

Chattanooga

Few cities are so identified with a song as CHATTANOOGA , in the southeast corner of Tennessee. Though visitors expecting Tex Beneke's and Glenn Miller's Chattanooga Choo-Choo may be let down to find that there is no longer even an Amtrak service, the town continues to celebrate its railroad history, and has plenty more to offer besides not least its beautiful location on a deep bend in the Tennessee River , walled in by forested plateaus on three sides. This setting led John Ross, of Scottish and Cherokee ancestry, to found a trading post on the spot in 1815, and its strategic importance made it a great prize during the Civil War; victories here in 1863 were the springboard for Sherman's march through Georgia. The Town The centerpiece of Chattanooga's twenty miles of reclaimed riverfront is Ross's Landing (the town's original name), a park at the bottom of Broad Street. Here the splendid five-story Tennessee Aquarium traces the aquatic life of the Mississippi from its Tennessee tributaries to the Gulf of Mexico, and also shows giant IMAX movies (\$12.95, IMAX \$7.25, combined ticket \$17; call for hours and reservations tel 423/265-0695 or 1-800/262-0695,). A variety of different cruises on the Southern Belle riverboat (tel 423/266-4488), from the bottom of nearby Chestnut Street, include the daunting experience of bobbing around in the bottom of a huge lock on Chickamauga Lake. Prices start from \$10 for a daytime sightseeing tour. A few blocks from the river, the Chattanooga Regional History Museum at 400 Chestnut St (Mon-Fri 10am-4.30pm, Sat-Sun 11am-4.30pm; \$4) takes a look at the area's rich history, with displays on its steel, soft-drink bottling and power industries, and on the Cherokee. A short walk further along are the grand old c.1900 buildings of the lively business district, such as the eye-catching Tivoli Theatre at 709 Broad St. The further Chattanooga sprawls back from the river, the more run-down it becomes, but it's well worth heading the two miles up to the Choo-Choo complex , where the 1909 Beaux Arts-style Southern Railroad Terminal , at 1400 Market St (tel 423/266-5000), is now a Holiday Inn - the Chattanooga Choo-Choo Hotel . The impressive high-domed waiting room serves as the lobby, leading through to the former platform area, where restored carriages act as hotel suites. Giftshops and cafés share space with a steam engine similar to the original Choo-Choo (the name given by the local paper to the first passenger train to come in from Cincinnati in 1880). You're free to roam around; admission to the world's largest model railway display, on site, is \$2.75. A free shuttle runs between the Choo-Choo complex and the Aquarium. The authentic steam trains of the Tennessee Valley Railroad offer stunning six-mile rides, crossing the river, running through deep tunnels, and turning round on a giant turntable. The two main stations, restored to their 1930s look, are at 2200 N Chamberlain Ave in east Chattanooga and 4119 Cromwell Rd (I-75 exit 4 to Hwy-153); some routes pick up at the Choo-Choo Hotel (\$10.50; for schedule call 423/894-8028 or visit). A taxi downtown from Chattanooga's airport (tel 423/855-2200), three miles east, costs around \$12. Greyhound connections with Nashville, Knoxville and Atlanta arrive on Broad Street downtown. The visitor center , adjacent to the Tennessee Aquarium (daily 8.30am-5.30pm; tel 423/756-8687 or 1-800/322-3344,), provides the usual range of help, along with a useful guide for travelers with disabilities. Budget motels downtown, such as the Days Inn Rivergate , 901 Carter St (tel 423/266-7331, fax 423/266-9357, ; \$75-100), tend to be in rather dismal areas; far more atmospheric, if you can get a room on the train, is the Choo-Choo (tel 423/266-5000 or 1-800/872-2529, fax 423/265-4635; \$100-130), and there are countless inexpensive options along the interstates, such as the Super 8 , at 1410 Mack Smith Rd off I-75 S, exit 1 (tel 423/892-3888, fax 423/499-0677, ; \$35-50). There's camping at Raccoon Mountain Campground , 319 West Hills Drive (tel 423/821-9403, fax 423/825-1289, ; cabins up to \$35/\$35-50, tentsites \$12.95). The obvious place to eat in Chattanooga is the Choo-Choo complex, where the enclosed but well-lit Gardens Restaurant serves standard meals for around \$10; the more romantic Silver Diner serves steaks and seafood in a railroad car permanently parked on the platform behind, and there's also an Espresso Café (all tel 423/266-5000). For inventive southern cooking in a stylish atmosphere, try the Southside Grill , 1400 Cowart St (tel 423/266-9211). The Big River Grille & Brewing Works , 222 Broad St (tel 423/267-2739), is a cavernous brewpub and restaurant near the Aquarium.