Beyond the Sunsphere: Knoxville's Most Iconic Landmarks

Knoxville, Tennessee, is a city that wears its history proudly — but it's so much more than the golden orb that dominates its skyline. While the Sunsphere may be the first thing visitors spot, the city is packed with landmarks that tell the story of its frontier roots, its creative spirit, and its deep connection to the natural world. Here's a look at the landmarks that truly define Knoxville.

The Sunsphere: The Starting Point

Get more info

Let's begin with the obvious. Built for the 1982 World's Fair, the Sunsphere rises 266 feet above World's Fair Park, its golden glass panels reflecting the East Tennessee sun. Once a symbol of the fair's theme — energy — it has become the city's most recognizable icon. Ride to the observation deck and you'll get a panorama that stretches from the Tennessee River to the Great Smoky Mountains.

Market Square: The Heart of Downtown

Few places capture Knoxville's personality like Market Square. This pedestrian plaza has been a gathering place since the 1850s, and today it buzzes with cafés, local shops, and weekend markets. It's where locals come to linger, and where visitors get their first real taste of the city's easygoing charm.

Historic Homes and Founding Sites

Knoxville was founded in 1791, and traces of that early era survive throughout the city. Blount Mansion, the home of territorial governor William Blount, is known as the "birthplace of Tennessee." Nearby, James White's Fort marks the site of the city's first settlement. Together, these landmarks offer a window into the frontier life that shaped the region.

Ijams Nature Center: Knoxville's Green Escape

Just minutes from downtown, Ijams Nature Center spans more than 300 acres of forests, meadows, and riverfront. Its trails, quarries, and wildlife make it a favorite for hikers, kayakers, and families. It's also the anchor of Knoxville's celebrated Urban Wilderness, a network of over 50 miles of trails connecting parks and natural areas across the city.

The Tennessee Riverfront

The Tennessee River has shaped Knoxville's identity for centuries. Today, the riverfront offers scenic walks, paddlewheel cruises, and views of the city from the water. It's a reminder that Knoxville's story has always been tied to the river that runs through it.

Zoo Knoxville

For families, Zoo Knoxville is a must-visit. Home to hundreds of animals, including one of the nation's most significant red panda populations, the zoo blends conservation, education, and fun — another landmark that shows Knoxville's appeal reaches far beyond its historic core.

Conclusion

The Sunsphere may be Knoxville's most famous landmark, but it's only the beginning. From historic homes and lively squares to green escapes and riverfront views, the city's true icons are the places where history, nature, and community come together. Explore beyond the golden orb — Knoxville rewards every curious traveler.

