

Charming CHATTANOOGA



PHOTO BY KEVIN RUCKSTOCK/ADOBEE.COM

From railroad heritage and dramatic scenery to an aquarium and outta-this-world MoonPies, Tennessee's Scenic City is a gem of a vacation.

BY RICH WARREN

If your only association with Chattanooga is a catchy tune recorded by Glenn Miller in 1941, you owe yourself a visit to this picturesque southeastern Tennessee town. You'll not only find a real Chattanooga Choo Choo there but also a rich railroad heritage and fascinating Civil War history—not to mention some great options for family fun. Plus, all these attractions are in a place that calls itself the “Scenic City” because of the lofty mountains that surround it and the snaking Tennessee River that meanders through it.

Nowadays, that “Choo Choo” moniker is applied to the city's former train station, where 50 passenger trains once made daily stops between 1909 and the mid-20th century. The Beaux Arts terminal boasts a soaring 90-foot ceiling and one of the largest freestanding arches in the world. Part of a larger complex of historic buildings called the Chattanooga Choo Choo, the terminal now houses restaurants, entertainment venues and retail stores, including a comedy club, train-themed escape room, distillery and shop selling regional crafts.

But it's the platforms out back where you'll feel the closest connection to the trains of yesteryear. An antique locomotive and dozens of vintage train cars still sit there, and until recently, it was even possible to stay overnight in one of the many Pullman cars lining the

platforms. Alas, those luxurious cars are currently undergoing renovation until early 2022. In the meantime, those who succumb to the Choo Choo's charms can stay at the 76-room hotel, tucked in the MacArthur building at the rear of the complex. Be sure to stroll through the neighboring two-acre Glenn Miller Gardens, complete with rosebushes, fountains and gazebos.

Should you feel a hankering to ride a vintage train, Chattanooga can deliver. Head for the Grand Junction station of the Tennessee Valley Railroad, where dozens of railroad cars, mostly from the 20th century, greet you on arrival.

Several excursions are offered, including all-day trips and a dinner train. One of the more popular rides is the hour-long Missionary Ridge Local pulled by a restored steam locomotive built in 1904. The excursion passes through a unique horseshoe-shaped

tunnel constructed in 1858. Another highlight of the trip occurs mid-ride when passengers disembark to watch the locomotive change directions on a giant turntable.

TRACKING HISTORY

Its railroad made Chattanooga a strategic prize during the Civil War as the Union sought to capture the city and its converging railroad lines to cripple the South. Several fierce battles took place in the area in 1863, with the Union finally prevailing after an initial crushing defeat at nearby Chickamauga.

For the best glimpse into the city's critical importance during the War Between the States—and for astounding panoramic views—ascend 1,500-foot Lookout Mountain, which towers above the city. You can easily drive to the summit, but it's more

exciting to ride the Lookout Mountain Incline Railway, a one-mile climb up the mountain's side that achieves one of the steepest grades in the world.

From the incline railway's upper station, it's a short walk to Point Park for breathtaking views of the greater Chattanooga region at a site where another Civil War confrontation, The Battle Above the Clouds, took place.

The park is now a placid green space with sky-high views of the city far below. But to get an overview of the military campaigns that occurred here and throughout the region, stop at “The Battles for Chattanooga,” housed inside a building adjacent to Point Park's entrance. A half-hour digital diorama with surround sound and film projections demonstrates how the fall of Chattanooga sealed the fate of the Confederacy.



PHOTO BY RICH WARREN



COURTESY OF TENNESSEE VALLEY RAILROAD MUSEUM



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: the city's 1909 train station, part of the Chattanooga Choo Choo complex; the Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum offers rides on vintage trains; Lookout Mountain Incline Railway



PHOTO BY ROD CLEMENT

ABOVE: Rock City's Observation Point offers a view of up to seven states and is located atop Lookout Mountain.

RIGHT: Ruby Falls is a 145-foot underground waterfall more than 1,100 feet below the mountain's ridge.

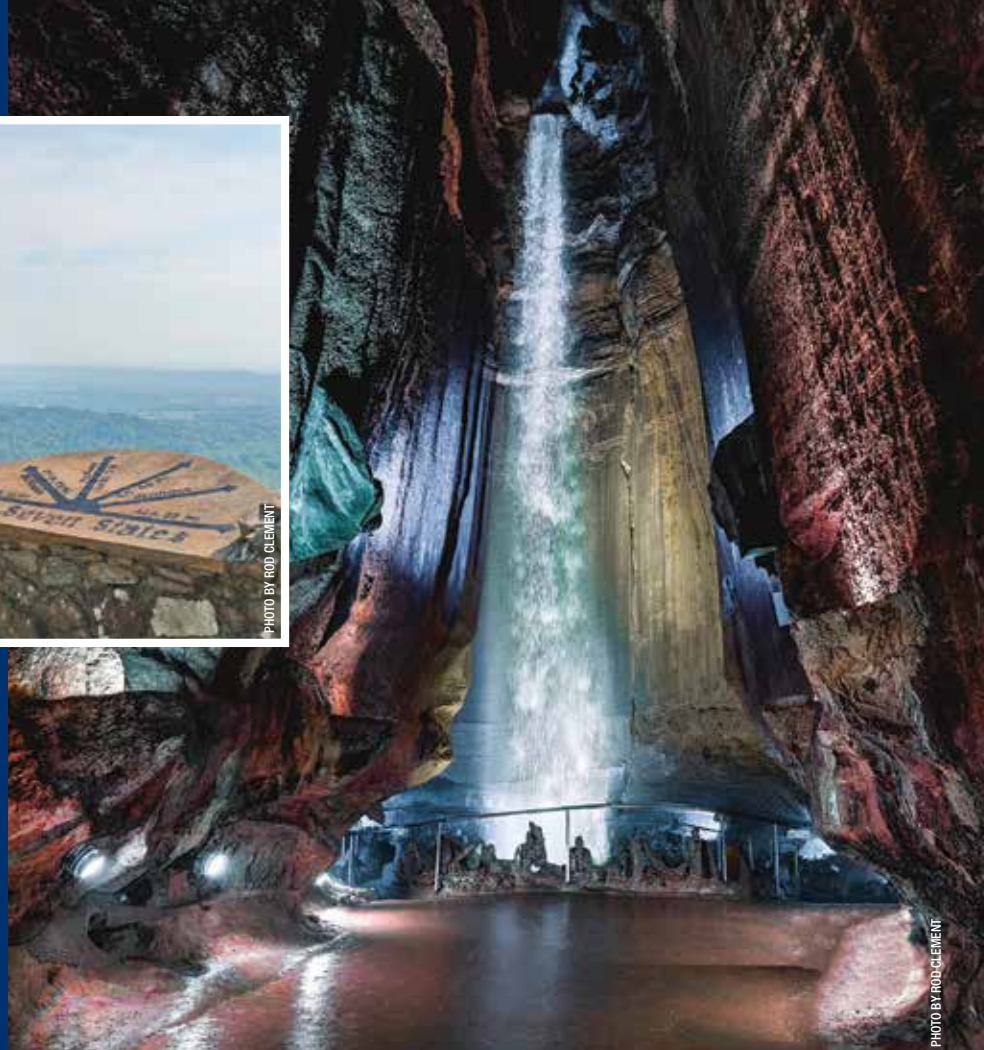


PHOTO BY ROD CLEMENT

Also atop Lookout Mountain are Ruby Falls and Rock City, two other prime destinations that have drawn visitors to Chattanooga for decades. These sites are too far to walk from Point Park, so ride the incline railway back to the mountain's base, retrieve your vehicle, and follow signs up the winding road back to the summit.

Ruby Falls, a 145-foot underground waterfall more than 1,100 feet below the mountain's ridge, is accessed via a nearly half-mile guided hike through a narrow, low-ceilinged cave with rock formations bearing such fanciful names as Onyx Jungle, Angel's Wing and Elephant's Foot. The falls are located in an immense cathedral-like chamber, and if you have trouble seeing them at first, fret not—your guide will

activate a five-minute sound-and-light presentation that will provide ample photo ops with the falls as background.

More photo ops await at Rock City, where a beautifully landscaped trail leads through massive rock formations that can be viewed from both far below or way up high. Two sheer precipices afford premier panoramas: Observation Point, which offers a view of up to seven states, and Lover's Leap, which can be reached by traversing either a stone bridge or a swinging bridge. The latter vantage point is made all the more majestic by a waterfall cascading down the mountain's side visible from both above and below.

Children will be especially delighted by stops at Rock City's

Fairyland Caverns and Mother Goose Village, which has dioramas featuring storybook characters and other whimsical creations, like red-capped gnomes riding a Ferris wheel.

Chattanooga's appeal extends to downtown, which brims with a variety of attractions. A must-visit among them is the Tennessee Aquarium, housed in two separate buildings on the riverfront, each topped by distinctive glass roofs in multiple geometric shapes. Both buildings feature towering multistory tanks filled with fish, including giant catfish and sturgeons; bizarre paddlefish with long, pointy snouts; and ominous sharks.

Especially popular stops are the sizable enclosures for playful otters as well as several others, including ones

for macaroni penguins with colorful orange head feathers and another for alligators sporting color-coded toenails (for identification purposes). A turtle nursery with dozens of endangered baby turtles is part of the aquarium's conservation efforts. Surprises abound, including a tank showcasing 25 species of vibrantly colored coral and another with "flashlight fish" that glow like fireflies.

Adjacent to the aquarium, the National Medal of Honor Heritage Center, which opened in early 2020, pays tribute to the 3,588 Armed Services members who have received the nation's highest military award. Fascinating displays explore

the acts of valor many of these service members performed, from falling on a grenade to shield others to saving a drowning soldier.

Chattanooga was chosen as the site for this national center because the first recipients of the Medal of Honor were involved in the nearby Great Locomotive Chase in 1862, in which a number of Union soldiers went behind Confederate lines, captured a train locomotive, and attempted to destroy as many bridges and train tracks as possible.

No trip to Chattanooga would be complete without sampling a MoonPie, the homegrown confection

made by the Chattanooga Bakery. MoonPies consist of graham cookies sandwiched around marshmallow filling and dipped in chocolate or other flavored coatings. Legend has it that the treat was invented when a coal miner asked the bakery's traveling salesman for a snack "as big as the moon."

You can sate your sweet tooth at the MoonPie General Store downtown. In addition to boxes upon boxes of MoonPies available for purchase, there's also a soda fountain inside the general store where you can customize your own MoonPie sundae for a sweet ending to your visit to Scenic City.



COURTESY OF CHATTANOOGA TOURISM CO.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Giant catfish at the Tennessee Aquarium; National Medal of Honor Heritage Center; a MoonPie, the homegrown confection made by the Chattanooga Bakery; Lover's Leap vantage point.



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