

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

75 Years Of Smoky Mountains Beauty

(NAPSA)—Just about everybody loves birthdays and anniversaries, and one of America's treasures marks a big one throughout 2009. It's the 75th anniversary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, America's most visited national park.

Many people assume that one of the legendary national parks out West gets the highest visitation, but the annual 9 million visits to the Smokies far outpace the 4.4 million of second-place Grand Canyon National Park.

The park's next-door neighbor, Pigeon Forge, Tenn., is a great home base for a national park vacation because it combines the joys of nature with the delights of a family vacation destination.

It was in 1934 when a big piece of Appalachian backcountry—evenually 800 square miles—became the national park. Today, it's the biggest piece of wilderness in the Eastern U.S. and a magnet for hikes, wildflower treks, photography expeditions and driving tours.

Indeed, it was the desire for a scenic location for driving tours that helped establish the national park. The movement began in the 1890s, but it was motorists' clubs—early branches of the AAA in the mid-1920s—that pushed the effort into high gear.

Unlike in the West, where the federal government could carve out national parks from land it already controlled, land for Great Smoky Mountains National Park had to be acquired privately and then donated to the U.S. That also meant that about 1,200 people moved away when the park's boundaries were set.



What was acquired was not necessarily prime land. Most of what we see today as forested wilderness was logged over by timber companies and was in terrible shape. Mother Nature has healed a lot of wounds in the last 75 years.

The park's Mt. LeConte rises to the sky south of Pigeon Forge and provides a breathtaking backdrop for the tourist community that claims Dollywood, 13 theaters, WonderWorks, scores of restaurants and dozens of family attractions among its attributes.

Six Pigeon Forge festivals scattered throughout the year are on the national park's official 75th anniversary calendar, and there's a special show at Dollywood that's helping to celebrate the occasion.

That show is "Sha-Kon-O-Hey! Land of Blue Smoke," which pays tribute to the music, heritage and traditions of the mountains. "Sha-Kon-O-Hey" is the phonetic spelling of the Cherokee word for this lovely mountain region.

To plan a Pigeon Forge/Great Smoky Mountains visit, go to MyPigeonForge.com or call toll-free (800) 251-9100.