

## Fantasy Vacation

My three sons are each old enough to rejoice if Mom and Dad will take a vacation without them. But because I still have two little Chihuahuas that pine away when I'm gone, I rarely go anywhere, for any length of time, without them. Finding vacations that can include pets is a bit tricky. The Caribbean is out. My dogs like to yap – at anyone and everything – so I'm not sure how other airplane passengers would react to them.

In fact, any place that involves a beach most likely wouldn't work. Dogs think that beach sand is for one thing only, and it's not sunbathing. They don't appreciate the big waves, and shells don't interest them.

The doggies might like a cruise – they'd get into the whole pampered atmosphere - but that wouldn't work for me. I'm literally scared to death of being out on the ocean... *and sinking*. Guess I saw Jaws, Orca, and Beast (about the giant killer octopus) too many times, huh? I get shivers just going to the aquarium, where all the big fish are behind glass, mocking me with their bulging eyes.

But now, seclusion on land, nature, no laundry to do and no phones to answer, that appeals to me. And that makes Gatlinburg, Tennessee one of my favorite places to visit. I love hiking the mountains trails, taking in the incredible scenery, locating wildflowers, unearthing salamanders under a log, and just plain breathing the fresh air.

Forget hotels – I always choose one of the small cabins complete with a hot tub on the back deck, facing the woods. With the linens supplied, a comfy queen sized bed and a DVD player with movies galore, hey, what more could I want? I get exercise and fresh air during the day, the hot tub to unwind, and movies to engross me so I don't get distracted plotting out a new book. And trust me, I'm almost always plotting. It's a bad habit that writers fall into.

My husband loves the mountains, and the dogs enjoy being carried while we explore. Since they only weigh 6 pounds each and we have those strap on contraptions (like moms use for their babies), hauling them around is a piece of cake.

And shops! *Love* the shops. At least one day of the trip is spent going from gallery to restaurant to store to boutique. From homemade fudge to artwork, to clothes and knickknacks, Gatlinburg has it. Some of my favorites are The Donut Friar, with freshly made donuts and cinnamon bread, The Honey Pot with everything from painted glassware to pottery, Candle Cottage with every scent and shape candle you can imagine, and finally, The Hofbrauhaus Restaurant, where I can finish out the day with a bratwurst and sauerkraut.

One word of advice: when you get to Gatlinburg, don't be taken in by the many signs for boiled peanuts. Last summer, my sister insisted that she just had to try them. Trust me when I say, they're nasty, nasty, *nasty*.

Everything else in Gatlinburg is sure to please you as much as it does me, and as much as it did the characters of my book. Go, and have fun!