



SLAYING THE DRAGON

Motorcycle Touring in the Great Smoky Mountains. Jim Payne leans his Harley Ultra Classic low to the left as he negotiates a sharper-than-usual turn on the twisting asphalt ribbon known as the Dragon. Jim challenged this 11-mile, 318-turn stretch of NC 129 many times over the past 13 years, but he rarely has the luxury of admiring the spectacular Smoky Mountain scenery. "Just hitting my marks as I come down the mountain keeps me pretty well occupied," he grins. "They tell me it's right pretty, though."

That could be the understatement of the millennium. Swain County, North Carolina, home of the Dragon, is 87 % national forest and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. With cascading waterfalls, tree-covered mountains and lush valleys, it's a natural wonderland for nature lovers. Add smooth, curve-alicious highways to the mix and what you have is a veritable paradise for bikers.

Hog Heaven. "We get all kinds of vehicles here," says Brad Talbott, owner of Deal's Gap Motorcycle Resort (located on the Dragon's south tail). "Sport bikes, cruisers, custom motorcycles, sports cars... everybody wants to take a shot at the Dragon." But the Dragon is just one of many great riding destinations in the area. Mike Ginocchi, who moved to the Smokies from Florida, takes his "Geezer Glide" to just about all of them. "The Dragon brings in bikers from California, England, Australia, France... you name it," says Mike. "Once they get here they find incredible scenery on the Cherohala Skyway, the Blue Ridge Parkway and NC 28, affectionately known as 'Hellbender 28.' These are the best motorcycle roads in the world."

And A Lot More. Even the most ardent bikers get out of the saddle occasionally, and when they do, Swain County offers a raft of recreational opportunities—literally! With dam-controlled flow and Class II and III rapids, the Nantahala River is the most popular whitewater rafting destination in the Southeast. Other diversions include hiking the trails of the Smoky Mountains National Park and catching trout in the rivers and walleye in scenic Fontana Lake. There's also horseback riding, camping, boating, shopping for local crafts, listening to live mountain music and exploring the rich cultural heritage of the Cherokee Indians and the Scots-Irish pioneers. For an out-of-the-way place, Swain County offers plenty of excitement—in and out of the saddle.

Riding the Green Wave. Surrounded by incredible beauty, it's not surprising that Swain County folks are into a "green" way of life—recycling, conserving water, picking up trash and reducing air pollution. Accordingly, they welcome motorcyclists who share their love and respect for this ruggedly beautiful land. "Bikers love it here," says Mike Ginocchi, "and the local folks are very welcoming. Hey, at 40+ miles per gallon, we bikers have small carbon footprints, right?"

Jim Payne is not entirely surprised by the growing popularity of motorcycle touring in the Smokies. "Thirteen years ago I rode up from Florida with 20 buddies," he says. "This year the number swelled to 125. There's just something about the Dragon. As bikers say, 'If I have to explain, you wouldn't understand!'"

For more information on touring the Smokies, contact the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, 210 Main Street, P.O. Box 509, Bryson City, NC 28713; chamber@greatsmokies.com; or 800-867-9246.