

## CLINGMANS DOME, HIGHEST POINT IN THE SMOKIES

The first day on the trail starts on Clingmans Dome, the top of Old Smoky. Clingmans Dome Road doesn't open until the first of April because of the likelihood of snow and ice. Even then, park management closes the road whenever it's concerned about the safety of visitors. If the weather is clear, you'll see the characteristic ridges upon ridges of the Southern Appalachians.

Standing on Clingmans Dome gives you an awe-inspiring 360-degree view that captures the heart of the Smokies. "At that location, you realize your hiking possibilities are endless," Great Smoky Mountains National Park superintendent Dale Ditmanson says. "One of the more intriguing hiking options is to embark on a quest for the coast on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. The trail is the result of a series of dynamic partnerships, which connects the wonderful resources, communities and stories of the people of North Carolina. While exposing hikers to the diversity of the North Carolina landscape, the trail's value will be significant in promoting the outdoors, whether by hiking the trail end to end or just walking a section in a local community."

In good weather, the parking lot is full of tourists. Some visitors are starting hikes, some sit in their cars but most walk on the outer edge of the parking area, taking pictures of the layers of clouds over the mountains. They're taking in breathless views without becoming breathless. Anyone carrying a backpack will be asked, "Are you doing the Appalachian Trail?"

"Only for a few miles. I'm doing the Mountains-to-Sea Trail through North Carolina. This is where it starts." And you're eager to get going.

You'll pass groups climbing the half-mile paved path to the Clingmans Dome tower. They're exhausted by the steepness and marvel at anyone carrying a backpack. At the intersection with the Appalachian Trail, the MST gets off the pavement and turns into the woods. But go up the tower to get its famous 360-degree view.

At this altitude, the environment is more like that of Canada than the southeastern United States. It's cold, wet and foggy much of the time. Fraser firs and red spruce, informally known as balsams, dominate the

landscape. Clingmans Dome is one of the few areas where Fraser firs grow wild, though they're cultivated on Christmas tree farms at lower altitudes.

On top, the forest looks like a ghost town instead of a green sea of trees. The balsam wooly adelgid, a non-native sucking insect, has attacked Fraser firs, making them appear like giant matchsticks. The insects, which look like white fuzzy cotton candy, were first noticed in the late 1950s on trees perched on mountaintops. Within a few years, most Fraser firs were dead. You can orient yourself with the help of signs set up around the tower. You won't be able to make out the Atlantic Ocean, but on the clearest of days, you might see Mount Mitchell.

Clingmans Dome was named for Thomas Lanier Clingman (1812–1897), a legislator and explorer in the Western North Carolina mountains. Before the Civil War, he served in the North Carolina State House and Senate and then moved on to the United States House and Senate. During the Civil War, he was a brigadier general in the Confederate army. Clingman is always shown with a full beard, wearing a bow tie on a white shirt. He was recognized as the first great booster and a one-man chamber of commerce for Western North Carolina. Clingman explored the mountains in the Mount Mitchell area and argued with Elisha Mitchell over who had first climbed the highest peak.

After Mitchell died in 1857, Clingman led a scientific exploration to the Smokies from Waynesville. The group of six men included Arnold Henry Guyot, a Swiss geographer who mapped the White Mountains of New Hampshire and was now going to do the same in the South. Guyot gained prominence for measuring altitudes accurately, using the best methods of the day. It's difficult to imagine how they managed to go to the top of the mountain; keep in mind that there were no trails or signs at that time. The explorers had to push their way through a tangle of vegetation to what was then called "Smoky Dome." Clingman made the arrangements and hired Robert Collins as a local guide. Collins cut a six-mile path to the top, which allowed Guyot to bring a horse. Guyot named a peak located on the A.T. and MST Mount Collins and renamed the dome after Thomas Clingman. The second-highest mountain in Great Smoky Mountains National Park is named to honor Guyot, but few people hike Mount Guyot since there's no trail to the top. [...]