

Toward the Great Smoky Mountains

The usual way to approach the Smokies from the west is on the billboard-lined US-441 that sweeps past the small market center of SEVIERVILLE, whose well-preserved center is tucked just off the highway and evokes days gone by with its wooden-floored general stores and small cafés serving mountains of Southern food to hungry farmers. A statue of Dolly Parton stands on the lawn outside the courthouse. Sevierville merges almost seamlessly into the six-mile strip of motels, fast-food places, factory discount outlets, themed family attractions and souvenir shops at the dry town of PIGEON FORGE. This is the spot to race go-carts in places like the Rebel yell Speedway, visit an Elvis museum and absorb regional entertainment at numerous barn-sized haunts including Elwood Smooch's Hillbilly Hoedown. Five miles further along US-441, a heavy layer of kitsch all but submerges the genuine Germanic heritage of the more upmarket "wet" tourist town of GATLINBURG. The long, narrow main street is packed to the point of claustrophobia with gimmicky souvenir shops, wax museums, and stalls selling sickly sweet taffy. An alternative, if you're approaching from the east, is to drive along the pretty Foothills Parkway through woods and across misty mountains, and turn east for seven miles or so to TOWNSEND, a peaceful strip where the motels are laid-back and the air is clear.

Dollywood Born in 1946, one of twelve children, Dolly Parton lived in several modest homes around Pigeon Forge, the most isolated of them two miles from the nearest neighbor and over four miles from the mailbox. As a child she sang every week on local radio, before leaving for Nashville on the day she finished at Sevier County High School. Her first success, duetting with Porter Wagoner, came to an acrimonious end in the early Seventies, but she scored a major country hit in 1976 with Jolene. She then crossed over to a poppier sound, and into Hollywood films like *9 to 5* and *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. Her songs have been acclaimed for their readiness to address issues like rural poverty, and a refusal to tag along with the Nashville stereotype of subservient females. Dollywood, Dolly Parton's "homespun fun" theme park, blends ersatz mountain heritage with the glamour of its celebrity shareholder. One section showcases Appalachian crafts, making everything from lye soap to horse-drawn carriages; a museum looks at Dolly herself in entertaining detail; and music shows are constantly on the go. The rides, however, are mostly unspectacular, and although they've moved with the times by installing the \$8 million Tennessee Tornado roller coaster, the whole place can get insufferably precious. Dollywood is at 700 Dollywood Lane at the north end of Pigeon Forge (April weekends 9am-6pm; May to mid-June Mon, Wed & Fri-Sun 9am-6pm; mid-June to Aug daily 9am-9pm; Sept-Nov Mon, Wed & Fri-Sun times vary; Dec daily times vary; \$35, children (age 4-11) \$24, April-Oct; Nov & Dec \$25, children \$12; tel 423/428-9488). Local radio station WDLY, 105.5FM, is another Dolly Parton enterprise.