beautifully winding highways with clean and well taken care of scenic pull-outs every few miles. And flowers in abundance everywhere you look.

Coming over from Knoxville however is a severe culture shock. Once you come off the I40 you drive through what seems to be one endless strip mall of cheap hotels, motels, gas stations and every fast food joint you can think of --- all in triplecate. It's revolting and rather sad. The exception is the town of Gatlinburg, which strongly resembles an upscale ski resort with





*Top: Fontana reservoir*

*Right: a bit of left over railway - submerged under 3 feet of water*

lots of good restaurants, hotels and resort complexes.

So, back to route 129, which cuts across the Appalachian mountains. It's an incredibly scenic highway --- it also runs along a stretch of the Little Tennessee river where a dam has





*A small arm of the Fontana reservoir (on the southeastern edge of the park) as seen from route 28 looking north.*

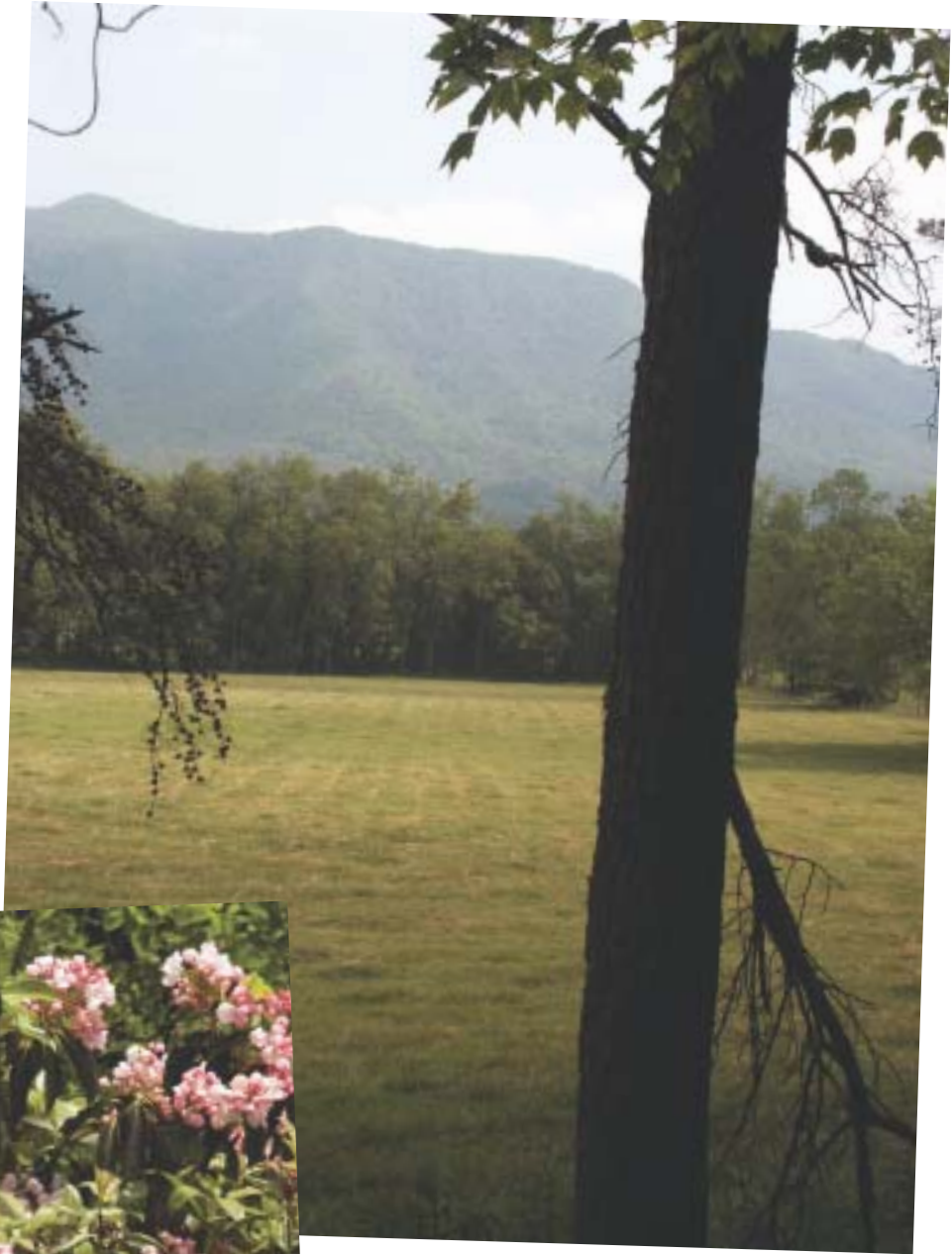


been constructed creating one of several reservoirs in the area.

After settling into our motel, our first excursion was to visit Cades Cove, a valley on the western end of the park. A narrow, eleven-mile road loops around the valley's perimeter.

It gets real busy here towards evening as people come to the Cove to watch the feeding deer.

We biked the loop a couple of times during our return visit in October. The biking part



is easy enough, but is little fun among the fumes from the hundreds of cars and pickup trucks. However, during the summer, there are days when the road is only open to non-motorized use.

From the 1830s through approximately the next 100 years travelers entered and left the Cove by five narrow unpaved roads, such as Parson Branch Road (page 23). Most of the roads started out as part of the Indian trails that ran through the Smokies.





The land in Cades Cove was rich and fertile and produced abundant crops and game was plentiful. By 1900 there were about 125 families (708 people) living in or near the Cove.

To establish the park, the states of Tennessee and North Carolina bought most of the land now making up the park and gave it to the federal government.

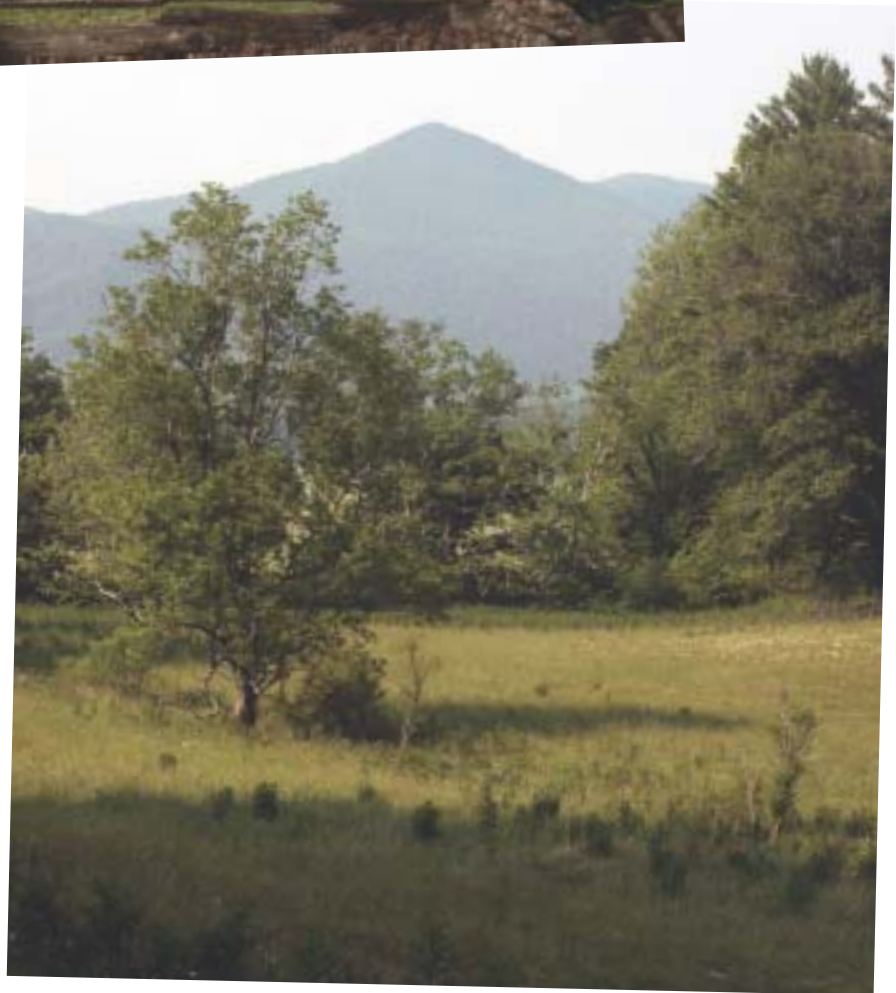




Eighteen lumber companies owned more than 85% of the park and had logged between two-thirds and three-fourths of it.

Some farmers resisted the state's effort to buy their land but everyone eventually left. Those that agreed to sell and accept less money could remain until they died, but their descendants could not.

Today there are over 70 historic building in the park including mills, churches and homes. The last school closed in 1944 and the post office shut down in 1947.





The Cove is like a little piece of heaven and I can fully understand the people's reluctance to leave their land to make room for busloads of tourists.

The Cove also had legal and illegal distillers. George Powell and Julius Gredd were licensed distillers. Powell owned large orchards and made apple and peach brandy, while Gregg made corn whiskey. They say that Powell forgot to quit after Tennessee voted for prohibition.





There's nothing quite as relaxing as sitting by a small waterfall and just letting the world flow by.

This was shot along the Little River Road on the way to Gatlinburg.

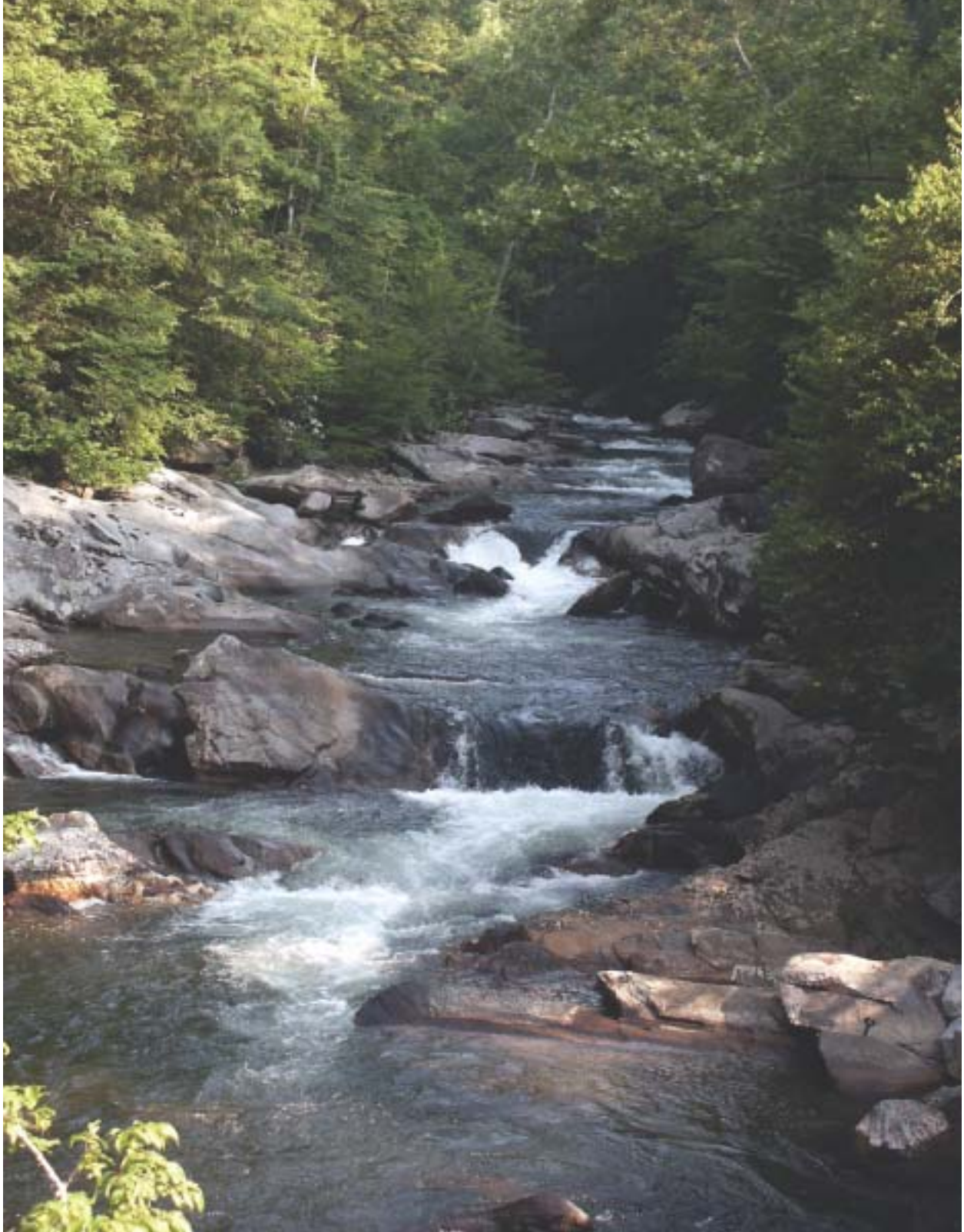




Top: view from our motel balcony early in the evening in June.

You will not have trouble finding deer. Its estimated that over 1,000 deer inhabit the Cove alone. If you take time out to hike one of the many trails, you will undoubtedly also come across black bears and other wild critters among them a shit load of unruly tourists from all over the world.





*One is never far from a river or creek --- all very scenic and perfect for cooling off ones tired feet during a long hike. Taken along the Little River, June 2002.*





The park's many twisting roads attract bikers from all over the United States. We met folks from as far away as Texas who trailed their motorcycles along to be able to spend a glorious week or two riding up and down route 129 & 28.

The curves are so tight that even with a Porsche you'd have trouble going faster than the posted speed limit of 25 miles per hour.





View from Newfound Gap, a few miles before the turn-off to Clingmans Dome, the highest point in the park, on our way to the Heintooga Ridge Road via the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Between 1926 and 1939 the Little River Lumber Company built several railway lines up the drainages and using special locomotives like the





one shown on page 27 & 28 extracted millions of board feet of chestnut, tuliptree, oak, maple, cherry and other woods.

The object of our outing on this day was Balsam Mountain Road. A leisurely run down a gravel road originally built as a railbed. It has a steady and even grade and all you need to do is put the car in low gear, take your foot off the brake and enjoy a fantastic 27 mile downhill run to the town of Cherokee, in the heart of the Cherokee Indian Reservation.

The downhill run is all one-way, so you don't have to worry about some clown flying up trying for a hill-climb record.

This loop is over 50 miles and will take well over four hours. If you set out early in the morning you may even find





time to hike one or two sections of the many excellent trails that crisscross the road.

All the way down Balsam Mountain we're thinking how we'd love to ride our bikes down this road. There would have to be a third person along to take care of the car, for riding downhill is one thing, but you'd never get me to peddle 27 miles back up.

*The pictures on this, and the previous page, were taken at the Sugarlands Visitor Center, not far from Gatlinburg.*



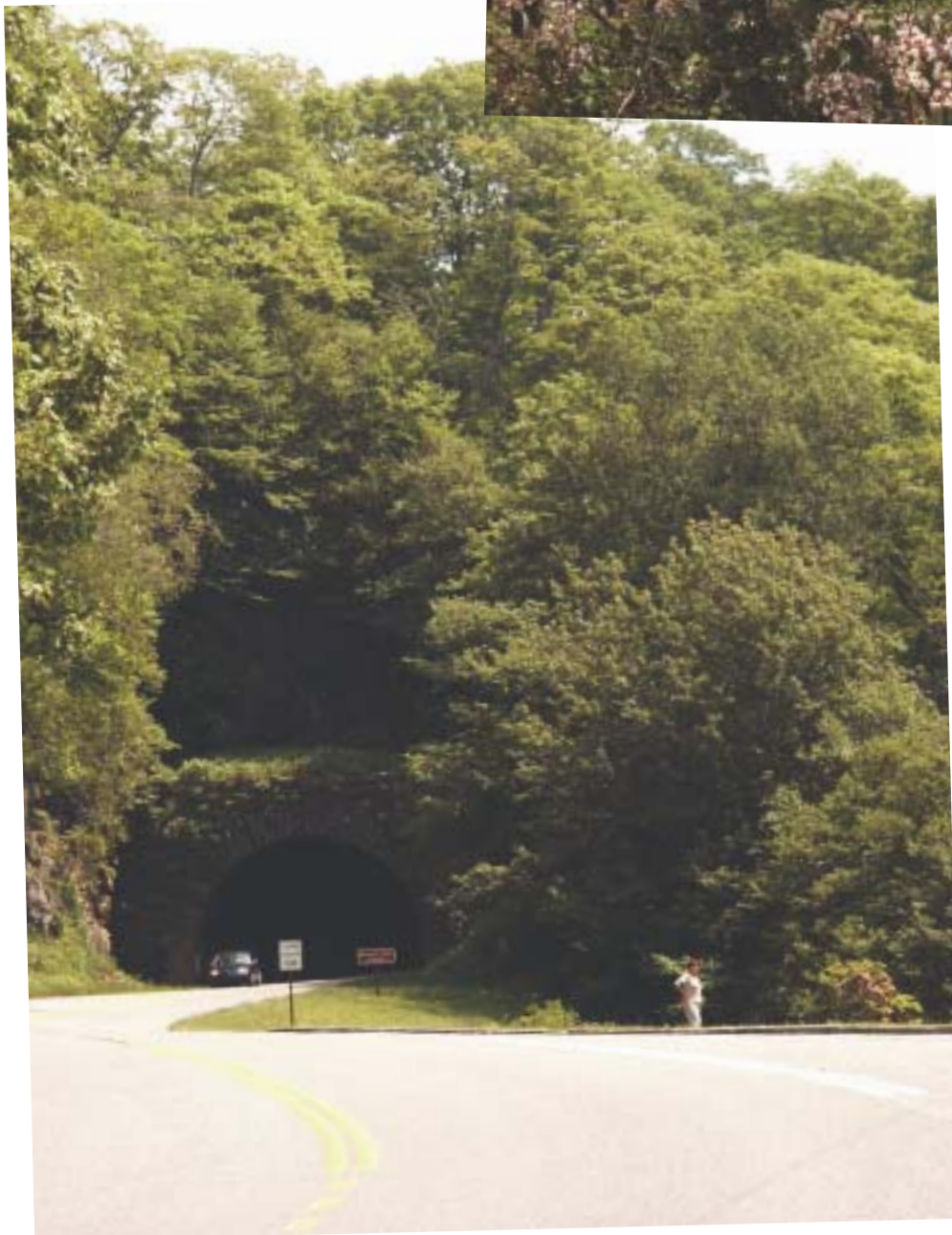


*Looking north from the Blue Ridge Parkway  
on the North Carolina side of the park*



Having been lucky enough to see the park in both spring and fall, I prefer spring. There are more flowers and the softer greens of new growth mixed with the darker spruce and hemlocks gives off a refreshing vitality.

*Below: one of several short tunnels within the park*





John Oliver's cabin, built in the early 1820s, is the oldest log home in Cades Cove. It forms part of what is believed to be the largest collection of log homes in the eastern United States.

With deer grazing just a few feet away, you can literally sit on the front porch with your shotgun and bring down supper without even getting off your rocking chair. However, you may not be 'sitting' in your chair anymore either.





*Irma on the back-porch of John Oliver's cabin.*

*Right: a simple loom*

Large families often lived in such small building. It was not uncommon to have 12 or more children. Usually, parents, infants and daughters slept on the first floor and sons in the loft.

Simple to build, it required little more than mules, muscle, simple tools and a little help from the neighbors. The logs were hewn square with a broad ax. The notched corners needed no nails or pegs and the chinks were filled with mud. The stone chimney is held together with mud mortar.





*A more elaborate home built circa 1875.*

*Right: 19th century farm implements*

On closer inspection of the building techniques used for barns, it was not surprising to find similarities with those of the Black Forest region of Germany.

There are no entrance fees to the park, which is rare enough these days, but I did notice how few people stop to take time to drop a

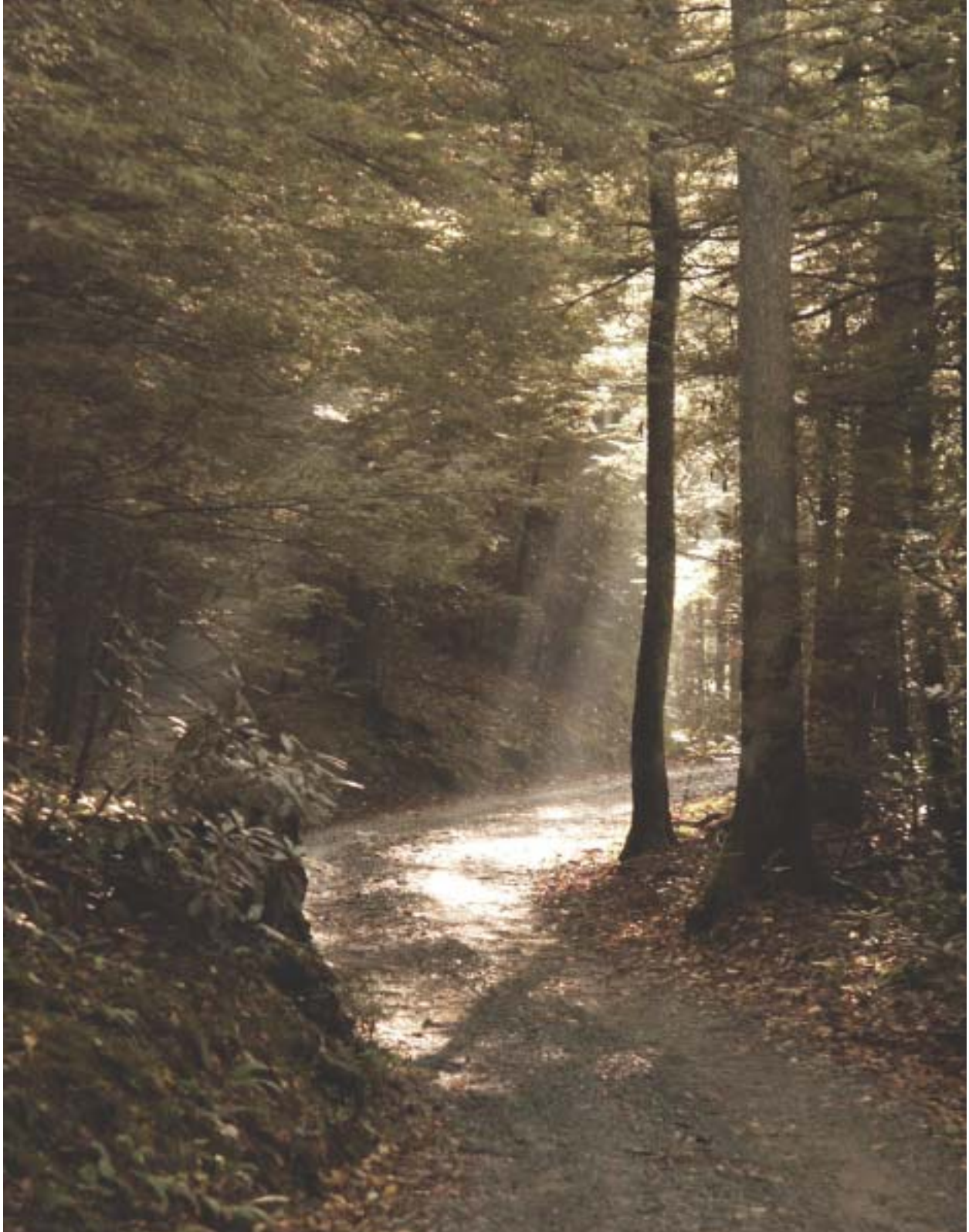




few dollars into the donation boxes put up in conspicuous locations throughout the park.

The park is kept exceptionally clean and free of litter. Considering the millions of visitors to the park each year, even the rest rooms are kept in great shape. There is a visible and valient effort to preserve building and old farm implements, but there is so much to do and not always enough to go around.





*Parson Branch Road - a scenic, one-way only road leading out of Cades Cove to route 129.*



This was only the second wagon we found that could be considered in working order. Built sometime in the 1880s it's in remarkable shape.

During our visit in October we biked along the Little river valley from Townsend to Walland and came across a number of displays set up for Thanksgiving.





This was our favourite display. The folks that made this obviously took much time and care to create the straw dolls and decorate the wagon.





Not even a mile down the road from the Thanksgiving display we found a small railway museum. It was just recently started and basically is still being assembled, but there was enough there already to be of interest to stop for a while.

Judging by the look of this moveable steam engine, it was most likely used as a source of power for a sawmill.





It wasn't until we took a closer look at this locomotive that I noticed the unusual way power was delivered to the wheels.

Typical steam locomotives have a horizontal piston directly connected to the driving wheels. This engine is equipped with a 'drive shaft' with bevel gears on six sets of wheels. This arrangement was only on the right side. The wheels on the left side simply idled.

This was obviously done to bring more power to the wheels at the expense of speed. To move trainloads of lumber down the mountains the priority must have been on braking power. It also explains the care taken with the grades on Balsam Mountain railbed.





*An unusual but powerful drive mechanism of a mountain locomotive*





*A pile of logs stacked beside a house along the Little river turned out to be one of my favourite shots.*

While there are well over 100 hiking trails criss crossing Smoky Mountains National Park, and plenty of parking spaces at every trail head, the opportunity for bicycles is still limited. This is mainly due to elevation. With the exception of the loop in Cades Cove, bicycles are prohibited on Laurel Creek Road (leading in to the Cove), Little River Road from Townsend to Gatlinburg, and New Found Gap Road.

The latter dissects the park roughly down the middle. It crests at 5,046 feet elevation and is extremely curvy and narrow with no shoulder. Two-way motor vehicle traffic is too heavy and would make cycling extremely dangerous.





*View from one of the many pull-outs along the Foothills Parkway looking north-east.*

One other exceptional road to explore is the Roaring Forks Motor Nature Trail that begins and ends right in Gatlinburg. This 10-mile loop is rough and narrow but has incredible scenery --- waterfalls, a few old homesteads and loads of deer. Since you can't drive but more than 5 miles an hour, it easily takes two hours to make the loop. The slow speed however gives you the opportunity to watch out for bears along the way (and the many trees that jump out at you as you pass by).

If it hadn't been for some pea-brained tourists who persisted in a most dangerous sport of climbing up the steep terrain to get closer to the bears, I would have been able to make a few decent shots.





Another interesting outing is the route from Cherokee to Bryson City, on to Fontana Village, roundind the southwest side of the park via route 28 & 129, and then via the Foothills Parkway to Townsend.

Aside from the great vistas, there are several overlooks of the Fontana reservoir.

We couldn't help notice these 'vine sculptures'. These parasites grow up and over anything --- trees, telephone poles, etc. like vast sculptures.



*The Great Smoky Mountain Railroad runs along the parks southeastern perimeter*





The **Great Smoky Mountains National Park** was established on June 15, 1934. The park lies on the border of the states of North Carolina and Tennessee and covers an area of 800 square miles (one of the largest protected areas in the eastern United States). The park is world renowned for its diversity of plants and animals and the beauty of its ancient mountains.

Elevations in the park range from 800 feet to 6,643 feet (Clingmans Dome). It is the highest point in Tennessee, and the second highest point east of the Mississippi. Only North Carolina's Mt. Mitchell (6,684 feet) rises higher. The Appalachian Trail crosses Clingmans Dome, marking the highest point along its 2,144 mile journey.

The view from Clingmans Dome is spectacular. On clear, pollution-free days, visibility can exceed 100 miles and into seven states. However, air pollution limits average viewing distances to a mere 22 miles.

95 percent of the park is forested. The cool, wet conditions in the higher elevations created a wonderful coniferous rainforest. Unfortunately, the park's magnificent old-growth hemlock groves are now under siege from a tiny Asian insect called the hemlock 'woolly adelgid' (brings to mind one of those germanic heroins, complete with horned helmet, from a Wagnerian play).

The park is also taking a severe environmental beating from the two million visitors (and their cars) that come here each year, and in part by the proximity of urban sprawl surrounding the park.

Nevertheless, it's a great place to visit and enjoy.



On the cover: sunrise in the Smokies.

