

Believe It or Not!

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For the past two weeks I have related to you my experiences while touring Cades Cove during a visit I paid last August to the Gatlinburg area. After exiting the 11-mile Cades Cove loop road, disappointed in my lack of an ursine encounter, I returned to Gatlinburg.

I found a reasonably-priced parking space on the top level of a parking deck behind the Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies and rode the elevator down to street level. As I walked by some parked city buses that were collecting tourists for the next run through town, I considered buying a bus pass and riding one of them to the various attractions I planned to visit. I decided instead to walk since my destinations were not too far away and because I could use the exercise.

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Since it was getting late in the afternoon I decided to stop in at just two tourist spots – the Guinness World Records Museum and the Ripley's Believe It or Not! 'Odditorium.' When I was planning my trip a week or two beforehand, I considered visiting the aquarium as well but decided against it after catching a case of sticker shock - \$22.95. So, I walked right by it and hoofed it to the Guinness Museum.

At the ticket booth I noticed a sign indicating the offer of a combo ticket for \$39.95. This ticket included admission to the two museums as well as to the aquarium, all three of which are owned by the Ripley's corporation. Buying the ticket would save me \$6.00 off the admission price to the aquarium. I thought it over for a minute and decided to go for it.

In front of the Guinness Museum, even before entering, there is a life-size replica of Robert Wadlow, the record-holder for the title of world's tallest man, at least in modern times, that is. I guess ancient giants such as Goliath don't count.

With the push of a button the mechanical Wadlow rises from a seated to a standing position, all eight feet and eleven inches of him. With him in a fully standing position I came up to about his beltline.

Also in the museum is a replica of Robert Earl Hughes, who at the time was the world's largest known man, who at one point tipped the scales at over half a ton. A replica of his belt is also on display, all 122 inches of it.

For close to an hour I toured the museum, which featured the world's longest motorcycle. I exited the museum thinking that it was an okay museum but nothing special. My next stop, however, was

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I walked several more blocks until I reached the Odditorium, passing countless small shops along the way, several of which advertised fudge for sale. Every tourist trap I have ever been to has featured the obligatory fudge shops. I think there must be some sort of federal law that tourist areas must have vendors who offer fudge for sale. I detoured into several of them along the way but, you'll be proud to know, I withstood all temptations to buy.

We humans share at least one trait with cats – we are curious. That's why I travel to interesting places. That's why you are reading this article right now. That's why I decided to tour the Odditorium. We all have a certain degree of curiosity. Robert Ripley had it in spades.

Ripley traveled the world in search of the unusual, the bizarre, the singular, the unique, the very thing that causes the rest of us to stare in shock and disbelief. And over the years he gathered these items and brought them back to share with the rest of us.

Although Ripley is long dead, a hologram of him greets the curious visitor shortly into his visit. Of all the oddities that I saw in the aptly-named Odditorium, the thing that still sticks in my mind is an actual, genuine shrunken head picked up by Ripley from some deep, dark jungle somewhere halfway across the world. The display explains the actual process that the headhunters used to shrink the head, but I won't bore you with it here.

In addition to the shrunken head, the vast Odditorium includes ancient fossils, antique torture devices, optical illusions, a two-headed calf, as well as a horse sculpted entirely out of coat hangers.

After touring the exhibits for quite a while I reached a small vending area and thought that I had reached the end. I was pleasantly surprised when the attendant informed me that I was only about halfway through.

After about an hour and a half I finally exited Ripley's old curiosity shop, thoroughly satisfied with the tour. The admission price of \$14.95 was well worth it. I then walked the several blocks back to the aquarium. Did I mention yet that I passed a lot of fudge shops along the way?

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I have only visited two other aquariums (or is it aquaria?) before this trip, the mammoth National Aquarium in Baltimore and a fairly small one in North Carolina.

The aquarium in Gatlinburg is somewhere between the two in size. After I completed my self-guided tour I was glad that I had decided to buy the combo ticket. I won't gush over the aquarium in these pages but I will say that I was sufficiently satisfied with what they had to offer.

The best feature of the aquarium is the gigantic over-head water tank that perhaps could be described as a water park for fish. You can look up and watch the sharks, as well as other fish, including a swordfish, glide effortlessly just a few feet above you. In the ocean the only thing that you see on a shark is his dorsal fin. In this tank, however, you can almost count his razor-sharp teeth as he scoots by just over your head in search of prey. I wonder if he gave me any thought.

By the time I exited the aquarium it was time for dinner and a bed. I didn't want to be getting to sleep too late, for I had more early for the morrow.

Next Installment – Pickin' and Grinnin'