

# MOTOR CYCLE ADVENTURES

In The Southern  
Appalachians

By Hawk Hagebak

## Smokin' Dragon

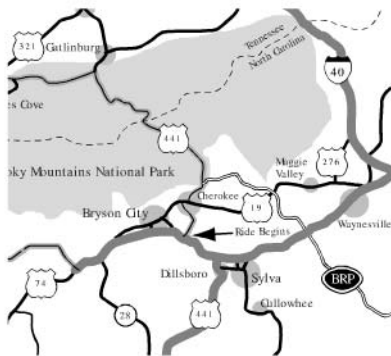
In Partnership with



# Smokin' Dragon

**S**mokin' Dragon takes its name from two of the finest riding destinations in the country—the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and a stretch of US 129 known simply as “the Dragon.” US 441 cuts through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with great scenery and no commercial traffic. The Dragon is internationally famous for 318 curves in 11 miles. Civil engineers were working overtime for bikers when these two roads were made! Views and cool roads aren't the only things that make this ride great; Cherokee offers much to see and do. The 18-mile Foothills Parkway is closed to commercial traffic also, with good views of the Great Smokies to the east and the Tennessee Valley to the west.

This ride is extra long, so plan for a full day of adventure.



## GAS

Gas is available at miles 0.2, 3.8, 5, 58.2, 58.6, 60, 98.4, 107.6, and 122.

## GETTING TO THE START

Start at the end of the ramp from US 74 at exit 74, near Cherokee, NC. To get there from I-40, take exit 27 off I-40 and head south on US 74 to exit 74. From the south, pick up US 74 north in Murphy, NC and follow it through the Nantahala Gorge to exit 74 near Cherokee, NC. Reset your trip meter at the top of exit 74 as you turn north on US 441.

## RIDE OVERVIEW

After exiting US 74 and heading north on US 441, you'll find the road is a wide four- to six-lanes. Don't worry, the route follows this highly commercial road for only the first 7.5 miles or so. As you near the downtown area of Cherokee, the road becomes two-lane and a lot more commercial. There's a well-marked left turn at mile 5.5, but going straight there will lead you to the town's many restaurants, souvenir shops, and the casino.

Before you even began this ride, you probably saw or heard the ads proclaiming Cherokee, NC to be the gambling mecca of the Southeast. While this is true, Cherokee offers much more. If Lady Luck climbed on your bike this morning and wants you to pull a few handles of the one-armed bandits, go ahead, but don't get confused by the neon and bright lights. Cherokee, NC is the tribal headquarters of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation. Looking past the

plastic tomahawks and rubber arrowheads, you'll find windows to the past.

In 1838, the Cherokee Indians were forced from these mountains along the "Trail of Tears." The move was brutal, to say the least. A high percentage of Cherokee died along the way to Arkansas. A few Cherokee hid from the soldiers who were rounding up the tribe and forcing it to move. Without giving up too much of the story, many Cherokee returned here to rejoin the ones who had remained hidden. Check out the complete history in the Museum of the Cherokee Indian on US 441 at mile 6.2.

Like a fire hose being suddenly shut off, the commercialism of Cherokee ends at the entrance to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Only a two-lane road, free of commercial traffic, lies ahead.

Two things you should focus on in the name of this Park; Great and Mountains. With beautiful and widely varying scenery, only "great" can come close to describing it. There are so many things to see and do in this Park that entire books are dedicated exclusively to it. So, here's a brief overview from a bike.

Near the Park's entrance, the Blue Ridge Parkway begins. At mile 9.2 is the Oconaluftee Visitor Center. Stop here for restrooms, maps, and to visit the farmstead museum. At mile 24.8, turn left to get to Clingmans Dome. The seven-mile ride up that road will lead you to a very unusual observation deck. It looks a little like a flying saucer, no doubt indicating who "actually" built it. The 360-degree views from the flying saucer are spectacular. You'll thank the aliens for their "advanced intelligence" design. Just past the road to Clingmans Dome is a tunnel through Newfound Gap. In

#### TOTAL DISTANCE

131 miles

#### TIME FRAME

4 hours from start to finish.  
Add time for stops at the Cherokee Indian Reservation, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and in Deals Gap.

tunnels, try to keep to the right half of your lane. Motorists tend to drive on that center line, causing many head-on crashes. At mile 31, the road gets so twisty that it actually twists under itself! Sugarlands Visitor Center marks your next left turn. This Visitor Center has vending machines, tourist information, and restrooms. After turning left at Sugarlands Visitor Center, you'll be following the Little River to your next turn at mile 55.9—onto TN 73 and out of the Park headed toward Townsend, TN.

In Townsend, although you'll find gas stations and a few places to eat, the road is less than appealing. TN 73 rolls into the four-lane US 321. Some roads are just magically under constant construction. US 321 is one of them, but you won't be on it for long. And hey, don't miss the Tuckaleechee Caverns at mile 60 (actually, you have to turn left to get to the Caverns, a short two-mile ride).

The Tuckaleechee Caverns are full of stalagmites and stalactites in huge underground rooms carved out by water over millions of years. Guided tours through the caverns lead you on a one-mile walk that lasts about an hour and costs \$9 for adults and \$5 for kids. Tuckaleechee Caverns is open 9 am to 6 pm seven days a week, but is closed for the season from

November 15 to March 15.

Mile 65.8 marks the ramp to the Foothills Scenic Parkway. This little-known gem of road is only 18 miles long and runs along the ridgecrest of Chilhowee Mountain. Enjoy views of the Great Smoky Mountains to the east and the cities of Maryville and Knoxville to the west. Never used by commercial traffic and rarely by others, it ends too soon at Chilhowee Lake, where you'll be making a left onto US 129 and heading into the Dragon's Lair.

As you ride next to the lake, your mind might relax a little. That's good; conserve your energy for the battle ahead. There's a dragon just round the next bend, and you must slay it! Okay, it's not a real dragon, but it's so twisty and curvy that motorcyclists from all around the country call it by that name. With 318 curves in 11 miles, it's an engineering feat! No matter what kind of bike you're riding, you're sure to enjoy it. Sportbikers like to take the curves pretty fast, so wave them around if you can. If you're the sportbiker, try to demonstrate a little restraint when it comes to dealing with other traffic. Don't give motorists a chance to create negative images of sportbikers. There are already too many bad stereotypes in motorcycling.

As you enter North Carolina from Tennessee, you'll be riding down into Deals Gap and the last curve of the Dragon. At the intersection of NC 28 and US 129 you'll spot the Deals Gap Motorcycle Resort Campground, which caters only to motorcyclists. It's open April 1 to December 1 and you'll probably also find it open on really nice winter weekends. The campground is about the size of a football field between the motel and the road. It costs just \$12 nightly to set up your tent, with motel rooms



Take it easy in the Dragon's curves and you'll keep your ride looking good.

just \$49 for two people in the room.

Here also you can buy your much-deserved and highly coveted "I Slayed the Dragon" T-shirt. Rob Pemble owns the Resort and used to own Sport Touring Accessories in Dillsboro. He moved all those great sport touring accessories right to where you'll need them the most, at the end of the Dragon, and he's added a little sandwich shop to this convenient storefront. If you're strapped for cash and plan to spend only a little, spend it here. Supporting motorcycle-only outposts like this one can only be good for the sport of motorcycling. And in case your bike needs some work, the Dragon Works sits next to the motel and offers tires and full service repairs.

Leaving Deals Gap, turn left onto NC 28. It skirts the north shore of Lake Cheoah as it snakes toward Fontana Dam and Fontana Village.

Motorcycle Adventures in the Southern Appalachians

Fontana Dam is the highest concrete dam east of the Rockies. Consider a tour into the bowels of the dam to see the control room and giant turbines. Fontana Village was home to the workers who built the dam. A popular place to stay when Deals Gap Motorcycle Resort has no vacancy, Fontana Village is accustomed to motorcyclists and offers reasonably priced accommodations.

NC28 continues east on the south shore of Lake Fontana. The lake is huge (11,685 acres), with over 200 miles of shoreline. You can rent a houseboat from Fontana Village and stay, literally, on the lake for an interesting perspective of the mountains (sorry, no motorcycles allowed on the houseboats).

The ride passes through another section of continual construction near the ride's end on NC28. For some unknown reason, the traffic engineers decided to take out all the good curves and replace them with a four-lane divided highway. So be prepared for a little traffic as the ride ends.

This ride ends when NC28 "Ts" into US 74. If this long ride wasn't enough for you, try out the Franklin Loop ride (p. 100). Get to its starting point by turning left on US 74 and then right onto NC28 at the gas station. To head back to I-40 from the ride's end, turn left onto US 74 and follow it north. To get to Murphy, NC and points south and west, turn right at the ride's end and follow US 74 through the Nantahala Gorge and beyond.

#### *RIDE ALTERNATIVES*

There's no way to shorten this ride, but there are a couple of ways you can lengthen it. At mile 24.8 you can

make a left turn and ride just seven miles to Clingmans Dome. There's a really cool 360-degree observation platform just a half mile (it's worth the hike) from the parking lot at the end of the road. At mile 38 the ride makes a left to avoid Gatlinburg, TN. If you want to go to this cool town to eat, drink, and be merry, keep going straight on US 441; you'll be in the center of town in less than ten minutes. Always wanted to go to Dollywood? US 441 north will take you to Pigeon Forge, home of country music diva Dolly Parton and Dollywood.

#### *ROAD CONDITIONS*

Generally speaking, there's little in the way of commercial traffic on this ride, but US 441 gets covered with RVs late in the day. To avoid having to follow a lumbering Winnebago through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, start the ride early—definitely before lunch. The asphalt through the Park is in desperate need of repaving, with a few potholes and some loose patches to keep you on your toes. The Foothills Parkway offers superb scenery, no traffic, and clean (but older) asphalt. US 129 (a.k.a. the "Dragon"), is a very twisty piece of road and offers fresh young asphalt with few spots of gravel. NC28 flows from Deals Gap in a series of fun twists and turns with little patches of exposed tar to keep you on your toes. About 15 miles from the end of the ride, NC28 becomes a four-lane divided highway. Except for loose gravel, potholes and a patch of exposed tar, hazards are well marked.

#### *POINTS OF INTEREST*

Cherokee, NC: Cherokee Indian Reservation, casinos, food, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, shopping galore. Great Smoky Mountains National Park:

Oconaluftee and Sugarlands Visitor Centers, Tuckaleechee Caverns, Foothills Scenic Parkway, The "Dragon," Deals Gap Motorcycle Resort and Campground (source of the "I Slayed the Dragon" t-shirts).

#### RESTAURANTS

For such a long ride, this one offers very little in the way of cuisine. There's fast food galore at the ride's beginning near Cherokee, NC (and an ample supply of Belgian waffles and other "tourist" food). A few places in Townsend, TN will compete for your dining dollar. The Deals Gap Motorcycle Resort and Campground might as well add "and Sandwich Shop" to its already long name. It offers colds drinks (no beer or wine; drinking doesn't mix with dragon slaying), chips, and sandwiches for about \$5.

#### DETAILED DIRECTIONS

**MILE 0**—Turn onto US 441 north from US 74, exit 74 near Cherokee, NC. There's a water wheel and old mill at mile 3.2.

**MILE 5**—Turn right to stay on US 441 north.

**MILE 5.5**—Turn left to stay on US 441 north. Continue straight to head into downtown Cherokee. On this road you'll find many places to eat. **Mile 6.2:** Museum of the Cherokee Indian (open daily 9am to 5pm). **Mile 7.8:** you'll enter the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. At mile 8.3 is the start of the Blue Ridge Parkway. **Mile 9.2** is the visitor center with the farmstead museum behind it (restrooms, too). **Mile 24.8:** Enter Tennessee. Turn left here to ride the seven miles to Clingmans Dome. At mile 25 you'll pass through the Newfound Gap tunnel. At mile 31, the road loops under itself.

**MILE 30**—Turn left at Sugarlands Visitor Center. Vending machines, restrooms, and information are here. For Gatlinburg and Dollywood, continue straight on US 441 north.

**MILE 55.9**—Turn right onto TN 73 toward Townsend. At mile 56.7 you'll leave the Park and find gas stations and food. The turn to the Tuckaleechee Caverns is at mile 60.

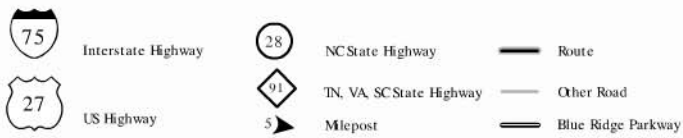
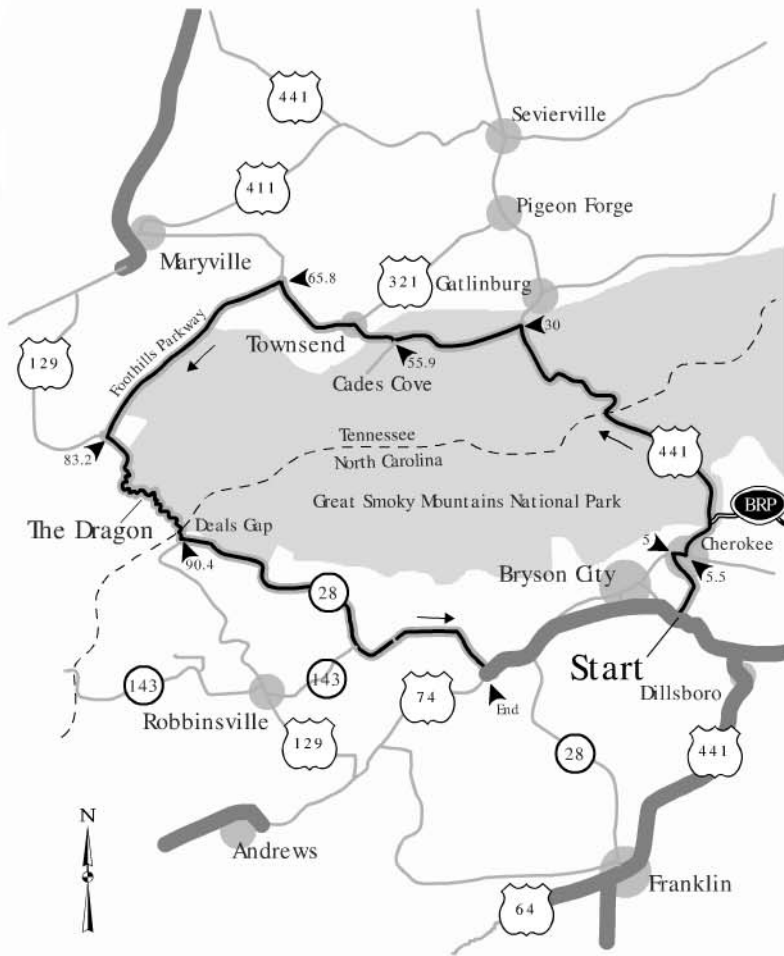
**MILE 65.8**—Turn left onto the ramp to the Foothills Scenic Parkway, making a right turn at the bottom of the ramp.

**MILE 83.2**—Turn left onto US 129 at the end of the Parkway. You'll ride next to Chilhowee Lake for a few minutes, then enter the Dragon's Lair at mile 86.4. At mile 97.7, enter North Carolina—Deals Gap is just around the next curve. At mile 98.4, stop in at Deals Gap Motorcycle Resort for a shirt to commemorate your excellent dragon-slaying adventure. When you're done celebrating, make a left turn onto NC 28.

**MILE 90.4**—Turn left onto NC 28. NC 28 follows Lake Cheoah for a few miles on its way to Fontana Village. **Mile 107.6** is Fontana Village with gas and lodging. At mile 109.2, NC 28 makes a right turn (if you miss it you'll just end up visiting the Fontana Dam, which isn't a bad idea anyway).

**MILE 131**—The ride ends at the intersection of NC 28 and US 74. Turn left onto US 74 to head north toward I-40, or turn right to head south through the Nantahala Gorge toward Andrews and Murphy, NC. If you aren't pushed for time, add two hours to your riding day by trying out the Franklin Loop ride (p. 100). It starts just three minutes north on US 74 at NC 28 south.

# Smokin' Dragon



# The Far West



**F**rom Richland Balsam, the Blue Ridge Parkway's highest point, to the tourist town of Gatlinburg, these rides run the gamut. Whether you're touring the museum of the Cherokee Indian or climbing the observation tower at Clingmans Dome, it's an awesome mix of history, native culture, and astounding natural beauty.

