



## Re-entry

Appreciating the Smokies BY TY GOODWIN

EVEN A FEW DAYS in the backcountry of the Smoky Mountains seems to remap the brain, reshuffling internal circuits and pointing them to a new set of priorities. The steep slopes funnel you into cool hollows of birch and oak, where streams run under unholy snarls of rhododendron, and where the rest of the world is reduced to a wedge of sky above. The mind can entertain the idea of solitude here.

Which is why Gatlinburg so completely unnerved me. After an extended fishing jaunt deep in the mountains, I had shuffled into town looking for a meal that didn't involve pouring hot water into a mylar pouch. The sudden assault of gaudy storefronts and rumbling traffic jangled my senses. The air, rancid with exhaust, filled my mouth with bitterness, and I remember feeling oddly off balance, as if the sidewalks were wobbly under my feet.

The town itself was crowded with clots of chattering tourists ruining themselves with thick slabs of fudge and super-size slushies. Many of them gawked unabashedly at me, as if I was an exhibit that had somehow escaped from the nearby Ripley's museum. After a week in the woods, my skin was a tortured geography of welts, rashes, and scabs rising like contours on a raised-relief map. The angry red bumps from bug bites, and the crusty wounds from various thorns and rocks added a weird texture to my already bizarre mix of sunburn, dirt, and campfire soot. Parents carefully nudged their children to the edge of the walkway as I approached. Others ducked into the nearest chintzy shop, their bright, sugary drinks sloshing over the rims of enormous foam cups.

I am sometimes asked why I choose to spend days at a time in relative discomfort, sleeping on the ground in all kinds of weather, and depriving myself—God forbid—of Wi-Fi and take-out. In response, I have tried to describe certain things, like the sound of a night wind breaking itself against these mountains. Or the eerie way a stream near your tent sounds like men talking, something the Cherokee believed was the voice of the Long Man, who spoke through moving

water to those who would listen. I have tried to relate the otherworldly spectacle of the Leonid or Perseid meteor showers as viewed from a place like Gregory Bald, along the Tennessee-North Carolina border. I have tried to describe the sweet scent of spruce and fir as you approach the summit of Mount Le Conte on the Alum Cave trail.

If the words exist to adequately express such things, I don't know them. My efforts invariably result in blank stares and polite nods, but it's clear I've sparked no interest. For my listeners, the backcountry remains only a tangled, unknown horizon beyond the pavement, unfamiliar, and vaguely dangerous. It's the place of "intimidating otherness" that Christopher Camuto writes about in *Another Country*. A place best viewed at arm's length.

Despite its apparent depth, however, the depressing truth is that our backcountry is a shallow horizon that will no longer take you far. The Smokies are a small island awash in a sea of urban development. You are never more than a few miles from a paved road or tract housing, regardless of how far you hike.

Still, in a diminished world of compromised rivers and ravaged forests, it feels significant to spend even a few backcountry days in what's left of the wilderness. And maybe that's the answer I should give when asked: I go because it feels like I should; because it feels too often like a chance to experience the last chapter in an old and deep narrative. Wild places are receding like an outgoing tide, but there will be no new moon to bring them back; no celestial pull to refill the empty spaces. As much as I relish them, my walks in the Smoky Mountains are underwritten by a slight sense of desperation, a quiet urgency to see as much as I can before even one more acre is lost. In the evenings, in the flickering of my campfire, I look into the darkening woods and wish, as Camuto does, that I had been here a thousand years earlier. 🌲