Going for a Hike? Why not Tennesse?

Western Carolina is home to many hiking trails, some apparent, and others hidden away, but after hiking the same trails many times, visiting the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, just outside of Cherokee is a great place to find new trails that offer a variety of features, without being too difficult to traverse. A great trail, just outside of Gatlinburg is Laurel Falls.

Laurel Falls is just a five minute drive from the Sugarlands Visitor Center located on 441 about an hour past Cherokee. The trail is 1.3 miles, and terminates at the Laurel Falls waterfall. According to the National Park Service, the trail was originally a road that allowed fire crews an access point to Cove Mountain in the event of a forest fire. Due to this, the trail is fully paved up until the bridge that crosses the falls, making the trail one of the easier hikes in the area. The hike to the falls offers a great view of the Great Smoky Mountains, and smaller waterfalls along the way. For any geology enthusiasts, the trail also offers multiple views of the thrust-faulted rocks resulting from the impact of North America and Pangaea around 250 million years ago. This waterfall is one of the most popular in the park, and due to its short length, makes it great for families with children of all ages. Hikers will most likely encounter multiple families throughout the trail, and see young people of the area taking a cool swim at the trail’s end.

For the more adventurous hiker, one may continue past the falls, and go to one of only three remaining fire towers in the national park. This trail adds an extra 2.4 miles the hike, but the experience is worth the extra effort. At the beginning of the trail, hikers can choose to travel up to the apex of the mountain, or down to the base of the waterfall. If one chooses to hike down to the base of the falls, be careful as the ground is very loose, but there are lots of tree branches to use for support. However, if a hiker chooses to continue up the mountain, this trail is unpaved and more of a moderate hike, with the beginning from the waterfall being very steep. One thing noticeable while hiking along this trail will be the forests surrounding the area. After about a mile past the waterfalls, the forest becomes very thick as this area has never been logged, and has some of the oldest trees within the entire national park. While hiking to the top of Cove Mountain, hikers will cross the Chinquapin Ridge, where the path merges with a dirt road. This road leads to the sixty-foot Fire Tower, which is unfortunately closed due to safety concerns about the structure.

Overall, this trail is great for people of all ages. The first portion of the trail leading to the waterfall is not strenuous at all, with the trail’s grade gradually increasing. For hikers that want to go further, and separate from the families at the waterfall, continuing on the trail is both great exercise, and a great way to experience the natural beauty of the Great Smoky Mountains.