

ALTHOUGH YOU wouldn't know it by the traffic along the Great Smoky Mountains National Park's main thoroughfare, the Newfound Gap Road, the greater part of this most visited of the nation's parks, remains utterly wild and largely inaccessible by automobile. The Smokies have more than 800 miles of hiking trails, but even if you're not up to trekking through the woods on foot, there are miles and miles of back roads to explore as well—and most don't require going anywhere near the main park entrances.

One of the best is the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, accessible from downtown Gatlinburg, Tennessee. This one-way road meanders through a deep forest of hemlocks, tulip trees, chestnut oaks, maples and glossy-leaved magnolias. The understory is thick with giant rho-

dodendrons that cradle rippling and sometimes roaring streams.

Visitors can spend as little as an hour puttering along this route or as much as a day if they care to explore one or more of the many hiking trails here. A fairly strenuous six-mile round-trip trek will take hikers to the cascading water terraces of Rainbow Falls. One favorite hike is Grotto Falls. The trailhead is located about halfway around the Roaring Fork loop. This one-and-a-half-mile trail climbs 500 feet through a deeply shaded forest of virgin hemlock. Conifer needles cushion the rocky path as it winds through maples, ghostly beeches and silverbell trees. The trail is a treat because it passes right under the 25-foot-high Grotto Falls.

From the Grotto Falls trailhead, the road descends, following the original

roadbed of the 19th-century Roaring Fork community. Many historic Appalachian homes are visible along this route, including the two-room Ephriam Bales cabin and the more colorful Alfred Reagan house, home of a relatively prosperous farmer and entrepreneur, who owned a mill, blacksmith shop and store in Roaring Fork.

On the North Carolina side of the park, one of the best uncrowded places to explore is the Cataloochee Valley. Located just inside the northeastern border of the park, accessible off Interstate 40 at Exit 20 via Cove Creek Road, the Cataloochee Valley is a quiet alternative to the bumper-to-bumper traffic through the more popular Cade's Cove south of Gatlinburg. The valley is also home to the park's newest residents: Canadian elk, which you are most likely

to see here at dawn and dusk.

After zigzagging up and around a mountainous stretch known as the Cataloochee Divide, visitors will find themselves transported into an open valley of endless serenity—miles of rolling grass cradled lightly in the arms of blue-green mountain peaks. Like its sister Cade's Cove, the Cataloochee Valley preserves the remnants of a once thriving Appalachian community.

Palmer Chapel stands empty now along Cataloochee Creek, its doors opening to the forest instead of to the road, and up the hill behind the church lies a ragged cemetery, where graves marked and unmarked, sunken and new, bear the names of the valley's early settlers.

Also here is the Beech Grove School, operational in its heyday in winter, the only time when children could be spared from the fields. Today it stands empty among overgrown weeds and woods, a leftover desk or two turned askew on dusky floors, blackboards curling away in the humidity.