

TAIL OF THE DRAGON

by Kat

The day begins much like any other here in the hills of East TN - I'm enjoying coffee out on the deck and admiring the view. It's 8:30 and you can still see your breath. I can feel the chill through my jeans and it makes me think it would have been nice to have packed the leather. Today's ride is an unplanned one but I wouldn't miss it for anything. Something that is on my bucket list - a chance to ride the Dragon's Tail! I'll brave the cold, leather or not.

Just coming down the drive from the house will set the tone for the day - steep, with a hair pin turn at the top and another at the bottom before you head out onto the road. Always loved being on two wheels in these hills - breath takingly beautiful is an understatement.

My driver, Rick, is sleeping in a bit. I've got a few layers on in preparation. Easy to shuck once it starts to warm up. Forecast is a high of 80 - I can deal with that, but the current temp is more like 45. I'll hunker down and think warm thoughts until the sun starts to shine and the temps begin to rise.

That's another anomaly of eastern TN.....don't like the weather? Stick around for just a bit and it will change.



Did some Dragon Tail research the past couple of evenings. There are some pretty good youtube videos as well, taking you on the ride through a biker's view. Also found info on the fatalities that have occurred, the new t-shirt shop that opened just days ago and jotted down some potential photo ops such as the tree of shame.

We won't make the entire run all in one shot - there are stops along the way. I'm debating whether to stash the laptop in the saddle bag or just cram a pen and piece of paper in my back pocket. My camera is a must-have. Cram some cash in my pocket and I think I'm set. No 'carry-on' needed.

I hear my driver up and about. I'm getting a bit antsy to hit the road and brave the cold. My thoughts once again turn to my leather hanging on a hook back in WI. *sigh* If only I had known.....oh well! No use whining about it.

We lock up the house, get the bike out and don helmets (helmet law in TN). Feels odd and a bit confining.

We mount up and head out. Just getting out of the area where I'm staying takes a while, but it's already a gorgeous ride. Yep, it's still a bit chilly and I pull my hands up into my sleeves and duck my head down a bit. Bike is running a bit rough and Rick seems to think it may be old gas, hoping it clears up. We stahl out a couple times before we even make it to town and I'm concerned I won't see the Dragon's Tail today. We hit reserve and she seems to run a bit better. Make it to town and stop at a gas station. A fill up is just that - we were bone dry! Back on the road and she's purring like a kitten. OK, more like growling as the two into one pipes have a nice rumble to them.

We meet our fellow riders for the day in Gatlinburg. Chuck on his Road King and Rodney and Cheryl (pronounced Shurl in these parts) on their Heritage softail classic.

Everyone is gassed up and ready to roll. I warn them ahead of time that I am doing the touristy thing and taking pics, but I'll do my best to not slow us down or be a bother. They assure me it's no problem and even have a few recommended spots for some great shots in mind.

We take the long way around and start out going across 441 through the park into Cherokee NC, then head towards Bryson City and turn towards Fontana Dam. Rodney missed the turn - ha! A quick turn-around and we pick up 129 to the Dragon's Tail.

Upon arriving at the start of the Dragon on 129 we grab a bite to eat and find some Dragon's Tail merchandise. I can't help but notice the wide range of bikers there. A few 'old coots on scoots', several weekenders and lots of young bucks on crotch rockets. Apparently this is a hot spot for running time trials with some of those boys running 'the Tail' several times during a day.



We also take a walk over to the "Tree of Shame" and snap a few pics. Wow - lots of bike parts on this tree - all representative of wrecks that have happened on the Dragon's Tail. *gulp* Some even have dates etc written on them. RIPs are amongst the writings as well as cleverly worded phrases telling of a wreck they walked away from and returned to ride the Tail another day.

I stuff a t-shirt and patch into the saddle bags as well as shuck a few layers before we head out again.

Here we go! The Dragon's Tail - 318 curves in 11 miles. My driver tells me to feel free to hang on as we head out. My hips soon feel as if they are on a swivel as we maneuver the turns. A few are even banked, and pretty steep as well. We get passed, yes passed, a few times by some guys on crotch rockets. Good thing you can hear them coming easy enough. We make the first stop and are positioned right between two curves, just past one of many hair-pin turns. You can hear bikes coming, changing gears, slowing a bit for the curve and then givin' er some gas as they come out of it again. The ones running fast are scary to watch, at least to me. They come screaming past, slow down a bit and shift their bodies to the other side and stick that knee out as they give 'er again and are gone in a flash. Yikes!

We listen carefully for anyone headed in our direction before firing up the bikes and heading out again. A scenic overlook is the next stop - I happily snap some pics of the scenery as well as our little group. A nice lady from Indiana offers to take a group shot of all of us and we happily oblige. I return the favor and take a few of her and her guy.



Even with all my photo op stops, the 11 miles go by pretty quickly. Rain is on the horizon and we would like to be home before it hits. We are off of 'the tail' and on our way home when the rain starts. Not too heavy, but just enough to make it unpleasant. Our group soon separates some. Rodney and Cheryl and soon way ahead of us, Chuck drops back some - everyone giving one another plenty of room. I soon feel the bike slowing a bit and we are headed for a pull-off spot. I'm thinking Rick wants to find his rain suit. Just as I get the words out "What are we doing?", the bike goes down on the left side. We are already in the grass and slide along for a bit before she catches and throws us off on the right side.

Driver is fine. Bike is fine. Me? Not so good. My whole right side hurts and I can't get up. My driver rushes to my aid. Soon my head feels like someone is standing on it. I peel the helmet off and hold my head (yeah, I know I'm not suppose to). Chuck was behind us and stopped immediately. Rodney and Cheryl soon notice we are no longer behind them and turn back to look for us. Soon others are stopped as well. The rain continues and here I lay in a grassy ditch. Rick grabs a jacket from the saddle bags and covers me up. He also takes my helmet and, squatting beside me, holds it over my face to keep me dry. He's not too concerned as he knows a pretty tough, but the fact that I'm not getting up has him worried.

EMT's, first responders and lots of looky-lous soon gather. At least that's what I am told. Someone has a hold of my neck and head so all I see is the sky above me. They ask my name, dob etc. One guy asks if I am allergic to anything. My response? "Yeah! Motorcycle accidents!"

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