Tennessee SPECIAL SECTION

New Never GETS Old

TENNESSEE CONSTANTLY REIMAGINES ITSELF

BY ROBIN ROENKER

Knoxville's iconic Sunsphere

BY BRUCE MCCAMISH, COURTESY SUNSPHERE

From the beauty of the Smoky Mountains to the toe-tapping energy of Nashville's music scene, Tennessee has always offered guests plenty to enjoy. But the addition of new visitor experiences across the state means there's never been a better time to be Tennessee-bound.

Here, learn about new attractions sure to excite groups of all types, whether Elvis fans, history and architecture buffs, or animal and nature lovers.

90 for 90 Exhibit at Graceland Memphis

Throughout 2025, Graceland will celebrate Elvis Presley's 90th birthday in style with its new 90 for 90 exhibit. The yearlong showcase features 90 marquee pieces highlighting unique aspects of the legendary singer's life and career. Items on display were specially curated for the event from among the organization's more than 1.5 million artifacts.

The King of Rock 'n' Roll would have turned 90 on January 8, 2025, and the new 90 for 90 exhibit offers visitors a chance to view dozens of Presley's personal belongings that have never been publicly displayed.

The exhibit provides an intimate glimpse into Elvis's full life experience — from his beginnings in Tupelo, Mississippi, and his early career in Memphis, through his Hollywood and Las Vegas stardom, to his eventual return to Memphis before his death in 1977 at age 42.

Items like Elvis's Army suitcase, branded racquetball racquets, engraved nunchucks and the earliest known photo of the Presley family — taken around 1938, when Elvis was just a toddler — provide hints into the things Elvis cherished in private, behind all his fame.

The exhibit is on display at Elvis Presley's Memphis, a 200,000-square-foot, $45-million entertainment complex built in 2017 across the street from the iconic Graceland mansion — the property's largest expansion since it began offering tours in 1984. Access to the complex, which includes exhibit space as well as restaurants and shops, is included in the price of standard Graceland tour tickets.

Graceland will further mark Elvis's milestone birthday in 2025 with updates to visitor-favorite exhibits like Elvis: Dressed to Rock, a collection of Elvis's elaborate stage wear. Those who can't make it to Memphis this year may want to plan ahead for a visit in 2027, when Graceland expects an even larger celebration to mark the 50th anniversary of Elvis's passing.

GRACELAND.COM

The new Clayton's Landing at Gatlinburg SkyPark

COURTESY GATLINBURG SKYPARK

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Enjoying the view at Gatlinburg SkyPark

COURTESY GATLINBURG SKYPARK

Graceland's 90 for 90 exhibit

BY JULIAN HARPER, COURTESY GRACELAND

Clayton's Landing Gatlinburg

Just above the busy Gatlinburg strip, beyond the bustle of the city's popular shops and restaurants, a quiet new oasis welcomes visitors to revel in the beauty of the surrounding mountains.

Unveiled in December 2024, Clayton's Landing represents a groundbreaking expansion to the iconic Gatlinburg SkyPark, in operation since 1954. The new, 10,000-square-foot mountaintop space features firepits and seating for more than 230 people, offering the perfect spot to relax and unwind.

"We think of it as a viewing park, where you can just sit in our rocking glider chairs and enjoy yourself for as long as you'd like," said Kristen Lodge, vice president of sales and marketing for the Gatlinburg SkyPark.

The new area also includes a 1.5-mile hiking trail, which can be enjoyed as a self-guided experience or during guided nature walks.

As the first construction development on the west side of the park's popular SkyBridge, the expansion also includes Smoky Mountain Smash, a burger restaurant, and a new drink spot called Sips, which will sell beer and non-alcoholic slushies once it opens later this summer.

Access to Clayton's Landing is included in a SkyPark general admission ticket, and Lodge recommends allocating roughly two hours to enjoy all there is to do on site — from taking the initial SkyLift 500 feet up Crockett Mountain and enjoying the viewing platforms on the park's 70-foot Tulip Tower to walking across SkyBridge, the longest pedestrian cable bridge in North America.

Groups can work with Lodge to reserve a private, roped-off section of Clayton's Landing for their exclusive use.

"It's a great home base since it allows visitors the option to just sit and relax and enjoy a drink, go for a little hike or go grab lunch," she said.

GATLINBURGSKYPARK.COM

Sunsphere Welcome Center Knoxville

Built as the hallmark structure of the 1982 World's Fair, the 26-story-tall Knoxville Sunsphere holds a special place in the city's history. The structure's 75-foot-diameter sphere, constructed of 360 panes of 24-karat-gold-coated glass, is hard to miss.

Today, the eye-catching icon continues to provide a one-of-a-kind architectural beacon for visitors to the area — a role that's been elevated thanks to the unveiling of the site's new welcome center in November 2024.

Accessible via the Clinch Avenue entrance, the new welcome center on the Sunsphere's third floor includes a gift shop and access to brochures and knowledgeable Visit Knoxville staff, who can help guests plan stops in the area to explore.

Visiting the welcome center is free, but there is a fee to go up to the Sunsphere's refurbished fourth-floor observation deck at the base of the ball. There, guests can enjoy panoramic views of downtown Knoxville and the University of Tennessee campus, plus the surrounding Smoky Mountains.

The refreshed observation deck also features new interactive video boards with information and maps spotlighting local attractions. Additional exhibits share the history of the Sunsphere and highlight products and innovations that emerged from the 1982 World's Fair, including Cherry Coke and touchscreen technology.

The new welcome center and observation deck upgrades are part of a years-long restoration of the historic Sunsphere structure, which underwent a painting upgrade in late 2023 to restore the base to its original blue color.

"There are people who travel all around the world to visit monuments from the World's Fairs, including the Eiffel Tower and the Seattle Space Needle," said Kim Bumpas, president of Visit Knoxville. "It's a big deal. That's why we're celebrating it."

WORLDSFAIRPARK.ORG/SUNSPHERE

The Sunsphere observation deck

BY BRUCE MCCAMISH, COURTESY SUNSPHERE

The new Sunsphere Welcome Center

BY BRUCE MCCAMISH, COURTESY SUNSPHERE

The Arcade in Nashville

COURTESY NASHVILLE DOWNTOWN PARTNERSHIP

The Sunsphere overlooking downtown Knoxville

BY BRUCE MCCAMISH, COURTESY SUNSPHERE

The Arcade Nashville

Following two years of renovation, a new multiuse destination set in an iconic Nashville landmark is debuting in 2025.

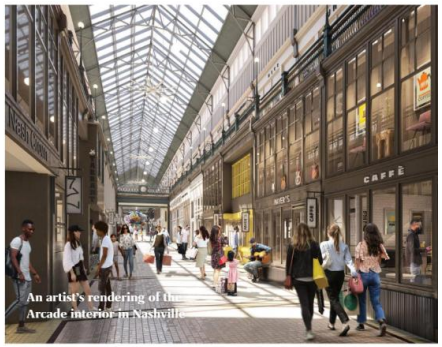
The Arcade, a five-acre, two-city-block space in the heart of downtown, is reopening this year with a mix of restaurants, bars and retail spaces. Built in 1902 and modeled after the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan, Italy, The Arcade expects to include roughly 30 tenants once it is fully renovated.

According to reporting by The Tennessean, New York-based real estate firm Linfield Capital partnered with local investors to purchase the languishing property in 2021 for $28 million. Developers have since worked with Dryden Architecture to restore it. Already, some new tenants — like Urban Cowboy Bar, Ugly Bagel, and Flea Style, home of The Original Hat Bar — are in place. Others, like Beignets & Brew and Playa Bowls, are still to come.

Meanwhile, some longtime local business residents, like Percy's Shoe Shine Service, are also staying on, and the second floor will continue to hold a series of small art studios able to host a rotating series of artists-in-residence.

Once complete, the site hopes to become Music City's newest mainstream attraction, joining the ranks of must-visit stops like The Grand Ole Opry, Ryman Auditorium and the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

THEARCADENASHVILLE.COM



An artist's rendering of the Arcade interior in Nashville

COURTESY NASHVILLE DOWNTOWN PARTNERSHIP

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Chattanooga Zoo Cape of Africa Expansion Chattanooga

Chattanooga Zoo, always a family favorite, has even more to enjoy thanks to its August 2024 addition of the new Cape of Africa section. The $3.9 million expansion — the largest in the zoo's history — gives visitors the opportunity to experience several African species not previously represented on site, including the Cape porcupine and the Aldabra giant tortoise, plus servals, caracals and common warthogs.

The expansion also includes a new 20,000-square-foot giraffe yard that provides an expanded outdoor area for the zoo's four giraffes — George, Porter, Hardee Star and the newest addition, 14-month-old Kuzco — to enjoy.

"This new space is what has enabled us to grow our giraffe herd, which was always part of our overall plan and goal with the expansion," said Jake Cash, director of marketing and communications at Chattanooga Zoo.

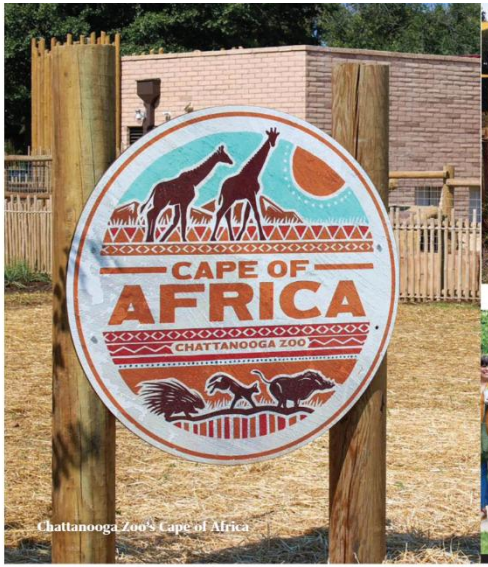
The Cape of Africa section aims to help visitors feel as if they've been transported to Africa through authentic imagery, colors, textures, sounds and iconography that harken to the African Savanna.

Each animal's new habitat was custom-tailored to fit its unique needs, from desert-like settings for the cape porcupines to shallow, muddy pools for the warthogs. The expanded area also includes a new group and field trip entrance, water features, and enhanced areas for keeper talks and other interactive education encounters. The zoo also now has a special platform where guests can feed the giraffes Wednesdays through Sundays.

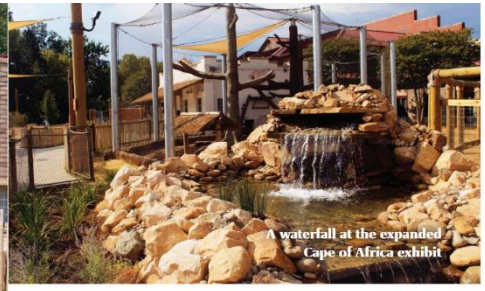
The zoo plans to add a new on-site veterinary hospital, tentatively scheduled to open in 2027, that will give visitors a chance to see animal care in action through publicly accessible viewing windows.

"At Chattanooga Zoo, one of our main goals is to connect people with wildlife from around the globe," Cash said. "The new Cape of Africa section features ample up-close viewing opportunities, plus other special experiences — like giraffe feedings and encounters with animals like meerkats and red pandas — that offer once-in-a-lifetime moments."

CHATTZOO.ORG



Chattanooga Zoo's Cape of Africa


A waterfall at the expanded Cape of Africa exhibit

A serval training demo

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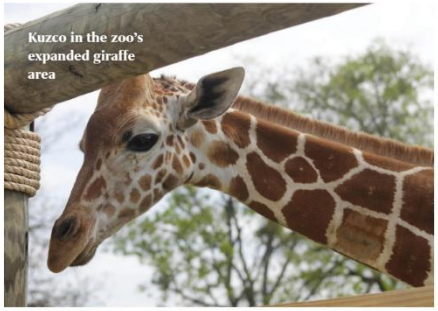
Kuzco in the zoo's expanded giraffe area

An African warthog

PHOTOS COURTESY CHATTANOOGA ZOO

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