

Clingmans Dome, TN, 6,643 ft. – October 4, 2019, HP #27: On Another Border

Wednesday, October 2, after having worked all day I caught a red-eye flight from Salt Lake City UT to Greenville SC that night. Without stopping to sleep I drove directly to Sassafras Mountain, visited the highpoint, then carried on to the highpoint of Georgia. From Brasstown Bald GA, I drove to Great Smokey Mountains National Park. It was dark when I arrived at my reserved camp spot in North Carolina's Smokemont campground. By this point I had been traveling for 23 hours straight and I had been awake for over 38 hours. The neighboring campers were playing guitar and I worried they would keep me up all night, but they quieted down soon after I set up my camp. As exhausted as I was, sleep came quickly. It was close to 11:00 a.m. the following morning when I left the campground.

At noon, October 4, I arrived at the parking lot for Clingmans Dome having driven twenty miles from the Smokemont campground. I was disappointed to find the large parking area to be all but full. Perhaps I should have anticipated a crowd, after all it was a Friday in one of the most visited national parks in the country.

As I started up the half mile paved path, a steady stream of people was going up with as many returning from the summit. Even though I was here to reach the highest natural point in Tennessee the hike was almost exclusively in North Carolina.

Located on the summit of Clingmans Dome is a 45-foot-tall circular concrete observation tower. In reaching the tower via the paved trail, one momentarily enters Tennessee crossing over the 6,643-foot peak of Clingmans Dome. A few steps later, back in North Carolina, the sweeping 375-foot-long helical ramp to the observation platform is encountered.

Confusion lies around exactly which US state the observation tower actually resides in. Some sources claim it straddles the border between the North Carolina and Tennessee. Many sources, including the National Park Service avoid mentioning either state and instead utter that Clingmans Dome with its Observation Tower is the highest point in the Great Smokey Mountains National Park. However trusted maps show the tower to in fact be in North Carolina even if ever so slightly.



Evidently, in 1789 North Carolina gave up claims to its western region which later became Tennessee. The border was pronounced as running along the extreme height of the mountains. As such, by the letter of the law - sticking strictly with that definition of the border - I must conclude it fortunate North Carolina has two peaks clearly within its borders which are taller than Clingmans Dome. If that were not the case then we would have a situation where two states shared their highpoint.

The circular observation platform is 28 feet in diameter, offering audiences a 360-degree view of the surrounding terrain. From the platform, under the right conditions, one can catch sight of seven states - Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Built in 1959, Wikipedia states the tower was one of several observation decks constructed as part of an effort by the National Park Service to

upgrade its facilities to accommodate an influx of visitors to national parks during the post-World War II era. The urban space-craft-like design is oddly out of place in its wooded wilderness surroundings. Some have joked that the structure resembles a giant survey marker, marking the elevation of the highest point in Tennessee. Since the closest survey marker appears to be in the parking lot, conceivably that might even be accurate if only the tower were in Tennessee.

On the roofed observation platform at the top of the tower I asked a couple of people to snap a photograph of me. Again, as I returned to the trail, I had a park employee take my picture with the tower behind me as I stood in Tennessee.

Instead of descending entirely on the paved trail I headed over to the Appalachian Trail. I followed the Appalachian Trail down to the southwest for a bit before returning to the main trail. Maps show that section of the Appalachian Trail to be in Tennessee (not North Carolina), with it claiming a highpoint of 6,643 ft. along the Clingmans Dome summit.

With this being my first visit to Great Smoky Mountains National Park I had allowed time in my itinerary for another hike, as well as a second night in the park. The multiple day highpointing trip I was on is known in the highpointing community as the "Southern Six Pack." The Six Pack is a single trip consisted of bagging the highest natural point in South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina – completed in whatever order the highpointer decides. My next Six Pack highpoint would be Kentucky, but not until tomorrow afternoon as I had some more Great Smoky Mountains National Park hiking and camping to do.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/tjuUFF7WHf6DVU2NA>