

# SMALL AND OFFBEAT MUSEUMS IN THE SMOKIES

By Katy Koontz

**M**OST VISITORS TO THE Smokies have at least heard of the region's most famous museums. Major players like the Titanic, Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies, and the Hollywood Wax Museum understandably get a ton of tourist attention. After all, who can miss the Wax Museum's giant replica of Mount Rushmore festooned with Marilyn Monroe, Elvis, John Wayne, and Charlie Chaplin smiling down at your passing car (unless, of course, you're too captivated by King Kong climbing a small-scale version of the Empire State Building to notice)?

Big, however, isn't always best. The Smokies also offers quite a few smaller, offbeat museums that don't scream at you from the Parkway. These places are typically less crowded and less expensive—yet their offerings are often top-notch.

As the weather turns colder and indoor fun seems like a more practical

pursuit, consider visiting any of the following lesser-known museum attractions in the Smoky Mountain region.

## Great Smoky Mountains Heritage Center

This Townsend treasure boasts a collection of 13 historic buildings, including an 1892 log cabin, a church, two cantilever barns, a gristmill, a granary, a wheelwright shop, a smokehouse, and several other structures—even an outhouse!

But there's more to this private, non-profit museum than its recreated outdoor village. The main museum building houses exhibits about the culture of the Native Americans and Europeans who lived in this area before the national park was established in the 1930s. Far from dusty displays, these exhibits put you in the middle of the history.

You can translate English words into Cherokee using a computer in a display on the Cherokee language. Or: You can





stroll through a fully furnished log cabin outfitted with implements once belonging to the Walker Sisters (some of the last residents of the national park). And: You can sit on an old-fashioned church pew as you listen to mountain hymns.

The museum also houses a stunning collection of Native American artifacts (some 5,000 years old) found during road construction in Townsend about 15 years ago.

**Information:** (865) 448-0044;  
[gsmheritagecenter.org](http://gsmheritagecenter.org)

### Rainforest Adventures Discovery Zoo

You aren't likely to encounter most of the animals displayed here on your average hike in the Smokies—although you'd see many of them on a slog through a tropical rainforest. The 600 residents of this Pigeon Forge zoo



belong to more than 130 species and include such unusual critters as poison dart frogs, black-and-white ruffed lemurs, death's head cockroaches, legless lizards, emperor scorpions, and African crested porcupines, among others. (Albino boa constrictor, anyone?) There are even several animals from Australia, such as kangaroos, wallabies, Dorper sheep—and even emus. The zoo's newest residents are the golden-headed lion tamarins, some of the smallest and rarest monkeys on Earth.

One Smokies-themed exhibit reports the latest tally of species found by researchers with the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory—the largest biodiversity inventory on the planet.

Catch one of the free, 45-minute live animal shows, which allows kids to volunteer to come up front and hold animals. A few of the featured creatures are not normally considered cuddly (think snakes and tarantulas), but none are venomous, and a zookeeper ensures the experience is both safe and fun.

**Information:** (865) 428-4091;  
[rfadventures.com](http://rfadventures.com)

### Salt and Pepper Shaker Museum

Who would have thought something found on most every kitchen table in America could become a fascinating focus for a museum? The answer is 80-year-old Andrea Ludden, a retired Belgian archaeologist-turned-curator who has been collecting salt and pepper shakers for decades. Her crazy and colorful collection includes more than 20,000

sets of shakers (plus some 1,500 pepper mills—the world's largest collection).

Her Gatlinburg museum displays the shakers in an endless series of themes, including animals, vegetables, holidays, celebrities, and even space (cleverly grouping rockets with aliens). Be prepared for the wacky (a recreation of the Mona Lisa, where Mona Lisa is the salt and the frame is the pepper) and the weird (a pair of shakers made for left-handed people)—as well as the astoundingly clever (a kitchen mixer shaker with rotating beaters). There's even a pair of spiffy-looking shaker cufflinks.

While this used to be the only such museum on the planet, another opened in Spain in 2010—also owned by the Ludden family.

**Information:** (865) 430-5515;  
[thesaltandpeppershakermuseum.com](http://thesaltandpeppershakermuseum.com)

### Floyd Garrett's Muscle Car Museum

Sure: High-end Italian sports cars have their admirers. But this Sevierville institution is devoted to American muscle cars—which began as relatively affordable street cars with large engines designed for high-performance driving (including hot rodding and occasionally drag racing). Think Chevrolet Camaro, Dodge Charger R/T, Ford Mustang, or even Pontiac GTO.

This museum is well known among aficionados as one of the largest and most impressive collections in the United States, with 90 cars (mostly from the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s) worth more than \$8 million. The museum

displays Garrett's own cars as well as a multitude of others on loan, including factory lightweights, rare engines, and super stock cars.

Wander among such classics as the bright yellow 1970 Torino King Cobra, one of three ever made (and one of three prototypes for NASCAR). The sunny orange 1969 Pontiac GTO is nicknamed "the judge." The black 1940 Ford Deluxe Coupe (the best original Ford Coupe known) was once used as a moonshine runner in Greeneville, Tennessee.

Check out the delicious-looking honey-cinnamon color of the custom-made 1940 Mercury convertible (nicknamed "Afterglow") and the gleaming black 1957 E-code Thunderbird (one of only 1,500 built that year) with its striking red interior. Also stunning is an unrestored original 1958 Impala convertible—the only documented convertible of its kind known to exist (chosen to be Chevrolet's 50th-anniversary car).

**Information:** (865) 908-0882;  
[musclecarmuseum.com](http://musclecarmuseum.com)

### Smoky Mountain Knife Works

You might wonder what a huge retail store is doing in an article on small museums. The answer is that Sevierville's Smoky Mountain Knife Works, the world's largest knife showplace, displays its merchandise among three floors of intriguing museum-like exhibits. You'll find historical dioramas (of Civil War soldiers, Native Americans, and animals at an African watering hole); taxidermied game animals and mounted trophy heads displayed on aptly named Trophy Moun-

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## SMOKIES SPOTLIGHT

tain; and glass display cases overflowing with military knives, Native American projectile points, ninja gear, machetes, swords, and even blowguns.

You'll also find a working gristmill (complete with its original gears and pulleys) and an impressive indoor waterfall. The 30-foot sword stuck in a giant boulder may tempt your inner King Arthur while your kids will enjoy the animatronic black bear band (dubbed Bubba Bear and the Backwoods Band).

As you would expect, the merchandise here indeed includes an impressive array of knives, but the store also sells kitchenware, food, jewelry, clothing, toys, and various gadgets.

**Information:** (865) 453-5871;  
[smkw.com](http://smkw.com)

## Little River Railroad & Lumber Company Museum

For a few decades, starting at the turn of the 20th century, several logging companies were busy felling huge virgin tracts of timber in what later became the national park. So a railroad was built to move the logs out of the mountains to a place where they could be processed into lumber and then shipped off.

Staffed by enthusiastic volunteers eager to share their knowledge, the non-profit Little River Railroad and Lumber Company Museum in Townsend tells the story of these loggers and the railroad. The collection here includes one of the few standard-gauge Shay locomotives remaining in the world. You'll also find a vintage L&N caboose (named "Little Woody"), flatcars used to haul logs, and a log loader for lifting logs onto the railcars. Don't miss the rustic, boxy setoff houses where logging camp families lived in unbelievably cramped quarters.

Inside the original railroad depot building, logging tools, railroad artifacts, and vintage photographs of the logging operation tell more of the story. Next to the depot sits a replica of the Elkmont Post Office (the museum's gift shop).

**Information:** (865) 448-2211;  
[littleriverrailroad.org](http://littleriverrailroad.org) ✕

Katy Koontz, author of Family Fun in the Smokies as well as the Smoky Mountain Travel Guide app for smartphones, writes regularly about the Smokies for Cityview.