

MY TENNESSEE MOUNTAIN THEME PARK

IN SEARCH OF AMERICA'S KITSCH CORE, TOM HAWKING GOES TO DOLLYWOOD.

DOLLY PARTON'S WORLD tour will be making its way to Australia in November, but it kicks off in about a week's time in her home state – which, happily enough, is where I've found myself as part of a press tour for a few days. Sadly we're too early to see Dolly in the flesh, but in the end that doesn't really matter, because there's absolutely no lack of her in East Tennessee.

This part of the world owes much of its tourist dollar to two drawcards. The first is the spectacular Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which attracts some 10 million visitors a year. But America being America, only a small proportion get out of their cars and go hiking, so the rest need some entertainment to go with their car-bound nature-lovin'.

The majority of said entertainment, and the second drawcard, hinges on the fact that Dolly was born right here in Sevier County. The town of Pigeon Forge has evolved over the past 50 years from an obscure Appalachian hamlet into an alcohol-free mountain version of Las Vegas. It's a tourist town, home to a half-scale replica of the *Titanic*, the WonderWorks Upside-Down Mansion (which is, yes, an upside-down mansion), an Elvis museum, about a gazillion churches, some 5000 tourist-accommodating log cabins, and many, many things named after Dolly.

This includes, of course, the main attraction: Dollywood. The US is full of strange things, but there's nothing more quintessentially bizarre than a Dolly-themed theme park. Honestly – an entire amusement park based on the personality of the woman who, over the past 40 years, transformed the terminally hokey genre of country music into a lumbering, chart-destroying commercial behemoth. Of course, we *have* to visit.

To outsiders, the whole idea of Dollywood is both amazing and hilarious. A couple of years back, the *Financial Times* in the UK sent a reporter there to answer the question: is Dollywood one big kitsch joke? It was a question laden with several imperial tons of preconceptions, but we found ourselves wondering the same thing as our minivan made its way through the forest towards the gargantuan carpark.

Curiously, and unexpectedly, the answer to the kitsch query is a definite 'no'. The place is nothing like you might imagine – there are no Kenny Rogers wax models, no water attractions called 'Islands in the Stream'...not even a reference to her 1973 hit, 'My Tennessee Mountain Home'. It is an amusement park, plain and simple – and quite a good one.

We are met at the gate by a professionally exuberant park representative who shows us around the main attractions.



ILLUSTRATION BY MEL STRINGER

She leads us to the Thunderhead, a giant wooden roller-coaster, which we brave in the interests of journalistic scrutiny, leaving us feeling queasy for the rest of the day.

It turns out that the Thunderhead is child's play – the main thrill-seekin' attraction is something called the Barnstormer, a hellish giant pendulum-type thing that swings you through the air so that, from the peak of your trajectory, you stare down at the ground as it rushes up to meet you from 25 metres below.

Woo, and, indeed, hoo.

We take one look at the thing and decide to skive off in search of what we've *really* come to find: genuine Dollyesque kitsch. But, curiously enough, there isn't a great deal to be had. The park is designed to emulate the feeling of the country fair coming to Dolly's hometown in the 1940s. As such, it's laid out as a faux Appalachian village, decked out in a surprisingly dark and subdued palette of alpine greens and browns instead of the bright colours normally associated with theme parks.

There's bluegrass music piped everywhere, along with craft demonstrations, southern food aplenty, an on-site chapel, an on-site theatre and the *Dollywood Express*, a vintage steam train that consumes five tonnes of coal a day as it ferries people across the park. But as far as glitter and such things go, the sole concession to kitsch is Chasing Rainbows: the Dolly museum, a surprisingly pokey cinderblock building.

It doesn't look like much from the outside, and you could easily miss it, but Chasing Rainbows is the Dolly mother lode, home to a wealth of Dolly-related memorabilia: old photos, costumes, movie posters, magazine covers and awards, plus plenty of homespun wisdom about life, family and God. *Lots* about God.

There are some insights, such as the fact that Dolly's grandfather was a Pentecostal preacher (you could "feel the fires of hell" every time he unleashed a particularly militant sermon). And there are enough sequins and sparkles to satisfy the most ardent fan.

There's even an ancient proto-touch-screen computer where you can generate photos of yourself in Dolly's wigs. Charmingly, the material is presented with a genuine sense of affection and reverence, as if it comprised precious Egyptian relics instead of Dolly paraphernalia.

Like everything about Dollywood, the museum is inherently strange and yet played with a completely straight face; bizarre but curiously normalised. And that's the strangest thing about Dollywood: after a day there, the idea of a Dolly-theme park seems like the most normal thing in the world.

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