

Long Day's Journey into GATLINBURG

It's a good thing my wife Minna's SUV has a heavy towing capacity, because we have to tow a tanker truck behind us in order to have enough gas to make it to the next filling station. Another neat feature is the mapping gizmo that tells you how many miles you have before you get there. It's very handy when dealing with my 6-year old son Mick's questions from the back seat:

How many miles 'til we get there?

Forty-eight.

How many miles?

Forty-six.

How-

-Forty-four.

I can feel him glaring at the back of my head in silence.

We finally roll up to our rental cabin, which is pretty cool. It has a great view of Mount LeConte (C'mon, you've been to Gatlinburg!) and a hot tub on the deck. Of course my four rugrats start hollering let's get in the hot tub! the second the engine stops.

We put on our bathing suits (Except Minna. She ain't big on germs) and are joined by my sister Sally's three kids. So all eight of us tromp up to the top floor and I'm delighted to see that the hot tub is out in the open, in full 92 degree sun. And the previous users were kind enough to crank the thermostat to 104 degrees!

Have you ever wondered if it's

possible to sweat underwater? You can. While getting blasted in the eyes by Mick and cousin Joey with 50% chlorine water, as I lunge after 3-year old Josie, who keeps trying to fling herself over the rail and down the 50-foot drop off the back of the cabin. Aaahh, relaxation in the mountains!

The next morning it's time to venture into downtown Gatlinburg. And I'm in heaven, because only on "the Strip" at 10:45 in the morning can you get a foot-long corndog, a bag of homemade chocolate turtles, and browse through a Chinese knife gallery, all in the same block.

Mick and I wander around endlessly in the China Bazaar, gazing at the knives, swords, throwing stars, cross-bows and nunchuka. (We called them num-chucks when I was a kid, but the result was the same: Eventually smashing oneself in the crotch) Mick finally decides on a \$6.95 bootleg Wrist-Rocket slingshot, which I thought was a very sensible choice, but which Mommy only barely tolerated. (Sister Belle was later also less than thrilled, when Mick and I fired over half a bag of her jelly beans at birds off the deck of the cabin. The birds seemed unconcerned.)

Since we are adjacent to 521,085.66 acres of scenic wilderness in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, we figure we should check out some nature.

So of course we drive into the park and stop at this old WPA campground that sits adjacent to a "raging river" as my kids call it. (It may rage in April, but in late-July it don't.)


And there are a million gnats. Most of which cling to Minna's legs. And she don't like bugs.

Then Maddy runs up, screaming Mick's fallen into the raging river!

And turns out Mick has found the one legitimate "rapid" in the whole place, and then promptly fallen into it. (On purpose, I'm pretty sure) And he really is more or less being swept away. I turn toward Minna and she screams Well, jump in and get him!

But these are brand new shoes, I say, realizing that sounds pretty lame, even before I'm finished saying it. So I turn and prepare to lurch into the liquid-ice of the water, (Pretty sure that I'm going to snap an ankle and have to be saved myself) when, joyously, I see Mick get washed into a little eddy. He grabs a boulder and hops onto it like a little mountain goat. He does a Tarzan yell and beats his chest, then glances over at me and says, Don't have a cow, Dad.

I turn around and see not only Minna, but Maddy, Belle and Josie also, shaking their heads and pursing their lips at me. I turn back to Mick and shout, C'mon, son! We're going back to the knife store! ■



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