

Chatt Town

From a scary-steep ride to historical encounters and a swig of Tennessee whiskey, our travel writer dives into Chattanooga

WRITTEN BY MELISSA REARDON

A recurring dream growing up was one where I'm in a vehicle, driving up an impossibly steep slope, when the engine stalls against the pull of gravity, forcing the car to roll backward, without control. This is the chilling thought going through my head while my eyes trace the rail line up the mountain in a nearly vertical fashion.

This railway has been in existence for over 125 years, my friend explains. I'm not sure if that statement is meant to make me feel better or worse, but I shrug and board the funicular. I recognize the absurdity of my dream and do trust that it's safe. They wouldn't welcome over 100,000 people annually to ride if it weren't. And besides, it has the word "fun" in the title, so surely the entertainment factor outweighs the risk.

Dubbed "America's Most Amazing Mile," Chattanooga's Incline Railway funicular has been shuttling visitors up Lookout Mountain since 1895 and is one of the world's steepest passenger railways, with a 72.7 percent grade (aka, scary steep). Two trolley cars counter-balance each other on a giant pulley system that takes visitors up and down the mountain every 20 minutes. It's fascinating for sure, but it's the panoramic views over Chattanooga and the surrounding Tennessee Valley that really heighten the experience.

I'm pleasantly wowed by the vista, but more so that America's steepest mile is only three hours from my home in Asheville. In fact, as I learn over the next few days during my visit, Chattanooga holds a number of surprising and interesting superlatives.

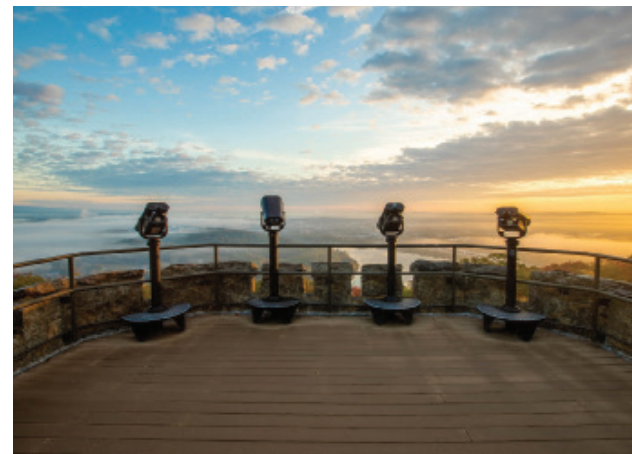
The first Coca-Cola bottling plant was established here in 1899, and continues to enrich the city. We have Chattanooga to thank for those delicious Southern

Moonpies as well as Little Debbie's classic desserts. Tow trucks, too, were invented and patented here; that history is on display at the world's only towing and rescue museum, in town. In 2014, Chattanooga became the first city in the world to get 10 gigabit broadband, making it the fastest internet connectivity in the nation. And if that's not impressive, the city's airport is the country's first—and only—to run entirely on solar power. Oh,

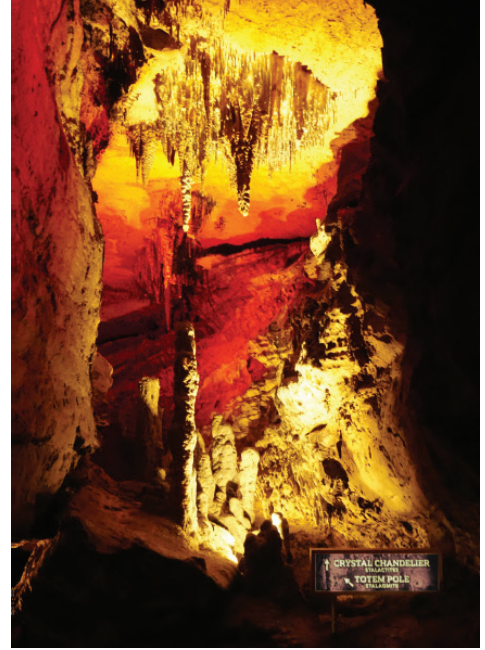


PEAK VIEWS Built in 1895, The Incline is billed as "America's Steepest Mile" and is also wheelchair accessible. The long-range views from the upper station atop Lookout Mountain are among the best.

PHOTOGRAPHS (3) COURTESY CHATTANOOGA TOURISM CO.; (LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN OVERLOOK) COURTESY RUBY FALLS



RIVERSIDE Flanked on one side by Lookout Mountain, Chattanooga sits at a bend in the Tennessee River. Alongside the waterway is the 16.1-mile Riverwalk greenway system. And new this year, the long-anticipated South Chickamauga Creek Greenway adds an additional nine miles of trail that link to the Riverwalk. Thanks to a robust bicycle-share transportation system, with 400 bikes and 42 docking stations throughout the city, it's easy to explore the entire length.



UNDERGROUND At Ruby Falls, the 90-foot namesake cascade is enhanced with a dramatic sound and light display. Along the approach are numerous formations that attest to the effects of water and limestone over time.

and there's evidence of human inhabitants here dating back some 12,000 years, though it wasn't until a revitalization effort in the nineties that Chattanooga began to develop into what it is today.

Positioned on a bend along the Tennessee River, the city is the state's fourth largest with 423,000 residents. It's a vibrant metropolis, with four colleges, convention and sports arenas, arts, entertainment, history, attractions, outdoor recreation, and a growing food scene. It's a city that appeals to residents and visitors alike, and the best place for any newcomer to begin exploring is from the top.

ABOVE THE CLOUDS

Lookout Mountain is a bit of a misnomer, really. It's actually a narrow southern ridge of the Cumberland Plateau, though its size is nothing to balk at. Rising 2,389 feet at its highest point, the mountain extends southwestward from Chattanooga for 75 miles, across northwestern Georgia to the northeast corner of Alabama. The mountain played a strategic role in both the Revolutionary and Civil wars, and today draws hundreds of thousands who come for the views, 30-plus miles of hiking trails, and several large attractions, including The Incline, Ruby Falls, and Rock City. For

the attractions, a package ticket will save money, and with an early start, it's possible to take in all three in one day.

The Incline Railway takes people up and down the mountain, but since there aren't shuttles at the top, it's actually better to drive up, ride the rail down and back, then continue on to the next point. The Incline's lower station includes a Clumpies homemade ice cream shop, rumored the best in all of Chattanooga, while the upper station has an observation deck, an interesting display of historic photos of The Incline's 125 years, as well as a souvenir and fudge shop. For anyone interested in Lookout Mountain's war history, Point Park is a five-minute walk away. It's a national military park and site of what's known as the Battle Above the Clouds, a pivotal Civil War clash in 1863 that gave Union troops control of Chattanooga.

Interestingly, it was after this battle that Lookout Mountain became a draw for tourism, first to Union soldiers and their families and eventually to the masses. The first Incline was built barely 30 years later. And with the mountain more easily accessible, it only took roughly another 30 years to spawn the other two big attractions, one of which takes people inside the limestone mount.

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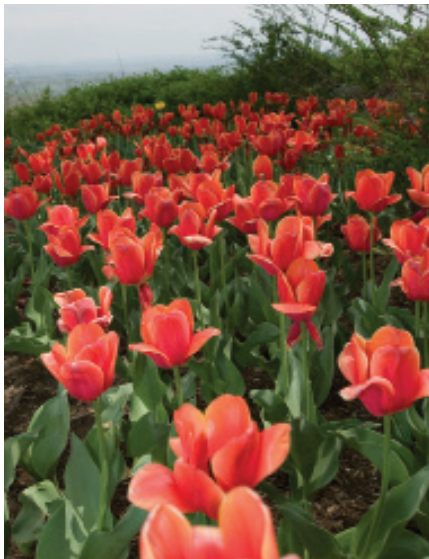
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IN BLOOM A sprawling mountaintop garden attraction, Rock City contains over 400 native plant species, which visitors explore via a 4,100-foot stone pathway that meanders through the property. There's a fairyland cavern that will appeal to kids, and everyone will enjoy the views; on clear days, seven states are visible. In a savvy marketing move in the mid 1930s, Garnet Carter commissioned a sign painter to travel the country, painting barns in exchange for three small words on the roof. "See Rock City" was painted on some 900 barns, though only 50 still exist today.

I've always been fascinated by stories of those who dare to be the first to venture into an unknown cavern. Caves are beyond dark, sometimes dank, and with one misstep, they can prove deadly. But thankfully that was not the fate of the man who discovered Ruby Falls in 1928. With

the intent of creating a tourist attraction, Leo Lambert was actually searching for a mountaintop entrance to Lookout Mountain Cave far below, but instead discovered an upper cave system and 90-foot waterfall, which he named after his wife. So he built a 260-foot elevator and

PHOTOGRAPHS (SCENIC OVERLOOK) BY MELISSA REARDON;
(3) COURTESY ROCK CITY



BLAST FROM THE PAST

Chattanooga's oldest and longest-running hotel, The Read House, marks 150 years in 2022. It's decked in 1920s splendor with modern amenities, though one room does stand out. Room 311 maintains its original look from the early 1900s and is rumored to be haunted.

widened the path, and voila! Ruby Falls has been welcoming tourists since 1930.

An hour-and-a-half tour—via a well-lit path and with one of Ruby Falls' jovial guides—takes groups of about 40 at a time past stunning, curious, and creatively-named formations, like “bacon” and “potato chip.” The cascading pièce de résistance is viewed alongside a vivid light show set to music, all of which is kind of awesome when you consider that Leo Lambert would've had minimal lighting and did not die getting there. Though if you do want a sense of what it would've been like to navigate the cave in that way, the nighttime tours are led with only handheld lanterns.

Lookout Mountain's third big draw is Rock City, a massive rock garden with over 400 native species of wildflowers, shrubs, and trees, as well as a dramatic viewpoint overlooking seven states. Tennessee native Garnet Carter had attempted to develop a neighborhood and golf course here in the 1920s; all the while, his wife, Frieda, was creating an immaculate rock garden on the 700-acre mountaintop property. Though Garnet's venture failed under the Great Depression—leading him to invent mini golf instead—the garden was a sight to behold. Rock City opened in 1932 and drew visitors from near and far, thanks to some savvy marketing on some 900 barn roofs.

Today, a 4,100-foot stone pathway guides visitors through the mossy, high-elevation

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PLACES TO BE The Tennessee Aquarium (above) takes up three large riverfront buildings: one dedicated to freshwater species, including the largest river fish in the world, another focused on saltwater creatures, as well as an IMAX theater. At The Hunter Museum (pictured at right) guests can view American fine art dating back to the 1700s to the present day and stroll through an outdoor sculpture garden along the grounds.

garden, under and over stone bridges and through tight crevices and fairy-like doorways. Gnomes, stone-carved goblins, and other magical elements lightly sprinkled throughout are a manifestation of Frieda's enthusiasm for European folklore. There's even a Fairyland cavern that meanders past tripped out dioramas depicting fairy tales and nursery rhymes under black light. It's all a bit reminiscent of the 1980s cult classic *Labyrinth* and is simultaneously kitschy and wonderfully enchanting.



TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

After a much-needed night's rest at the glamorous and reputedly haunted Read House, I set off to explore another side of Chattanooga: the riverfront, a key feature of which is a 22-mile greenway.

In the mid 1980s, Chattanooga sought to increase its livability and desirability for potential investment and devised a master plan centered around development and community-building. It was bold and required both public and private funding partnerships. In addition to the greenway, one of the first major projects to come out of this effort was the Tennessee Aquarium, which opened in '92 and remains a preeminent draw.



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Spotlight on Cherokee History

In Chattanooga, Ross' Landing and The Passage public art project both commemorate the Trail of Tears, and across the river, the 750-acre Moccasin Bend National Archaeological District offers hiking in a park situated on 12,000 years of human history. For those seeking to explore Cherokee history further, Red Clay State Historic Park in nearby Cleveland was the last seat of Cherokee government prior to the 1838 removal. An excellent film tells the story and it's worth scheduling a tour of the grounds in advance. Just a little farther east in Charleston, the Hiwassee River Heritage Center reveals the story of Fort Cass, the military headquarters for the entire Trail of Tears operation and one of the removal camps that marked the start of the treacherous 800-mile journey.



BRIDGING THE GAP Chattanooga's architecture combines classic style with modern functionality. Pictured above are metalworks on display at the River Gallery Sculpture Garden near the banks of the Tennessee River and Veterans Memorial Bridge.

Amidst a manicured plaza with play and water features for little busybodies, three imposing riverfront buildings house freshwater and saltwater aquariums and an IMAX theater. The ocean aquarium includes a 615,000-gallon tank that mimics Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary and its inhabitants in the gulf, while the centerpiece of the freshwater aquarium is a multi-story tank housing the world's largest river fish, many reaching six-plus feet in size. All ages can learn about aquatic wildlife and conservation while discovering some pretty astonishing creatures.

The education continues at the waterfront, which is the site of Ross' Landing, named for the Cherokee chief who established a trading port here. It also became a key embarkation point along the Trail of Tears. A marker tells that story, while around the corner toward Market Street is The Passage, a public art project and walkway with cascading pools that commemorates the forced removal.

Chattanooga has a robust shared bicycle transit system with over 400 bikes and 42 docking stations, making it easy for me to grab a bike and head toward higher ground nearby to check out the city's arts district.

On a bluff above the river adjacent to the Walnut Street pedestrian bridge, which

is definitely worth a stroll, The Hunter Museum of American Art sparks curiosity from first glimpse. A grand neoclassical mansion—a remnant of that old Coca-Cola money—sits nestled between and connected to an austere East Wing built in the 1970s Brutalism style and a very modern zinc-clad West Wing. It's a testament to the museum's growth since the 1950s and also reflects the vast array of art and mediums contained within, dating from the 1700s to present day. The museum holds 5,000 objects in its permanent collection, while rotating exhibits feature artists from around the globe.

A short walk from the museum is the Bluff View Art District, which despite the name does not include a slew of galleries and art studios. It's actually a turn-of-the-19th-century neighborhood that has been lovingly manicured by the Portera family, who bought and revitalized the district in the '90s, developing it into a mix of elegant bed and breakfasts, restaurants, and shops. There is one gallery, River Gallery, which represents works by 150 esteemed artisans, as well as an immaculate Smithsonian-recognized sculpture garden. It's an ideal district to grab a meal or a house-roasted coffee and a chocolate-dipped pastry and



PHOTOGRAPHS (2) COURTESY THE FLYING SQUIRREL;
(2) COURTESY CHATTANOOGA TOURISM CO.

just wander. The views over the Tennessee River are some of the best in town.

TRAIN OF THOUGHT

On another side of town is the Southside Historic District and site of the famed Chattanooga Choo Choo. The area boasts a lively scene, with bars, breweries, an experimental whiskey distillery, and restaurants, all clustered around the old train depot, which arguably presents the city's most unique overnight experience; you can stay in the modified Pullman

BREWS AND BITES Made for visitors and locals alike, the Chattanooga food scene features vibrant and eclectic restaurants with new-wave favorites and well-done classics. Also known for its libations, Chattanooga offers plenty of Tennessee whiskey straight from the source.

train cars from the 1930s and '40s.

With Chris Stapleton's soulful groove on my mind, I've scheduled a tour and tasting at Chattanooga Whiskey—because it just doesn't seem right to leave the state without actually sampling some Tennessee whiskey—before diving into the excellent flavor experience at The Flying Squirrel. Chef Sanders Parker's creative menu changes almost nightly with what's fresh and features everything from Japanese savory pancakes to mushroom pastor tacos to lamb lollipops. The miso salmon poke and beet and ricotta with a lemon-pistachio crumble are both divine.

As I stroll past revelers at the popular cocktail bar STIR and through the palatial 1909 Terminal Station (now the hotel lobby), I can't help but think about another tune. That classic 1940s song "Chattanooga Choo Choo" is on my mind and transports me to a different time. Looking up at the station's soaring ornate dome, I'm thankful for the foresight someone had to save this building. It was almost demolished in the early '70s. Progress is a double-edged sword, though Chattanooga has managed to toe the line quite successfully, safekeeping enough important vestiges of its past while developing a future that's to the advantage of its citizens and even people like me who come to play. ▲▲

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