

Words by
Beth Williams

I'm on an eye-catching pink bus with a Priscilla-style interior, being entertained by two heavily made-up women; big hair, gaudy pink jewellery, matching denim outfits. They've just reeled off a string of big-breast jokes and, since we're in Nashville, Tennessee there really can be only one person they're referring to...

Dolly! She almost needs no introduction, such is her larger-than-life persona. Singer, songwriter, film star, writer, businesswoman, figure-head to a children's literacy scheme... the list goes on. Dolly Parton has her painted fingernails in many pies and, even though it's 50 years since she recorded her first single, she shows no sign of slowing down, with the February release of a new album, *Backwoods Barbie*, and a 2008 world tour to come (www.dollypartonmusic.net).

The question remains, however; what is it about Dolly Parton that captures our gay sensibilities? Is it that trashy-but-flashy ("It costs a lot to look this cheap") image, matched with her gravity-defying

bosom? Or, is it because she has hauled herself up from humble beginnings to become one of the most remarkable women in show business? Either way, she's got our attention.

And she certainly had my attention two days before the Nashville pink bus ride, when I found myself looking at a ten-foot high Dolly face and bosom. No, I wasn't hallucinating about a gargantuan drag act; I was looking up at a billboard in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and I was about to enter Dollywood.

If the huge billboard is anything to go by, Dollywood should be as camp as several rows of tents. My expectation was to see smiling Dolly faces everywhere; visitors in blonde wigs and rhinestones, with that sweet, Country voice warbling throughout. But Dollywood isn't like that. True, it *is* there if you know where to find it, but this theme park places more emphasis on Dolly's Smoky Mountain roots than it does on the Dolly of show business and glamour. Dollywood

NASHVILLE

TENNESSEE 36° 10' N 86° 46' W

Mystery Mine, Dollywood

is a celebration of the community in which she was raised and pays tribute to the local people, showcasing the area's centuries-old crafts and trades, from wagon production to taffy making. It offers a vast array of Southern foods, and an equally extensive array of themed rides, all influenced by the natural surroundings – Mystery Mine, Timber Tower, Beaver Creek. Plus, there's a programme of live Country music every day.

Now, I have immense respect for Dolly's roots as well as for the way she's helped generate employment in the area through her involvement with this tourist attraction. However, shallow as it may be, I wanted Dollywood to serve me a massive dollop of Dolly the superstar. After two hours of mountain industries and gift shops selling quilts, candles and American eagle figurines – with no sign of Ms Parton's popular appeal, other than a few cheesy postcards – I began to feel despondent. What I should have done is what any LGBT person with any sense would do, and look for the rainbow.

Situated in a town-square opposite a clothes store called Dolly's Closet – where you can buy 'Dolly's style in your size' – Chasing Rainbows, the Dolly Parton Story Museum, is *the* place to find a celebration of her sweet Southern celebrity. Now surely they had the gay community in mind when they named these two attractions?

Inside Chasing Rainbows, the walls are crammed with photos, personal notes, calendars, posters and discs, all documenting Dolly's



CHECK OUT

Moonshine Cabin

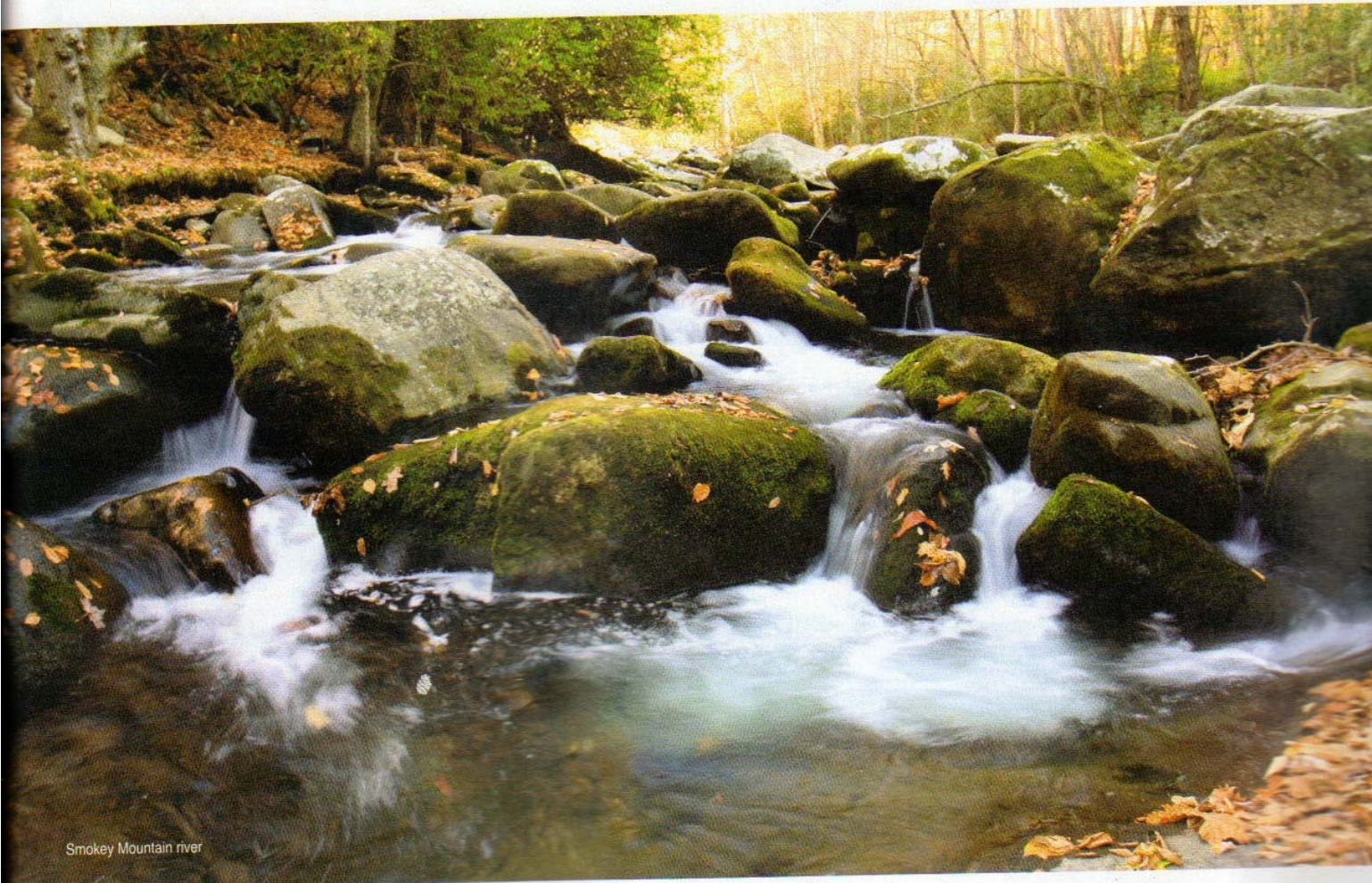
The gay-owned Moonshine Cabin sleeps six and boasts games room, hot tub and bar-beque as well as privacy and comfort. Spectacular views guaranteed unforgettable Smoky Mountain memories.
www.moonshinecabin.com/

Union Station Hotel

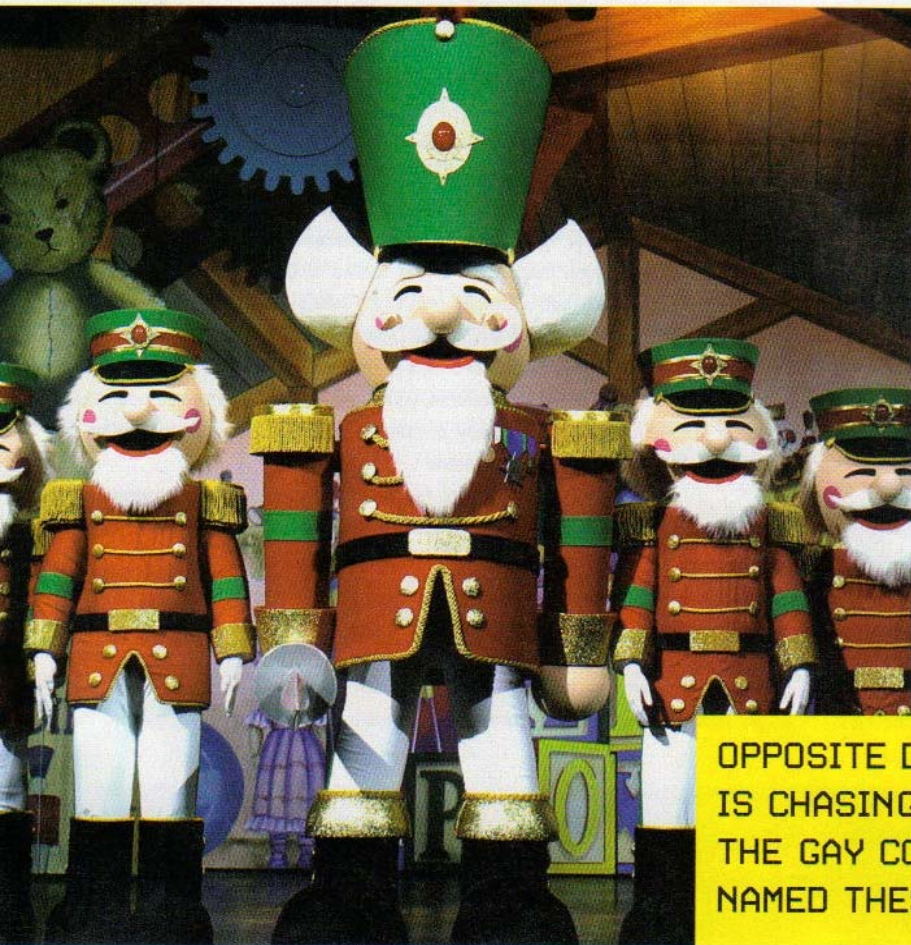
For cheap and cheerful accommodation, the Best Western, Music Row, can't be faulted. For something more plush, check out the centrally-located Union Station Hotel, formerly a turn-of-the-century railroad station.
www.bestwesterntennessee.com/
www.unionstationhotelnashville.com

colourful and lengthy career. Big-boobed mannequins show off many of her outlandish costumes, screens display clips from her films, music videos and TV appearances, and anecdotal soundbites from Dolly herself accompany many of the exhibits. Interactive audio-visual monitors provide further opportunities to find out everything you want to know about the buxom blonde and, if that's not enough, you can become her duet partner on screen and see how gorgeous you would look in a variety of her many wigs. This is wonderland for any Dolly fan. After this, when you catch sight of the replica of Dolly's Tennessee Mountain Home or see a performance in the 1950s-style Pines theatre (a nod to the first venue in which little Dolly sung her heart out), you get a humbling sense of the star's rags-to-riches life story. And, when you see the replica of her schoolroom, you realise what it might have been like to be the 'coat of many colours'-clad Dolly, being laughed at by her friends for being 'different'.

Since Dollywood also features scheduled events throughout the day, my suggestion would be to peruse the daily listings over breakfast. Aunt Granny's – what Dolly's nephews and nieces call her – does a fantastic Southern breakfast buffet. While eating your country ham, biscuits, gravy and grits, you can plan your visit to the Heartsongs Theatre for a multi-sensory Dolly experience as well as a performance by Kinsfolk, a jovial bunch of Dolly's relatives who perform a lively musical tribute to her songs and life. ▶



Smokey Mountain river



OPPOSITE DOLLY'S CLOSET CLOTHES STORE IS CHASING RAINBOWS. SURELY THEY HAD THE GAY COMMUNITY IN MIND WHEN THEY NAMED THESE TWO ATTRACTIONS?

► You should leave plenty of time for the Dollywood Emporium, too, especially if your inner child can't resist buying as much tat as possible.

Sadly, however, there's not an established gay scene in the Dollywood locality. The neighbouring Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg have plenty of hotels crammed in between the countless fast-food restaurants and trashy tourist attractions, but it makes far more sense instead to hire a mountain cabin and make the most of this area's breathtaking natural beauty. You'll also need to hire a car since there's no other way of getting to this part of East Tennessee. But this gives you the perfect excuse to make Tennessee's state capital, Nashville, part of your trip. It has an established gay scene.

Easily identified by the distinctive bat-eared building of its skyline, Nashville oozes Country music. If it's not being referred to on a poster or a billboard, you'll be able to hear it everywhere. The huge Country Music Hall of Fame museum, which resides in an architecturally apt building, provides everything you need to know about the history of the genre. And while there, buy a ticket for the Historic RCA Studio B tour. Elvis, Roy Orbison and Jim Reeves all recorded here, as did Dolly.

There's more music history at the Grand Ole Opry Museum (situated next door to the legendary Grand Ole Opry concert venue, five miles out of town), and while there you can visit Opry Mills shopping centre. Alternatively, The Ryman Auditorium, the Grand Ole Opry's former home, is open to visitors during the day and is centrally locat-

Jimmy Kelly's

Steak restaurant Jimmy Kelly's is a Nashville institution. The restaurant is located in a Victorian mansion with the look and feel of the Old South. The waiting staff are wonderfully charming and the food superb, including the best cornbread in Music City. www.jimmykellys.com/

Loveless Cafe

For breakfast or lunch, the Loveless Cafe is worth the short drive outside the city. It does the best Southern food, and their hot biscuits with jams, served with every order, are to die for. Specialities include country ham and red-eye gravy, fried chicken or catfish. www.lovelesscafe.com

ed. This is where all of the great Country legends have performed, from Patsy Cline to Johnny Cash, Tammy Wynette to – here she comes again – Dolly.

The Nashville gay scene reflects its Music City setting, to some extent. Cowboy hats are a popular fashion accessory, and if you want music, you'll find it here. There's karaoke or live acoustic performances most nights of the week. The OutLoud shop and cafe (www.outloudonline.com) on downtown Church Street, where most of the gay bars are located, is a good place to grab a sandwich and plan your scene schedule.

Karaoke or piano music is regularly available at the pub-style Blue Gene's Bar (www.bluegenes37203.com/, over-21s only) and laid-back dive bar Lucky's Garage (www.luckys-nashville.com), situated in the most dodgy-looking venue at the back of a car lot just off the main street, has regular events, including drag acts and karaoke. Be warned about karaoke in Music City, though – everyone here, it seems, can sing!

For an escape from everything Southern, Tribe (www.tribenashville.com), a (pretty much everything other than Country) music video venue is stylish, spacious and popular. It has a central bar perfect for cruising and an attractive outdoor

space, various smaller rooms with Tamara de Lempicka pictures, and an adjoining restaurant, Red, which serves tasty international food. Dance bar Play (www.playdancebar.com) next door is the place to go after hours.

But for a truly gay-friendly Nashville tourist attraction, you need look no further than the big-haired women with the big-boob jokes. They call themselves The Jugg Sisters and they host the unique Nash-Trash tour (www.nashtrash.com). While dishing the dirt on the Nashville stars, these dotty divas serve up canned cheese and crackers ("horse doovers"), holler at unsuspecting "celebrities" en route, and actively encourage you to drink as much as possible while on board (bring your own booze). This refreshingly un-PC pair ad-libs fantastically, as well as providing a series of amusing witty ditties.

"If I were a lesbian," Sheri Lynn, the tall one, says, "I'd do Dolly. I'd put my face between her boozums and go 'brrrrwr'." She shakes her head from side to side rapidly. Now, there's an idea for a new Dollywood attraction... ■

GT travelled from Gatwick to Atlanta, Georgia, with BA and Delta Airways. Five days' car hire (pick up in Atlanta, drop off Nashville, including one-way fee and insurance) costs from £150 with Alamo. Two nights in the self-catering Moonshine Cabin, Pigeon Forge, based on six people sharing, costs from \$119 per night (£60 on going to press), excl state taxes, for the cabin. Dollywood entry costs \$47.95 (£25), excl state taxes (www.dollywood.com). Two nights in the Best Western, Music Row, Nashville, costs from £45 per room per night (excl state tax and based on two sharing), breakfast included. See www.visitmusiccity.com for Nashville tourist info