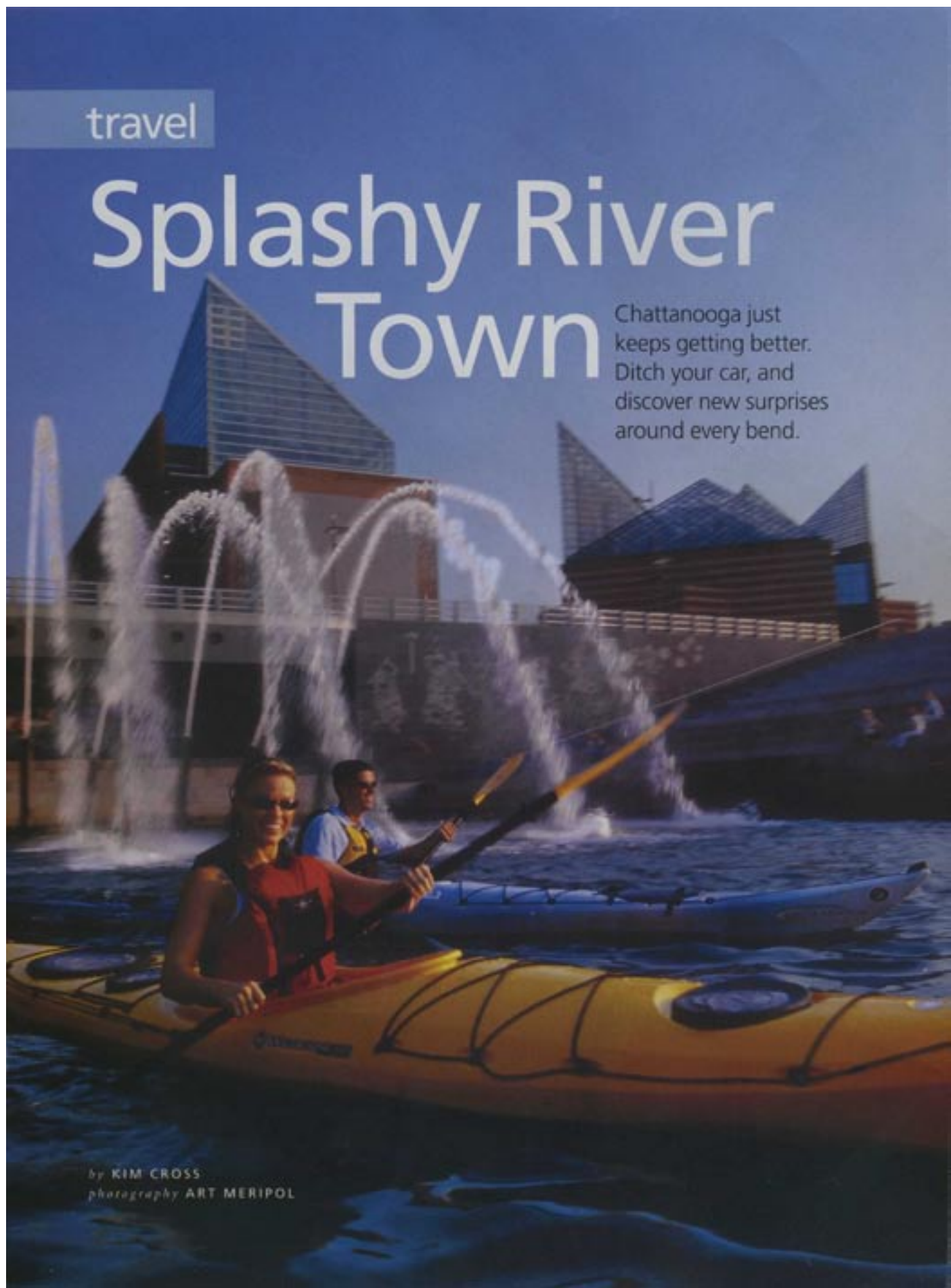


travel

Splashy River Town

Chattanooga just keeps getting better. Ditch your car, and discover new surprises around every bend.

by KIM CROSS
photography ART MERIPOL





left: The fountains of The Passage arc into the river beneath the unmistakable skyline of the Tennessee Aquarium. top: This stunning steel-and-glass bridge links the Hunter Museum of American Art with the waterfront. above, left: Blue Plate serves dressed-up comfort food made from scratch. above, right: The cascading stairway of The Passage is the nation's most elaborate memorial to the Trail of Tears.

Take a walk down Chattanooga's Riverfront to meet a city that dared to dream big. Fountains meander around buildings like streams. Outdoor art enlivens every step from the aquarium to the art museum. Families gather on the banks of the Tennessee River, where live music spills from a floating stage. People are walking, talking, smiling at strangers, crossing the river on a sky blue footbridge. This is what every city strives to be: a safe haven, a vibrant gathering spot, a place where people want to bring their kids and dogs and friends. This is the new Chattanooga.

Rebirth on the Riverbank

Unveiled in May 2005, Chattanooga's Riverfront has been heralded as a model of urban renewal. Its scenic network of

parks and pathways links restaurants, shops, and family attractions along the river. Where slabs of concrete once lined the bank, grassy terraces cascade toward the water, a soft and scenic gathering spot for sunsets and special events. During concerts, this serves as an amphitheater. Kayakers paddle to the best seat in the house while boats tie up to the pier.

Visitors kick off their shoes and splash barefoot down the waterfall stairs that meet six fountains arcing into the river. This is **The Passage** (see map on page 28), a special place that honors those who gathered here before embarking on the Trail of Tears. Cherokee symbols engraved in seven bronze discs tell their story.

Nearby, established attractions reveal their own extreme makeovers. **The Tennessee Aquarium** doubled its size in



Kids love cooling off among the playful statues and fountains in Coolidge Park. The carousel waits nearby.

2005 with a new saltwater wing. (It formerly featured mostly freshwater fauna. Now it boasts a shark tank, a butterfly garden, and a penguin exhibit.) ● **Creative Discovery Museum** expanded with dynamic exhibits for kids. ● **The Hunter Museum of American Art** grew into a spectacular metal flower of a building with a new wing designed by ultra-modern architect Randall Stout. Inside, its interactive exhibits and plain-English guides have made it easier to “get” fine art. This award-winning building connects with the waterfront via sculpture-lined paths and a stunning bridge of steel and glass that lights up at night, an architectural marvel in itself.

A Story of Hope

To appreciate the city's transformation, consider its past. In 1969, Walter Cronkite declared Chattanooga the nation's dirtiest city. Soot from the iron mills stained the air. The river was tainted; its banks an industrial wasteland. “All we had was hot pavement with litter blowing across it,” remembers former mayor Bob Corker, a Chattanooga who envisioned what his city could be. Now a U.S. Senator, Corker set in motion a plan for a cleaner, greener, friendlier Chattanooga.

Even before Senator Corker got involved, the rebirth started with the 1992 opening of the Tennessee Aquarium, which drew more than 1 million visitors that first year. Restaurants, shops, and attractions sprang up like wildflowers around a



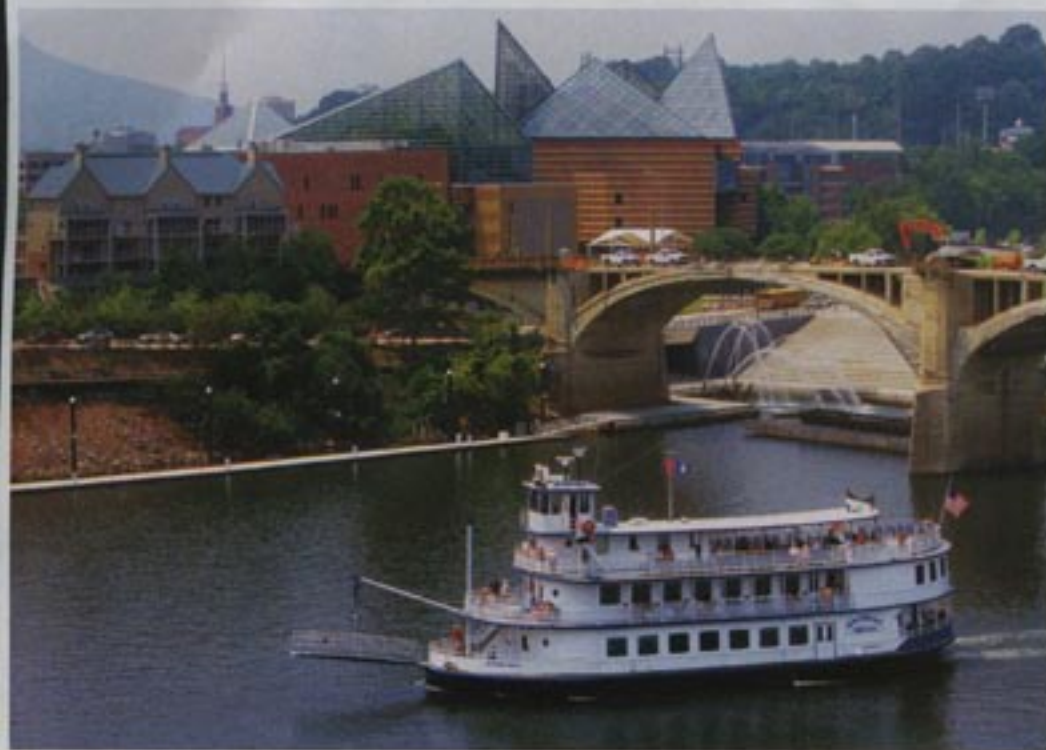
Clumpies Ice Cream Co., a quaint parlor on the North Shore, remains a local favorite for homemade ice cream.

stream. ● **The Bluff View Arts District** flourished into a neighborhood of galleries, bistros, and bed-and-breakfasts, all tucked in historic homes on the river bluff.

The energy spread across the river to the North Shore, where cafes and shops popped up along Frazier Avenue. Family-friendly ● **Coolidge Park** came alive with children splashing around a giant fountain and riding a refurbished carousel, whose fanciful beasts were hand-carved locally. The Walnut Street Bridge, built in 1891 and condemned in the 1970s, was saved and restored as a pedestrian bridge that spans the river. “We’ve connected our city so people can walk,” says Senator Corker, who helped raise \$120 million to complete the city's transformation in just 35 months. ▶

Reasons To Come This Month

- The Chattanooga Symphony & Opera plays under the stars during Pops on the River on July 3. Spread a picnic blanket on the grass at Coolidge Park, and stay for the fireworks show.
- Also in the park, see free movies at 9 p.m. every Saturday in July.



Where To Stay

The Hilton Garden Inn, Residence Inn, and Courtyard by Marriott sit very close to the Creative Discovery Museum and the Tennessee Aquarium. Escape the crowds by staying at the Chattanooga Hotel, a modern conference hotel with a spa, pool, and several restaurants. It's 13 blocks from the aquarium. Couples should stay at the Bluff View Inn, a B&B in the arts district.

Walkable Downtown

Making Chattanooga pedestrian friendly was the smartest move of all. Parking can be tough during big events, but you can push a stroller everywhere. Most of the attractions lie within a 5- to 15-minute walk from the aquarium. (A sidewalk elevator carries wheelchairs and strollers up a steep hill.) The new water taxi ferries visitors across the river for \$3, and a free electric shuttle stops by the Chattanooga Choo Choo, restaurants, the Sheraton Read House Hotel, and the aquarium. Joggers and cyclists cruise the 13-mile Riverwalk that extends from downtown to the Chickamauga Dam.

An utterly inspiring turnaround, Chattanooga proves that a vision, a plan, and a community that cooperates can make big dreams happen. We hope other Southern cities on the rise will dare to follow its footsteps.

Chattanooga Convention and Visitors Bureau: www.chattanoogaofun.com or 1-800-322-3344.

For More Info

Chattanooga Editors' City Guide:
editorscityguide.com



Our Favorite Stops

Some new, some blue, some tried and true, these shops and restaurants keep us coming back again and again.

The Blue Plate puts a modern spin on the diner with blue-toned booths and a full bar. Every dish is delicious, affordable, and made from scratch. Try the Maytag blue cheese potato chips, fish tacos, and mind-bending milk shakes. **Bluewater Grille** flies in fresh seafood from the Gulf every week. Try the lobster tacos and the sashimi-grade ahi tuna. **World Next Door** sells fair-trade gifts such as colorful beach bags, made from recycled materials, crafted by disenfranchised Cambodians. The artisans name their prices, so you know your gifts are giving back. **Clumpies Ice Cream Co.** is a local favorite for tasty ice cream. The mint chocolate chunk makes us melt. **Food Works Riverside** serves trendy power lunches in a stylishly revamped warehouse on the North Shore. **Blue Skies** is one of the best boutiques in town, with purses, jewelry, and gifts. **Rock Creek Outfitters, Inc.**, sells gear for hiking, paddling, camping, and rock climbing. Ask their staffers about their favorite trails.