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Get out in Chattanooga



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Old and new attractions draw visitors to southeast Tennessee

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There's so much to report on Chattanooga, it's hard to know where to start.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Chattanooga Choo Choo, while the Delta Queen docked on the Tennessee River and has recently opened as a boutique hotel.

You can still view several states from above Lookout Mountain, see Rock City and travel up and down the world's steepest passenger railway. And while Ruby Falls takes visitors 260 feet below the ground to a breath-taking waterfall as it has for the past 70-plus years, the attraction is now powered by solar energy.

Outdoor recreation has always been on the menu, but now Chattanooga offers kayaking and canoeing downtown on the river, whitewater rafting and hang gliding and its Nature Center just opened the innovative "Paddler's Perch," with composting toilet and kitchenette where canoeists can spend the night elevated above the creek and peaceful woods.

Even the art scene is booming, thanks to CreateHere, ArtsMove and other cultural development programs. More than \$450,000 has been dedicated to 57 local creative endeavors and 25 working artists, many from Louisiana, have received help in relocating to Chattanooga.

It's all part of a communitywide effort to enhance and grow Chattanooga. And it's working.

The city's reformation

When Walter Cronkite reported on the evening news that Chattanooga was the dirtiest city in America, residents took notice. They formed the Vision 2000 project, ready to move Chattanooga from the smokestack industries to tourism, to revitalize the languishing downtown and to clean up the Tennessee River. Change began, albeit slowly.

In 1982, a group of businessmen renovated the old Terminal Station, built in 1909 and made famous by the 1941 Glenn Miller song, "Chattanooga Choo Choo." Landing the impressive Tennessee Aquarium in 1992 really turned downtown Chattanooga around, said Bob Doak, president of the Chattanooga Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. That same year, the Bluff View Arts District was created, eventually leading to a complete revitalization of the historic neighborhood with its now-*tony* cafés, restaurants and bed and breakfasts.

The Walnut Street Bridge opened as the world's longest pedestrian bridge, spanning the Tennessee River to the North Shore, now witnessing healthy development of its own. The Hunter Museum of American Art expanded, new museums opened and a free bus service began from the Terminal to the river, encouraging visitors to park their cars and enjoy Chattanooga without the hassle of parking.

Within the last few years, many historic properties were not only renovated, but await LEED certification for their sustainable architecture and green living.

Then in 2005, the 21st Century Waterfront Project opened, a \$120-million transformation of downtown where it meets the river.

"We've seen a paradigm shift," said Doak. "The amount of changes happening to our community has been significant."

Chattanooga stands today as a model for other cities, attracting 8 million tourists each year.

What to see

Visitors can run the gamut of activities in Chattanooga, from the Creative Discovery Museum for children to rock climbing downtown in Coolidge Park.

The best way to see Chattanooga is to park your car and travel aboard the electric free shuttle that runs a circle around downtown, past the minor league baseball stadium and over to the shopping and green spaces of the North Shore. Once visitors hit the river, there are ample things to do within walking distance, including traipsing across the sky blue Walnut Street Bridge with its fabulous view of the city and surrounding river valley.

A stop at the Tennessee Aquarium is a must, where visitors can view how a drop of water falling on the Appalachian mountain forests travels to the Gulf of Mexico in its “River Journey.” Next door at the Aquarium’s \$30-million expansion, 10-foot sharks, penguins and other saltwater creatures inhabit the “Ocean Journey,” where the Aquarium’s current exhibit marries the maritime with art. Jellies: Living Art offers glass sculptures inspired by nature next to giant displays of jellyfish pulsating and dancing in dreamy lighting and music.

The Aquarium is also the place to purchase tickets to ride the River Gorge Explorer, a high-speed catamaran that travels daily along 26 miles of the Tennessee River, 27,000 acres of its shore protected land.

Other museums and attractions include the African American Museum, the Chattanooga Zoo and the Hunter Museum of American Art with one of the largest collections in America. And just outside of Chattanooga, some of the worst fighting of the Civil War occurred on the Chickamauga Battlefield.

Parents may remember visiting Rock City, Ruby Falls and the Incline Railway as children, but all three attractions still exist and continue to lure young visitors inside. Ruby Falls offers daily trips down into the limestone cavern with its massive underground waterfall, but be adventurous and take the lantern tour, a more personal tour of the cave where only a lantern and the lights on your spelunking helmet illuminate the way.

Outdoor enthusiasts may wish to try hang gliding off Lookout Mountain or white water rafting on the upper and middle Ocoee River. Equally fun, although less stressful is kayaking and canoeing the Tennessee River along downtown’s Riverwalk through Outdoors Chattanooga, a city department created to promote outdoors activities and encourage tourism. The outfitters also provide bicycles for tourists and downtown companies from a reconstructed Arnold Palmer golf factory that’s now environmentally friendly with its green roof, 8,000-gallon cistern that captures rainwater for bathroom use and native species landscaping.

“There are few municipalities that do what we do,” said Ruth Thompson, Outdoors Chattanooga events coordinator.

In keeping with the city’s green movement, several area farms raise organic produce for downtown restaurants and the Sunday Chattanooga Market sells farm-fresh vegetables in a giant covered pavilion that also features numerous artists, live music, demonstrations and a café. Greenlife Grocery on the North Shore is Whole Foods on steroids.

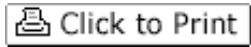
Hotels, too, are striving for LEED certification. The Doubletree Hotel downtown renovated its ’70s building and now offers energy efficient air and heating units, water efficient bathrooms and two trash bins to each room, one for trash and one for recyclables.

If a bed and breakfast is more your style, Bluff View Inn offers a breathtaking view of the river in the restored Bluff View Arts District with easy access to the sculpture garden, art galleries and the exquisite food of Back Inn Café. Visitors can spend the night on the river inside the Delta Queen steamboat, newly arrived and renovated. And if you want to ride back in time, the Chattanooga Choo Choo will offer special anniversary packages until Dec. 1, when the train station officially turns 100.

ON THE INTERNET: Chattanooga Tourism: <http://www.chattanoogafun.com>.

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