

Springtime in the Great Smoky Mountains

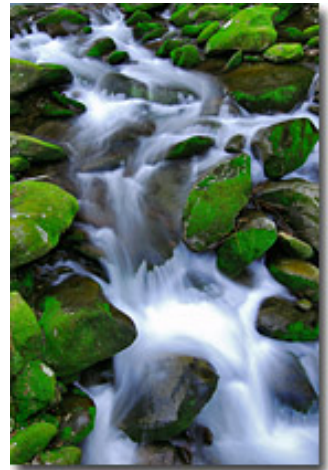
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Mountain ridges stretch to the horizon and a soft haze first becomes blue and pink, before the sun breaks over these ancient mountains and casts a golden banner as far as the eye can see. You are standing atop Clingmans Dome, the highest peak in the Park. The air is soft and cool. A spruce-fir forest saddles the ridge and skeleton trees afflicted by a non-native insect called the Woolly Adegid stand like ghostly statues. The view is breathtaking, but there is so much more to this park than the rolling grand vistas of the Smoky Mountains' ridges. There is a great diversity of life, wild streams, moss covered boulders, homesteads, wildflowers, mammals and birds. You are standing on the precipice of such wonderful diversity. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park encompasses over 800 square miles in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world. It is believed to be 200 - 300 million years old. This is ancient Appalachia.

With so much to offer, where does one begin to explore this great Park? On foot, there are hundreds of miles of trails to enjoy and some lead to some amazing photo destinations. By car, there are also many wonderful and photogenic spots with many of these right alongside of the road. The Smoky Mountains are a very wet and humid place. With over 55 inches of rainfall in the valleys and up to 85 inches on some peaks, the Smoky Mountains contain some truly awesome scenery from wild waterfalls and streams, old growth forest floors abundant with flowers and plant life, valleys cloaked in fog, and mountain tops with 360 degree views. I have spent a good deal of time exploring this Park from the mountain tops to valley bottoms and lead photographic tours and workshops in the spring and fall in this majestic Park. Let me take you to some of my favorite places to shoot in the Great Smoky Mountains.

Roaring Fork

This 5-mile winding road located just outside of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, is a great place to shoot spring wildflowers, rushing mountain streams, historic buildings, and old growth forests. To access Roaring Fork, turn off the main parkway in Gatlinburg, Tennessee at traffic light #8 and follow Historic Nature Trail Road to the Cherokee Orchard entrance to the National Park. Just beyond the Rainbow Falls trailhead, you have the option of taking the one-way Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail (closed in winter). This narrow, paved road winds for six miles beside rich forests, waterfalls, and streams. Buses, trailers, and motor homes are not permitted on the motor nature trail. The Ogle homestead is one of the first attractions you will encounter of the road. This is a great place to photograph a historic mountain homestead nestled in among the woods. As you continue along the road you will find the trailhead to Grotto Falls. The Trillium Gap Trail will lead you through old growth hemlock forests and will actually wind its way under Grotto Falls. There are numerous photo opportunities along the way to photograph wildflowers, forest scenes and salamanders under mossy rocks. The hike is 3 miles roundtrip and considered moderate in difficulty. After the Roaring Fork Trailhead the road becomes very narrow and you eventually wind your way along the Roaring Fork River. This is an absolute favorite location of mine and a must do for any photographer in search of moss covered rocks, cascades, and fresh spring foliage along a beautiful mountain stream. There are many places to pull off the road and explore this wild stream. I recommend leaving the road and wandering along the stream in search of the perfect spot. Rainy and overcast days are perfect for photography along the roaring fork. Don't forget to bring your circular polarizer and a set of towels for wiping down your equipment when it gets wet. As you continue to make your way along the Roaring Fork Trail, you will find many other historic homesteads and even a gristmill right next to the river. If the light is right, all day can be spent on this 5-mile stretch of road exploring and capturing the many photogenic subjects.



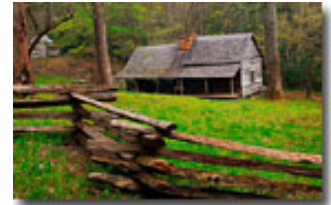
Clingmans Dome and Mountain Balds

At 6,643 feet, Clingmans Dome is the highest point in the Smoky Mountains and is located on the North Carolina/Tennessee state line. It is an amazing place to photograph sunrise and even sunset. Plan on getting up pretty early and being on location at least 30 minutes before sunrise.

The best places to shoot from the top of Clingmans Dome are right along the parking area at the top of the mountain. There are uninterrupted views over the Smoky Mountains looking east into North Carolina. I have found that a telephoto lens in the 70-200mm range is best for capturing the stacked ridges of the mountains against the sunrise sky. Make sure to bring along your circular polarizing filter and a set of 2- and 3-stop neutral density grads to best record the mountain vistas. Toward the west end of the parking area is the Forney Ridge Trail, which will lead you along the Appalachian Trail out to Andrews and Silers Balds. Appalachian mountain balds are mountain summits or crests covered primarily by a thick layer of native grasses or shrubs occurring in areas where heavy forest growth would be expected. Andrews and Silers Balds are best at sunset. I would recommend bringing a wide angle lens in the range of a 12-24mm or 17-35mm. Try finding an interesting foreground element like a clump of lichen covered rocks or the wavy patterns of mountain grass to draw the viewer into the frame.

Greenbrier

The Greenbrier area is certainly a favorite location of mine in the park. It is never very crowded and the Middle Prong of the Little Pigeon River is absolutely gorgeous. During overcast skies is a great time to photograph river scenes and wildflowers, which bloom in profusion in April and May. Between 3:00pm and sunset, the trees on the far side of the river are brightly illuminated and cast vivid reflections into the river. Look for an area where the river is in deep shade and the fresh green canopy is illuminated and you will surely find some great water reflections. I try to find a set of beautiful cascades and waterfalls to line up with yellow, green and blue reflections in the water. A circular polarizer will help cut the glare of the rocks and really pump up the contrast and color saturation. A Singh Ray Vari-ND filter would also be helpful in lengthening your exposure and creating that trademark cotton candy appearance in the flowing water. I like to have my 17-35mm for sweeping scenics along the river as well as the 70-200mm for picking out sections of cascades and waterfalls with vivid reflections. A macro lens or close-up diopter would also be useful for capturing the many wildflower specimens in the area.



Cades Cove

Cades Cove is a lush valley surrounded by mountains, containing an abundance of wildlife and historic buildings that date back as far as the late nineteenth century. Sunrise is my favorite time to be in Cades Cove, although any time of the day would be productive. There are so many photographic opportunities in this section of the park that you could spend an entire week just shooting in Cades Cove and just begin to get your feet wet. An 11-mile one-way loop road takes you through the cove and is often very busy in summer and fall as well as weekends. Keep this in mind and try to visit on a weekday or in the off-season. Along the road, you will find many pullouts with scenic views, old gristmills, historic Methodist churches and log buildings. The Tipton Place is a favorite location of mine to shoot a rustic barn and weathered homestead. Sparks Lane is another great morning shoot. It provides the photographer with a telephoto view towards the eastern mountains and a fence lined dirt road with very graphic trees on either side. Spring and early summer will usually produce some very nice fog in the early morning hours. This is great for capturing moody and dramatic images. Remember to bring your entire arsenal of equipment from a wide angle lens all the way up to a telephoto in the range of 300mm or even greater for the abundance of wildlife in the valley. A set of graduated neutral density filters and a circular polarizer will be essential for capturing the range of light at sunrise and sunset. Last but not least, be sure to arrive at the entrance into Cades Cove at least 45 minutes before sunrise to ensure you get a good spot at the front of the line of cars that will be waiting for the gates to be opened.

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Joseph Rossbach is a professional landscape and nature photographer based out of Annapolis, Maryland. Over the past ten years, he has traveled into some of the most beautiful and remote areas of the United States in order to capture the American landscape. His images have appeared in local and regional magazines, calendars, advertising campaigns, websites and in books and art galleries and corporate collections. He also leads photography workshops through [Mountain Trail Photography Workshops](#). To see more of Joseph's images visit his website at www.josephrossbach.com.

