

# SCRUFFY CITY

THE KNOXVILLE CASE FOR  
“MOST UNDERRATED  
CITY IN AMERICA”



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The cries of  
“Rocky Top” and the  
Creamsicle-orange  
color have always  
made my teeth grind.

Since then, Knoxville has become one of my favorite destinations and easily an unqualified pick for most

When the leaves started to turn this fall, I loaded up my car to make the three-hour drive from my house in Atlanta through the mountains to Knoxville, winding through the familiar curves of the highway. It's the best time of year to visit, thanks to the

After checking in, first-timers to the city should make a beeline for the Knoxville Visitor's Center — it's not as boring as it sounds — which plays host to the WDVX Blue Plate Special, a live radio recording with bluegrass and country bands. The city has long been a launching pad for artists to continue on to Nashville, so you never know who you might see.







Speaking of music, homages to the unofficial queen Dolly Parton are all over the city, including the mural in Strong Alley and the “Dolly for President” paraphernalia at [Rala](#), an Old City boutique that focuses on clothing and gifts from local makers. She’s one of the artists honored on the Cradle of Country Music Self Guided Walking Tour, honoring the radio station where she performed before hitting it big in Nashville.

The Sunsphere, constructed as a futuristic orb and tower for the World’s Fair, makes up the city’s unusual skyline and is viewable from all over town. While it’s one of the top things to see, it’s far from the only one. The [Museum of East Tennessee History](#) is the perfect primer to the region, with exhibits on Native American tribes, frontier life and the influence of the Tennessee Valley Authority. The [McClung Museum of Natural History & Culture](#) is full of oddities like fossils from around Tennessee and artifacts from ancient Egypt. The [Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame](#) is the only museum devoted to women’s sports in the world.

Knoxville sits at the confluence of the Tennessee, French Broad and Holston rivers, so water is an important part of the active lifestyle of the city. During football games, UT fans hit the

river in houseboats as an aquatic form of tailgating. My visit fell on a weekday, so, without my own watercraft, I went out with [Knoxville Adventure Collective](#), a kayak and paddleboard outfitter downtown.

These rivers have played a large role in the outdoors, as the Tennessee Valley Authority dams created the nearby lakes. The water was important for the quarries that once dotted the area. One of Knoxville’s limestone quarries is now [Ijams Nature Center](#), a sprawling urban wilderness with mountain biking, hiking trails, and paddleboarding on the calm water of the quarry.

After struggling up the one-mile loop to the top of the quarry, I went in search of sustenance. Knoxville may not have the big-name chefs of cities like Atlanta, Nashville and New Orleans, but the restaurants are the perfect primer to Southern food. I still think about the Tuscan chicken sandwich at [The Tomato Head](#), a restaurant well ahead of the vegan and specialty diet curve. [JC Holdaway](#) was the first in the state to earn a James Beard award. I had a lovely orecchiette ragu at [Emilia](#), named for the chef’s Italian grandmother.

Once it’s after hours in Scruffy City, get the password for [Peter Kern Library](#) — grab the code from their social

media or ask a hotel concierge — at the Oliver Hotel. It’s a speakeasy and one of the top bourbon bars in the country, featuring famous brands alongside Knoxville labels. While waiting to get in, I chatted with my new friend, the bouncer, who told me about the history of Market Square before I eased into a booth for the perfect Old Fashioned.

And a Knoxville visit needs to include a foray into its craft breweries, which rival Asheville with more than a dozen in a 100-square-mile radius. South Knoxville’s [Printshop](#) is across from the Tennessee River and features tap handles inspired by its former life. There’s also a mural honoring the passage of the 19th Amendment, women’s suffrage, by Paris Woodhull. In the Old City, [Pretentious Beer Company](#) owner Matthew Cummings is like the Willy Wonka of glassware, crafting artisanal containers to hold his equally quirky beer.

Back at the hotel, I packed up my car, already planning my next visit’s itinerary. Of course, I barely scratched the surface of Knoxville. I could have continued on to the Smokies or explored the surrounding counties along the Tennessee River. And while I’m not ready to don an orange T-shirt, the Scruffy City’s lack of pretension is something I can get on board with.