

TOWNSEND HIKING FAVORITES

Overview of Hiking Trails Easily Accessible from Townsend

This commentary is not intended as a trail guide, but rather a collection of personal insights and suggestions based on hiking experiences in and around the Peaceful Side of the Smokies. See trail guides and maps for locations and directions.

Tremont Area

Middle Prong Trail

Everybody's favorite. The ideal trail for beginners or folks who just want to have a good walk along a cascading stream. Trail head is at the end of a gravel road and large parking area, three miles from Tremont Institute. That drive itself is a very pretty outing, running along the stream the entire way.

The MP trail is an old railroad bed, beginning at a large bridge where the Lynn Camp Prong and Thunderhead Prong come together to form the Middle Prong. The trail runs 4.1 miles where it ends at an intersection with the Lynn Camp Prong Trail and with the Greenbrier Ridge Trail. The Greenbrier trail continues 3.5 steep miles to the AT.

An appeal of the MP is its flexibility. The first 3.5 miles rise very gently, making it an easy stroll for as little or as much as you want to do, doubling the mileage for the trip back to the trailhead. This is an excellent spring flower trail in late April/early May, offering all the usual species, but especially varieties of Trillium and Jack in the Pulpit.

There is a spectacular Cascade at about the 0.7 mile point from the Trailhead, complete with a log bench for pondering the rushing water. About 0.2 mile further is an overlook hanging out over the top of the Cascade.

Continuing to the junction with Panther Creek Trail makes a 2.3 mile easy hike with a total round trip of 4.6 miles.

From there the MP trail will narrow some, as will the stream. The next mile and half or so continue a gentle incline, though a bit rocky in places.

If you continue on the MP to its junction with Greenbrier Ridge, you will encounter a little steeper climb, though still not strenuous. There is a series of long switch backs in the slightly less than a mile section, but they are very gentle. Within the elbow of the third switch back, there is a man way that leads about 200 yards to Indian Flat Falls. It is not marked and easy to miss. Listen for the falls. Take caution on the manway. It is narrow and has a couple of tricky spots. A three layer falls tumbling down makes for a really stunning spot, ideal for naps and picnics. Definitely a first-rate destination hike, totaling an 8 mile round trip.

For the bold and hearty, continuing past the switch backs to the trail junction with the Lynn Camp Prong trail, then to the Miry Ridge Trail and back down to the Panther Creek Trail will connect you back to the Middle Prong. That loop totals about 14 miles.

Sam's Creek Man Way

This little travelled path is not on the map and is more a man way than a trail, but it is a pleasant stroll with a pretty picnic destination and some interesting fishing challenges.

The trail is not marked, but is easy to find at the Middle Prong trail head. Just after you cross the big iron bridge at MP parking area, and just before you pass the MP trail head sign, look for a well used path off to your right. Within about 300 yards, you will come to a single rail iron bridge that crosses Thunderhead Prong. Continue the path about a mile or a little less through the woods to a major stream crossing. This is a beautiful spot to nap or picnic. Probably should turn back here. The man way does continue, but eventually turns into a maze of paths and dead ends that can get you lost in a hurry.

In and out to the stream crossing totals just under two miles. The main feature is the total solitude of the walk. Sam's Creek and the adjacent Lynn Camp Prong are noted for native brook trout.

West Prong

This trail is accessed off the Tremont Road with a parking area on the right across from the Tremont Institute. An easy to moderate trail with a fairly steep climb for about the first mile, but not bad. Watch for a sign at the trail head that directs you on a short side trip to an old cemetery that is interesting and worth a look. After the first mile, it is down hill to campsite 18, a total of about 2 miles. The campsite is very pretty. Nice stream. A foot bridge. Great place for picnic or just resting or creek wading. One of the best places in the Park to hang an Eno hammock!

Hiking to the campsite and back is a nice 4 mile round trip with moderate climb both ways. Or if you use two cars, you can continue past the campsite for another .7 mile to connect with Bote Mountain Trail and take it down hill for 1.2 miles to Laurel Creek Road where you will hopefully have left a second car!

Spruce Flat Falls.

One of the park's best kept secrets. Not on any of the trail maps. It is truly one of the prettiest falls in the park. Park at the institute headquarters and walk the gravel road up hill to the institute dormitory to the beginning of the Lumber Ridge Trail. Follow it to the left a short distance to a path that leads off to the right. This is the beginning of the Falls man way. Distance to the falls is one mile via a narrow, fairly steep, rocky trail. Requires a bit of rock scrambling in places, but the end view is well worth it.

There are two over looks along the way which offer excellent fall color vistas. These same spots also host Laurel growths that offer spectacular encounters mid to late May. Also some limited growths of flame azaleas about the same time frame.

The falls are beautiful. Framed in rhododendron which enhances the view during blooming season mid to late June. Timing with rainfall has a dramatic impact on the water flow, but even at its lowest ebb, well worth the trip. Two miles total round trip.

Lumber Ridge Trail

Park at Tremont Institute. Walk up past the first big dorm building to Trail Head sign. This is a good trail that offers several options. You can hike it straight through to Elkmont, combining with Meigs Creek trail to the Jakes Creek junction at Elkmont, about a 10 mile hike and requiring two cars. Overall, a wonderful day hike with modest climb to a nice resting/picnic spot at the top of the ridge.

For a shorter outing, take Lumber Ridge four miles to Buckeye Gap for an 8 mile in and out round trip. In June there is a spectacular array of Mountain Laurel. Some nice vistas for fall color, looking west to Little Round Top.

Elkmont Area

Little River / Cucumber Gap Loop

Everybody's favorite. An easy five mile loop along a rushing stream for 2.5 miles, then another 2.5 miles back to the car through beautiful woodland. One of the very best wild flower hikes late April / early May. Lots of everything, including showy orchis down by the river, every kind trillium, jack in the pulpit.

Obviously you can hike the loop in either direction. A suggestion is to keep to the right as you enter the parking area and drive as far as you can through the old cabin area to a less used parking area that serves the Cucumber Gap end of the loop and also the Jakes Creek trail head. Park there, then walk back the way you came, down hill through the old cabins and start at the Little River trail head end. That way when you have finished the clockwise loop, you come out right at your car and don't have to trudge up that last half mile of paved road when you are finished and ready to plop.

Another option is to park at the Little River end and just walk the 2.5 miles to the Cucumber intersection and then back out. You get the same 5 mile distance, but virtually no elevation gain and it's all a pleasant, streamside stroll with lots of places to dabble your toes or sit and contemplate. If you want a longer walk the Little River Trail continues flat and easy past Cucumber Gap another couple of miles to the junction with Goshen Prong Trail for a total 8 mile round trip out and back.

Meigs Creek

This is a rewarding trail that starts at the Sinks and goes 3.5 miles up to Lumber Ridge Trail. First mile is quite steep with several switch backs that take you around to a point of looking back down on the Sinks, then loops around to the top of ridge, facing southwest. At this point the trail runs level for about 300 yards with a sandy, dry floor and lots of afternoon sunshine then goes downhill for about half a mile. It reaches the floor of the Meigs Creek valley and runs beside the creek. You cross the creek 18 times via rock hopping. Immediately after a heavy rain would create crossing problems, but otherwise, the hops are easy. At the fifth crossing, a little over 1.5 miles in, there is a very pretty small cascade, coming down into a small pool. Turning around at that point would total about three miles.

If you continue on, after the cascade you will climb again to reach the top of the ridge and connect with Lumber Ridge, at 3.5 miles. At that point, you can turn right and reach Tremont in about 4 miles or turn left and reach Elkmont in about 6 miles. Would require two cars, but would make a nice 10 mile to Elkmont or about 8 to Tremont. Or about seven miles to retrace your steps to the Sinks.

Curry Mountain

This is a good trail with very little traffic. It is generally wide with good under footing except for a couple of rocky places. Good vistas and a very nice Laurel growth that is spectacular in early June. An eight mile hike but mostly down hill or fairly level.

Best way is leave a vehicle at Metcalfe Bottoms picnic area and drive to Elkmont. Park at the back side of Elkmont, all the way back to the Cucumber Gap and Jakes Creek parking area. From there, walk up the 0.5 gravel road to the Jakes Creek / Meigs Mountain junction. (this will be the steepest part of the hike). From there, take the Meigs Mountain trail 4.1 miles to junction with Curry Mountain. This will be a pleasant woodland walk, mostly level or downhill with a few modest inclines scattered in the mix. You will pass campsite 20 enroute and have a couple of rock hops. Take the Curry Mt. trail downhill 3.3 miles to Metcalfe.

Laurel Falls

Probably the single most visited, most crowded trail in the park. It is the most easily accessed water fall and its closeness to the road (just 1.3 miles, partially paved!) make it appealing to the windshield crowd. It is, nonetheless, a very pretty falls and worth the effort to avoid peak visit times. Go very early in the day and you can enjoy the view without the crowds.

Here's a further suggestion...venture past the falls to some interesting options. You can walk 2.7 miles past the falls for a total of 4.0 miles to connect with Cove Mountain trail. There is an old fire tower at the top and a nice view over into Wears Valley. Turning back gives you an 8.0 mile roundtrip and you wont encounter any people past the falls.

By use of a second car, you can make this trail even more versatile. At 1.8 miles past the falls and 3.1 miles from the road, you connect with the Little Greenbrier trail, which offers an easy, mostly downhill hike to the road cutting through between Metcalfe Bottoms and Wears Valley....or another connection off that trail will take you past the Walker Sisters cabin which is a very interesting spot to visit and then on past the old school house and into the Metcalfe Bottoms picnic area. Either way requires some planning, but is relatively easy and makes for an interesting day hike. Consult a trail map to get all the connections right!

Metcalfe Bottoms/Walker Sisters Cabin

This is a short, pleasant walk from the picnic area at Metcalfe Bottoms that includes a visit to an old school house. The old school is interesting. Go through a gate at the north side of the school house and begin an easy walk of about 1.5 miles to the Walker Sisters cabin. You should read material about the family before you go....a very interesting story and gives good insight into life in the park area not so long ago. The cabin, barn, springhouse and grounds are still intact. Sitting on the front porch is a great spot for a picnic.

Along Laurel Creek Road Towards Cades Cove

School House Gap/Turkey Pen Ridge/Chestnut Top

From School House Gap Trailhead, you find a fairly easy trail with a couple of loop possibilities and other interesting intersect options. The trail starts off flat, following a small stream until you begin to climb a bit. At just over a mile, you will intersect Turkey Pen Ridge trail on the left. Turkey Pen offers a pleasant stroll through heavy forest, following a ridge line for just over 3.5 miles and bringing you back to Laurel Creek Road—but about two miles from the School House Gap TH. You need two cars.

Meanwhile, back on School House Gap, continuing past Turkey Pen, you continue to climb a bit and come to the Chestnut Top intersection on your right at the 2 mile point. You can turn around here and walk back down hill to your car for a 4 mile walk. You might go past Chestnut Top for about a half mile the Park boundary and look over into the Laurel Valley area, then return to go back down School House.

Another option is to take Chestnut Top down hill 4.3 miles to the Townsend Wye. That will give you a relatively easy 6.3 mile hike that is mostly level or down hill. Obviously you will need a second car.

In late April /early May, portion of Chestnut Top nearest the Wye is rated one of the top wildflower opportunities in the park. You can access that end of the trail by parking at the Townsend Wye and hiking about a half mile uphill until you run out of flowers and then turn back. The flowers are spectacular and worth the bit of climb.

Lead Cove /Finley Cane /Bote Mountain

The trailheads for Lead Cove and Finley Cane are at the same place on Laurel Creek Road. This makes for a simple loop by going up Lead Cove to intersect with Bote Mountain and coming back down to intersect with Finley Cane and take it back to the starting point. That loop totals about 7 miles. It is fairly unspectacular with not much scenery in the wooded sections. It offers a mixture of flora and terrain. The early part of Lead Cove has a couple of branch crossings that are famous for a variety of salamanders. If you are patient, you can find them around the crossing. In the fall, the Bote Mountain section offers some spectacular vistas of high peaks.

Bote Mountain Road

This trail offers a lot of options and serves as a connector between several trails. You can take it straight up to the AT. You can connect with the Lead Cove / Finley Cane loop as part of a seven mile loop. You can take the West Prong to Tremont. You can take Anthony Creek to Cades Cove. You can access the excellent vistas for high elevation color. Around 3 miles from the trailhead, there is an open area allowing you to look out to the mountain tops and get full effect of the color without hiking all the way up. There is a little path through the low buckberry bushes that provide access out to the open edge, just a few yards off the trail.

Lead Cove / Bote Mountain / AT / Rocky Top

Yes. There actually is a Rocky Top! Shortest way to access it is to take Lead Cove 1.8 miles up to Bote Mountain—a fairly steep climb. Turn right on Bote Mountain and take it to the AT at Spence Fields, then go north on the AT to reach Rocky Top, about a 12 mile round trip. A very tough hike but a spectacular vista with good bragging rights. Rocky Top can also be accessed via Anthony Creek trail, but the Lead Cove route is a mile shorter—and that means a lot on this trail!

Cades Cove

A word about the Cove in general. It is of course one of the most wonderful places in the Park. Much to see. Much to enjoy. Wild life viewing is a top attraction with bears, deer, turkey, coyotes and other critters spotted regularly. But it is very popular—if it were considered as a separate park, it would rank as the seventh most visited park in the country!

There are also excellent hiking opportunities accessible from the 11 mile Cove Loop. Abram Falls, Rich Mountain Loop, Gregory Ridge, Anthony Creek, Cooper Road, Rabbit Creek—plus the unique driving experience via Parsons Branch Road, said to be the closest you can come to hiking without getting out of your car!

Be aware this popularity can lead to challenges from a traffic and travel time standpoint, especially during peak seasons of summer and fall. Best bet is to get there as early as possible. Gate opens at sunrise. The spectacular views and historic sites make the challenge worth it.

Anthony Creek / Russell Field

Anthony Creek is a popular route to the AT, but it affords an excellent day hike choice as well. From the backside of the picnic area, you can hike for 1.5 miles to the junction with Russell Field Trail, a gentle climb that follows the creek, crossing two man made bridges and three rustic log footbridges, all pretty spots. After the second log bridge there is a wonderful resting rock in the shade.

At the trail junction you have a choice. You can turn retrace your steps for a nice three mile round trip. Or you can turn left and continue on Anthony Creek Trail, a 1.7 mile climb to intersect with Bote Mountain Road. You could then continue up to the AT, coming out at Spence Field. Accessing Rocky Top via this route is about a mile longer than the Lead Cove route.

Another option is to turn right at the junction on the Russell Field trail and continue another 3.5 steep miles to the AT.

You could actually continue about 3 miles over the AT to Spence Field, and hook up with Bote Mountain, come back down Anthony Creek and complete about a 13 mile loop. That's a long, tough day with a lot of elevation gain and a sawtooth route on the AT.

A shorter, easier option would be to take Anthony Creek up to the intersection, then take the Russell Field fork to the right for about half a mile up to Campsite 10 for a total of 2.4 miles one way, making a nice, just under five mile hike. The campsite is a great lunch spot with big stumps to sit on.

Rich Mountain Loop

This is an 8 mile loop starting just inside the Cove entrance that offers good views of the Cove and of the Laurel Valley area from the top. Taking the trip counter clockwise is considered by many as the best option. The first leg is a demanding climb of about 2.5 miles, passing the Crooked Arm cascade. If there has been substantial rain, the cascade will be impressive. In drier times not so much. At the top, you have a pleasant, fairly stroll for about 2.5 miles across the ridge top with views down into the Cove and into Dry Valley on the other side. You will pass the remains of an old fire tower site, an excellent picnic location. You will then have a down hill leg of about 2.5 miles to reach the Cove. You will pass the John Oliver Cabin and then finish the loop with a mostly level 1.7 mile section back to the starting place.

Cooper Road

This trailhead is about half way around the Cove. It is a long connector trail with several intersecting opportunities which could take you 10 miles all the way to Happy Valley or loop around through various connections to reach the back side of Abram Falls. A pleasant use of this trail is to just walk 2 or 3 miles and turn around for an easy, pleasant outing. There is nothing attraction wise other than a nice walk in the woods. It is a particularly good fall hike with lots of hardwoods and excellent color. Study of trail map will show various connection options.

Abram Falls

A very popular trail with a beautiful destination. A moderate hike leading to a terrific waterfall with a deep pool area. The falls is only 20 feet tall, but is wide across and more water by volume flows across it than any other falls in the park.

Round trip five miles. Much of the trip is along the stream side and there are some excellent fishing areas. Downside is its popularity which can mean substantial traffic during peak seasons. Best time to go is during the week and preferably early in the day. It is a must see spot and a good picnic area. Be careful of the rocks around the falls. Over the years 9 people have died there.

Gregory Ridge

Quite simply one of the best trails in the park. From top to bottom, you will experience everything the park has to offer. The pretty stream and flat woods of the lowland, the mixed flora and fauna of the mid elevation and the fantastic views and beauty of the bald on top. Make no mistake, this is a tough trail, but very much worth the effort. Average elevation gain is 800 feet per mile which includes the fact that the first mile or so has very little gain if any. That translates to steep! This is a dry trail so take plenty of water. You will need it! And remember you are winding up at high elevation, so layer your clothes for the warmer lowland and the cooler upper elevation. And anticipate rain at the top.

From the Gregory Ridge trailhead off Forge Creek Road, total distance is 5.5 miles to the Bald, Another option is to drive about 3 miles out the one way, high clearance required Parson Branch Road to the Gregory Bald trailhead. From there the trip to the Bald is slightly shorter and not quite as steep. Either way, it is a 11-12 mile round trip, mostly up and mostly hard. But don't be dissuaded by the climb. It is absolutely worth it. Forge Creek road is closed from late November until spring. Best time to go late June when the flame azaleas are blooming on the Bald. Fantastic array. Another good time is in early to mid October when the fall color peaks. Probably the number one color hike in the park....but you will have to time your trip to make it to the trail head ahead of the traffic.

