

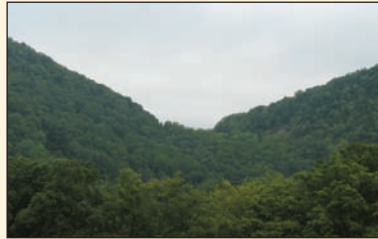


# Destinations less traveled

## Avoid the crowds by visiting some of Tennessee's underrated travel destinations

I have been told before that I have the best job in Tennessee. I don't know whether that is true, but my job at "Tennessee History for Kids" has required me to travel the state and take pictures of courthouses, skylines, landscapes, waterfalls, rivers, old buildings and anything else that captures my eye. I've been to all 95 counties at least twice and, on occasion, aimlessly followed my nose. I've been lost many times, gotten in trouble with private property owners more than I care to mention and once got my car stuck in the mud in Grainger County. Through this process I've developed a list of what I consider Tennessee's most underrated places — by which I mean places that don't seem to get as much hype as they merit. Here are a few of them:

**The Cumberland Gap** Some places have nature. Some have history. The Cumberland Gap National Historical Park and the area surrounding it have both. And as I travel the state, I am amazed at how few Tennesseans have been there. Here you can explore a cave, drive to the Pinnacle Overlook, hike to a place where three states meet or visit the Hensley settlement. But, most important of all, here you can walk a short trail to the gap itself — the exact footpath that was used by migrating buffalo, Native American warriors and tens of thousands of American settlers (including Daniel Boone). And if you come, you probably won't encounter many other people. On a recent visit to the gap (a Saturday on which we were filming a video for "Tennessee History for Kids"), we saw only two other people on the trail: two men from — get this — mainland China. Is there a better statement for how badly Americans need to get OUT?



**The State Capitol** The Capitol is a marvelous work of architecture with history around every corner, as the tour guide will explain. But the really interesting thing about the Tennessee State Capitol is that, a century and a half after being built, it is still being used for the exact thing it was designed for (unlike the capitol buildings in many states). The room where the Tennessee House of Representatives meets today looks about the same as it did when that body debated whether to leave the Union in 1861 and whether to extend the right to vote to women in 1920. Lobbyists try to catch a word with lawmakers in the bathroom, just like they did a century ago. And when tempers

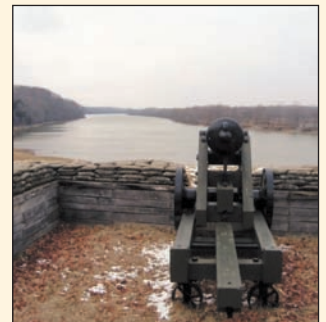


flare between Republicans and Democrats, East and West Tennesseans, old and young, you can take some consolation that they have flared in this building before.

**Burgess Falls** This state natural area, near the boundary between Putnam and White counties, is only about 10 minutes south of Interstate 40. To be accurate, it isn't one waterfall but a series of waterfalls along the Falling Water River. As someone who has hiked many a Tennessee trail, I can say, in my opinion, Burgess Falls is the most beautiful and breathtaking of all waterfalls in the Volunteer State. Yet, it is probably visited by a fraction of the number of people who visit all the waterfalls in the Great Smoky Mountains. Why? Marketing, I guess. In any case, the next time you drive from Knoxville to Nashville (or vice versa) take time to see this place and walk the mile-long trail.



**Fort Donelson** Most Civil War sites consist of big, open fields. The site of Fort Donelson overlooks the Cumberland River, and when you stand there, it is easy to comprehend the important battle that took place there. When I created the Fort Donelson virtual tour, I stood behind a cannon that points upstream on a snowy day and took a photograph. When I posted it on the Web site, I wrote the following outline below it: "This is the way the Confederate forces greeted the Union gunboats when they came upstream." Pretty simple, and pretty accurate. (Also, Fort Donelson is the best place in Tennessee to see bald eagles in their natural habitat. Several of them nest in the trees alongside the river there, and when you first





see them, you won't believe how big they are. I know that the first time I saw one I said, "What's that? A big dog in a tree?"

**Old Stone Fort** I wrote about Old Stone Fort (and its haunted legacy) a while back. Let me repeat that it is one of the most charming places in Tennessee — an ancient enclosure surrounded by creeks and waterfalls. There will, forever, be unanswered questions about Old Stone Fort and its history. But I don't think there is any question that ancient Tennesseans were drawn to it mainly by its serenity.



**Sycamore Shoals** I've been to Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park (now there's a mouthful!) three times in the last two years and wouldn't mind going back. The best time to go there is when they have one of their summer outdoor dramas or living history events. But not long ago I went when there was nothing going on, just to see if I could successfully wade through the Watauga River (note to self: fast-moving shallow rivers are harder to cross than they first appear, and water in fast-moving shallow rivers is much colder than it first appears).



**Sewanee** Yes, it is a college campus, and a private one at that. But if you like pretty places, you should take a look at the University of the South and the area that surrounds it. It's one of the prettiest college campuses in the South, and there are some spectacular hiking trails nearby, along the rim of the Cumberland Plateau. And if

you like football but don't much care for big-time college sports, check out Sewanee football. No scholarships here; these kids do it because they love the game.



**Reelfoot Lake** Reelfoot Lake is not a short drive for many Tennesseans; it's at the extreme northwest part of Tennessee, which feels more like the Midwest than it does the South. Reelfoot Lake is really something. It is the only natural lake in the Volunteer State, and it doesn't look like anything else in Tennessee. The first time I saw the cypress trees growing in the lake, I waded in, not the least bit worried about snakes.

**Grand Canyon of Tennessee**

Our ancestors used to have quite the time getting in and out of Chattanooga, a city adjacent to the Tennessee River and cut off from Middle Tennessee by mountains. As for those who came through this area by raft or flatboat, they were in for quite the adventure once they got through the town. Downstream from Chattanooga, the Tennessee River is surrounded by high mountains on both sides. If you stay on the interstate you'll never see this, but if you leave (or enter) Chattanooga on Suck Creek Road, you can see what I mean. This area is so majestic it is known as the Grand Canyon of Tennessee



**Memphis Cotton Exchange** Years ago, I stumbled onto this place, which now contains a museum of the cotton industry. I can't think of a better way to learn what cotton, cotton-picking and cotton-trading have meant to the culture of Memphis and its surrounding area than to go there.



**Greeneville** I recently wrote a column about Andrew Johnson and pointed out that, in some ways, Greeneville hasn't changed that much since Johnson lived there. Obviously that's a bit of an exaggeration, but it is still a small town that seems content with its status in history. The different parts of the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site are scattered all over Greeneville, and they are worth a visit. ☺



**Tennessee History for Kids**

Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of "Tennessee History for Kids," an online Tennessee history textbook.

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