

Pick the Perfect Cabin

It's the ideal time of year to get away. Follow our guide to choosing the right one for you.

Head to Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, this month, where the rates are low, availability is high, and the crowds have thinned, leaving you the space and peace for a quiet getaway.

Here's the only rub: picking your cabin. With more than 100 rental companies and more than 1,000 cabins in Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, choosing from so many options can be a bewildering task. Here are a few tips to pick the winners from the rest.

1. Know the system. Most rental companies manage dozens or even hundreds of cabins. Everything about them can vary widely—most notably price and quality. Companies have a contractual obligation not to favor some properties over others, so the due diligence is up to you.

2. Define your priorities. What's more important to you—a pool table or a stunning view? Proximity to town or privacy? A great bargain or a spectacular cabin? If you have a preference, name it. Be specific when you talk to a rental manager, and be prepared to make a few trade-offs.

3. Seek recommendations. Great Smoky Mountains National Park gets more than 9 million visitors a year, so chances are good that you know someone who has rented a cabin there. Their opinions are invaluable

because the photos and descriptions on rental companies' Web sites don't always match the reality. Ask friends, relatives, and colleagues where they've stayed and how they liked each place. Some of them might have photos they can show you. Visit southernliving.com/features to find our stories and recommendations.

4. Use the *Southern Living* forum. Here's one wonderful resource we provide to our readers: other readers. Members of our online community have a wealth of knowledge and love to help one another. Visit <http://community.southernliving.com/>, and post a question on "Weekend Trips," one of our online message boards about travel. You'll be surprised at the answers and helpful suggestions you'll get. You may even have a tip to share yourself.

5. Search the Web. This sounds like a no-brainer, but you must think beyond Google (that is, unless you have the time to go to more than 700,000 Web sites). Cabins.com has a limited selection of cabins, organized by state and town. Visit www.tripadvisor.com to see ratings and reviews written by ordinary folks. They are not shy of dishing, in great detail, every wonderful experience and every nitpicky problem they encountered during their stay.

KIM CROSS

SOME OF OUR FAVORITES

We can't vouch for every cabin these companies rent, but here are a few of our picks.

■ **Eagle's Ridge Resort** (www.eaglesridge.com) boasts a development of hundreds of log cabins in Pigeon Forge. The cabins are individually owned, yet they are all similar in character and quality.

■ We liked **Mountain Laurel Chalets'** (www.mtnlaurelchalets.com) higher-end cabins, including Woodsong (pictured here) and Three Suite Retreat.

■ We also have enjoyed staying with **Jackson Mountain Homes** (www.jacksonmtn.com).

Know of a great cabin in the Smokies? Tell us about it! E-mail kim_cross@timeinc.com. For more information visit southernliving.com/features.



PHOTOGRAPHS: ADAM BARNES

above: If you want to enjoy wine in Pigeon Forge, bring your own. You can only buy beer here. **left:** Ask for recommendations to find a great cabin such as Woodsong, rented by Mountain Laurel Chalets.