

## ARK & TENT



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info@arkandtent.com

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### TENNESSEE TAILS

*Animal Encounters in Sevierville, TN*

By Erin Caslavka

Mention the town Sevierville, and most people are likely to respond with a “Where the heck is that??” kind of look. But to the locals and visitors who head to the nearby Smoky Mountains and Dollywood, it’s the place they’re most likely to go if they want to do some outlet shopping or grab a bite to eat in a well-heeled dining establishment.

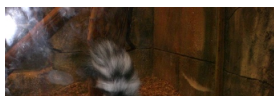
Sevierville (pronounced “*severe*-ville”) was named for John Sevier, one of the first settlers of Tennessee who gained notoriety for his heroics during the Revolutionary War. Its central location makes it an ideal base for exploring the area, which is part of the reason why staying there is attractive to so many. But if you just barely scratch the surface of what the city has to offer by way of flashy attractions and hotel options, you’ll also discover a handful of places where you can commune with nature and come face-to-face with an animal or two.

The following is a list of five local spots for “animal encounters” in Sevierville and the surrounding region:

1) Looking to enjoy nature literally right outside your hotel room door? Then **Five Oaks Riding Stables** is the place to do just that. Located on the parkway behind the Oak Tree Lodge, Five Oaks offers short trail rides that are perfect for ages 6 and up. Once you’ve been paired with a horse that’s reflective of your riding ability, you’ll head off into a wooded area just behind the parkway with a guide leading the way. The day we took our short ride, Penny (a moonlighting optometrist with a gorgeous mane of red hair all her own) entertained us with tales of the local mountains and a brief history of the area. It was a pleasant, relaxing way to spend an hour away from the bustle of the busy city.



2) In a location right next to the Nascar Cafe, **Rainforest Adventure Zoo (RAZ)** houses over 600 animals. Boasting some pretty exotic creatures (sugar gliders, serval, coatimundi and the red-eyed tree frog to name but a few), RAZ originally



started as a showcase for reptiles. These days, it belongs to a group that allows trades between zoos so they can participate in captive breeding programs. A 10,000-foot walk-through bird aviary delights young and old, and cards posted on the animals' habitats provide interesting info. (For example, did you know that a chinchilla can jump as high as 5 feet? Or that the African serval has 20 muscles in its ear?) The highlight for me, however, was when we were introduced to Jackie and George - two African porcupines that are just as lovable as they are dangerous-looking.

3) No mention of a trip to Sevierville - and nearby Pigeon Forge - would be complete without a tip of the hat to Dolly Parton and her enchanting resort, **Dollywood**. There's something very special and sweet about the homage to the "country life" she grew up with, situated near the mountains she adores. But aside from the stupendous rides and high-quality entertainment, you can also catch a show that animal-lovers will enjoy. Overseen by the American Eagle Foundation (AEF), "Wings of America: Birds of Prey" is presented in an indoor theater where audience members are wowed by the aerial acrobatics of a variety of raptors - among them, owls, hawks, vultures and eagles. The AEF is authorized to possess birds for education, exhibition, rehabilitation and breeding under special permits from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, so the birds in captivity are all handled with care. But the show is only part of the story, as the Dollywood complex includes not only the theater, but the Eagle Mountain Sanctuary, an eagle breeding and rehabilitation facility, and an eagle medical clinic and nursery (not open to the public). The Eagle Complex is a cooperative effort between the AEF and Dollywood, and the sanctuary itself houses more than 12 non-releasable bald eagles in a 1.5M cubic-foot aviary. Additionally, the nearby Breeding and Rehabilitation Center has been the home of numerous bald and golden eaglets that have been hatched (to permanent resident birds), and then released into the wild.



4) Having been to Peru and seen llamas up-close and personal at Machu Picchu, I was curious to see how they'd adapt to the environment at a much lower elevation and without the peaks and valleys they're used to in South America. I needn't have worried, as the llamas and alpacas kept by Sandy Sgrillo (aka the "Llama Mama"), are all quite content in their North American home. **Smoky Mountain Llama Treks** will introduce you to some of Sandy's llamas and alpacas - including Cinnamon, Africa, CoCoCo, Abu and others - while simultaneously introducing you to the local flora of the Smokies. We learned some facts about our two-toed pack animals as we crossed over streams and followed trails through wooded forest blooming with wildflowers in vibrant purples and yellows.



5) Who'd have thought that in the middle of Tennessee you could find a place to climb on top of an enormous ungulate? Though technically not in Sevierville, at the **Circle G Ranch Camel Safari** (located in Strawberry Plains), you'll still feel like you're miles from any place else as you enter the compound - which also sports a drive-through animal zoo and a petting zoo. With over 30 species of animals, you're likely to encounter more than your fair share. If you opt to take a ride on





camelback, remember that it will be a leisurely ride as camels don't like to have to run anywhere unnecessarily. Maybe it's because unlike any other hoofed animal, only the front of a camel's hoof touches the ground - which means that the bulk of their weight rests on their fleshy sole-pads. Just a little factoid to consider the next time you're atop one...

#### **FAST FACTS**

##### ***Circle G Ranch Camel Safari***

*831 Thorngrove Pike  
Strawberry Plains, TN 37871  
865-932-0070  
www.ridecamels.com*

##### ***Dollywood***

*Dollywood Lane  
Pigeon Forge, TN 38763  
800-DOLLYWOOD  
www.dollywood.com*

##### ***Five Oaks Riding Stables***

*1628 Parkway  
Sevierville, TN 37862  
865-453-8644*

##### ***Rainforest Adventures Zoo***

*190 Collier Dr.  
Sevierville, TN 37862  
865-428-4091  
www.rfadventures.com*

##### ***Smoky Mountain Llama Treks***

*865-428-6042  
www.llamahiking@aol.com*

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