

Dolly mixture

From Dolly-mania in the Great Smoky Mountains to live country music, Tennessee offers plenty to draw visitors beyond Nashville, finds **Laura French**

Great Pumpkin LumiNights, an autumn attraction at Dollywood

PICTURE: Tennessee Tourism/Dollywood/Steven Bridges

I get people calling up, asking to speak to me because they know I'm Dolly Parton's niece," says Danielle Parton, as she hands me a shot of electric-blue moonshine from behind a glitzy gold bar. "My family didn't come from money. Dolly built everything she made from scratch and that really inspired me."

Danielle is the owner of Shine Girl, a distillery in Sevierville – aka Aunt Dolly's hometown – in the heart of Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains. As I sip the shot – a silky, sweet liqueur infused with fragrant lavender – Danielle modestly mentions that she's not only a successful businesswoman, but also a commercial pilot and former military commander who

won several medals for her service in the Air National Guard, the reserves of the US Air Force.

Despite all these endeavours, she still somehow manages to look decidedly glam – her blonde bouffant hair offering a familiar resemblance to her aunt. She has us in stitches as we taste our way through her various moonshines, including a red velvet cake-flavoured creation, with an echo of Dolly's warm, down-to-earth charm shining through.

DOLLYWOOD FUN

Charisma, success and a penchant for befriending everyone clearly run in the Parton family. During my time in Tennessee, I get used to hearing how much ➤

PICTURE: Dollywood/Steven Bridges

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Dollywood's Big Bear Mountain rollercoaster; writer Laura French at the Dolly Parton Experience; Shine Girl distillery in Sevierville

PICTURES: Dollywood; Tennessee Tourism; Laura French; Shutterstock/CrackerClips Stock Media



MUSIC IN NASHVILLE



It's impossible to tour Tennessee without starting or ending a trip in country music capital Nashville (pictured). Here, we prowl the live-music bars of the Honky Tonk Highway, visit the Country Music Hall of Fame and stand where Elvis, Dolly Parton and many others recorded at RCA Studio B. On a backstage tour of the Grand Ole Opry (pictured, below) – celebrating its centenary this year – we glimpse Dolly's dressing room, while at the Ryman Auditorium, we stand on a stage graced by everyone from Elvis and Johnny Cash to Neil Young and Harry Styles. This music-infused city is every bit as surreal as I'd imagined.



of a legend Dolly is in these parts – and not only for her country music prowess.

A half-hour drive from Sevierville is Dollywood, the star's legendary theme park in Pigeon Forge, which marks its 40th anniversary next year (entry from \$92 for adults, \$82 for children). Country music plays from the speakers as we're welcomed into the scenic Smoky Mountains spot, with rattling rollercoaster tracks peeking above the trees.

Browsing the Dolly Parton Experience, which opened last year and features a collection of her trademark glittering outfits, I read about the singer's philanthropic efforts. In the late 1980s, she set up the Dollywood Foundation with the aim of decreasing the drop-out rate in Sevier County's high school. She later launched the Imagination Library, a book-gifting initiative developed in honour of her father, who couldn't read.

After my education in Dolly Parton, I sample a handful of the park's attractions: dangling from beneath a loop-the-loop track and soaring over the park on Wild Eagle, then riding the formidable Lightning Rod, where I'm blasted along an undulating track at 73mph, propped up on a huge wooden structure.

There are more than 50 attractions here and regular live-music shows mean the park can be a good option for adrenaline-averse clients too. Next to Dollywood, there's also a water park, Dollywood's Splash Country. I don't have time to visit, but I do drop in to try the

signature cinnamon bread – a slice of sugary indulgence doused in sweet cinnamon sauce, apple butter and cream icing that has me wired for the rest of the day.

MOUNTAIN HIGHS

Dollywood wasn't the only theme park I experienced during my visit to the Great Smoky Mountains. I'd already had my fill at Anakeesta – a mountaintop adventure park in nearby Gatlinburg (entry from \$35 for adults, \$23 for children).

Whimsy is at the heart of this eclectic park, which is reached by a four-seat chairlift that allows visitors to glide gently over a carpet of green below. At the top, a fairytale-like village offers a host of attractions – from ziplines to a new BirdVenture aviary-themed playground that has us descending neon-lit tube slides and jumping on trampolines, with views of billowing mountains all around.

More magical still is the Astra Lumina light trail, a celestially inspired night-time walk that mesmerises everyone into silence. Twinkling lights, strobe lasers and glimmering projections dance between the trees, while harmonious music and a cooling mountain breeze complete the ethereal effect.

Surprisingly, the best part comes as we leave the park. While riding on a large, safari-style truck that takes us back down the mountain towards the exit, we spot something emerging from the darkness – a black ➤



ABOVE: Leiper's Fork is home to an eclectic mix of art galleries, antique shops and candle-scented boutiques PICTURES: VisitFranklin.com/Amy Allmand

bear ambling leisurely ahead on the road in front of us. Moments later, we spot another climbing up the side of a forested hill. It's a reminder of the wild nature of the vast Great Smoky Mountains National Park – the most visited in the US, with about 12 million annual visitors.

A WARM WELCOME

The mountains straddle Tennessee's eastern border with North Carolina – but central Tennessee also has plenty of excitement. A 40-minute drive south of Nashville is the village of Leiper's Fork. This quaint, leafy spot feels like something of a local secret. Art galleries, antique shops and candle-scented boutiques line its serene streets, with verandas set in front of white-shuttered houses in true southern style.

Leiper's Fork isn't just known for its pretty architecture; live-music haunt the Fox & Locke is a local hotspot for its Thursday evening open-mic nights. We visit for a true experience of contemporary Americana music, watching country bands and crimped-hair singer-songwriters strum guitars to a packed-out crowd.

US flags and music memorabilia decorate the walls while barbecue pulled-pork sandwiches, sizeable burgers and giant cobbles (fruit crumbles) fill the tables. Big-name record labels frequently come here to scout out new talent, we're told, with Grammy-winning artists occasionally making a surprise appearance. Carrie Underwood owns a 395-acre home in the village and Chris Stapleton, known for global hit *Tennessee Whiskey*, is another illustrious local resident.

“There's something special about this state, where charm and authenticity emanate from just about everywhere

Morgane Stapleton, Chris's wife and a fellow singer-songwriter, owns jewellery shop the Tennessee Turquoise Company in the village. This quaint log cabin reminds me of Dolly's niece and her moonshine distillery, with the same unpretentious, down-to-earth feel that typifies country music.

That's all part of the magic of Tennessee. Music connections are everywhere, and clients won't have to go far to feel like they're part of it. “As a visitor, you can really get close to the music scene,” says our driver, Luke Parrish, also a musician. “Artists support each other – and that's one of the things I love about it. There's a real sense of camaraderie and welcomeness between everyone.”

After only a week in Tennessee, I can certainly see what he means. There's something special about this southerly state, where charm and authenticity emanate from just about everywhere – and I've got a feeling I've only just scratched the surface. **TW**

BOOK IT

Gold Medal offers a seven-night trip that combines four nights' room-only at Holston House Nashville with three nights' bed and breakfast at Hampton Inn Pigeon Forge from £1,739 per person. The price is based on two sharing and includes car hire and flights from Heathrow, departing September 22. goldmedal.co.uk

Premier Holidays offers a nine-day trip that takes in Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga and the Great Smoky Mountains. Prices start at £2,399 per person, based on two sharing, including car hire, accommodation and flights from Heathrow, departing October 7. premierholidays.co.uk