

Geezers go to Tennessee

You're a 67-year old retiree with a bad back, a K1200LT, and have never ridden the Smokey Mountains. Would you suggest to a friend (who also has a bad back) "Let's take a 3,200 mile trip on a motorcycle to Deals Gap!"??? The answer any rational person would give is "NO!!”. But I’ve never been known for making rational decisions when it comes to motorcycles.

The adventure started when I invited my friend Jerry to come to Colorado for the club (BMW Motorcycle Club of Colorado) 100K ride in August of this year. Not wanting to ride the 600+ miles from Lawrence, KS to Longmont, CO in the late July heat, he rented a U-Haul trailer and brought his recently acquired 99 LT out for the ride. Along with his son-in-law (97 K1100LT) and another riding buddy (R75/6), we did the 100K and had a GREAT time. This was the first 300 + mile day Jerry had ridden on the LT and he really liked it. At our lunch stop in Kremmling, CO, I suggested we ride our LT’s to visit a mutual friend who lives in Eastern Tennessee and “do the Dragon”. Must have been euphoria caused by lack of oxygen but Jerry thought this might be possible. We decided on a date that worked for all parties and made plans.

One wrinkle occurred when my LT broke its throttle cables on a weekend ride with a couple who ride a full dress HD (much embarrassment and friendly ribbing followed). Replacement of the throttle cables was accomplished with minimal “blue” air, only two phone calls to my dealer, and relatively few comments about the ancestors of BMW’s engineering staff. Further comments about the latter were issued when testing revealed the cruise control didn’t work. If you have done this job you know what a PITA it is to change a defective micro-switch on the fuel rail of the LT. Not wanting to delay the trip, I purchased a Cramp Buster and made final plans!!

On a beautiful Friday morning with local temps in the high 50’s, I pointed the LT toward Lawrence and struck out across I-70. A lot of riders say I-70 across Eastern Colorado and Western Kansas is BOOOOOOOORING!! Yes, there is a lot of open space but I like it!! There are no trees next to the road to obscure the view and there is quite a bit to see and lots of time to think. As I ride the plains, the hardships the pioneers endured crossing the plains, walking, riding, and driving loaded wagons, is made crystal clear. Read any of several books written from the perspective of the women who made these westward trips if you would like a feel for what the journey was really like. I much prefer the 100 HP engine purring below and the one plus mile per minute verses the ten miles per day of the former travelers. My “crossing” consisted of stops for fuel, coffee, food, and bathroom breaks. Upon arrival in Lawrence, my friend had a COLD adult beverage ready!! While consuming the beverages we made final plans for the next days ride and called it a day. After a 600 plus mile day across the plains, I slept well.

We departed Lawrence at O’dark-thirty the following morning. A failed attempt at lunch in Columbia, MO, where MU had a home game, delayed us somewhat. We actually sat at one intersection for 20 minutes, no Bullshit!! The cooling fans on the LT do work. In the eight years and 42,000 miles I’ve owned the bike, this was the first time I’d heard them, it wouldn’t be the last time on this trip. On to St. Louis where we rode for over two hours in city traffic - I hate mega cities! When we finally stopped for a lunch break, a lady pulled in front of Jerry and he dropped his LT in the parking lot. Thanks to two strangers, who helped us right the bike, we were able to get lunch and a bit of fuel, because of the “spill proof” hoses we didn’t get a full tank. The individual who invented these gasoline nozzles should be dragged out in the street and publicly flogged!

On into Illinois and Kentucky were super slab speeds and the beautiful country faded the memories of events in the mega city. Our planned stop at Paducah, KY was reached without further mishaps. The gods of traveling motorcyclist were smiling on us as it started raining just as we pulled under the motel awning. We celebrated by ordering delivery pizza to the room.

The following day at a Mickey D’s for coffee and breakfast we chatted with a gentlemen and his wife about motorcycle traveling. Turns out he and his wife ride a GoldWing and have traveled all over the US and Canada. Oh, did I mention he was a preacher? He promised to say a prayer for us to have a safe trip. Hey, we take all the help we can get!

The mid-day lunch/fuel stop occurred about two hours out of Knoxville, TN where Jerry pulled off the interstate at a nondescript exit and stopped in front of a small restaurant. Looked pretty “iffy” to me but he insisted we try it. The food was excellent home cooking and the homemade pies are baked there!! In fact our waitperson stated she baked the Apple pie earlier in the morning!! With that statement I had to try the Apple. Jerry chose the Chocolate. The meringue had tiny droplets of sugar on top which, according to him, is the mark of a superior pie! If you are ever in the area be sure and stop at the Rose Garden Restaurant for an excellent home cooked meal and GREAT pie! It is now in my Zumo as a favorite!

Following this excellent lunch and fuel stop, we rolled on Eastward and South of Knoxville to our friend’s home and base of operations for the next two days. Our friends live within a couple of hours of Deals Gap and the Cherohala Skyway and he proved to be an excellent tour guide and food service director. What can you say about the small out of the way bakery where we sat on the deck overlooking a beautiful stream and munched on homemade rolls and coffee, or

the local brewery in Gatlinburg, or many of the other places we stopped for "breaks" and enjoyed the local cuisine. We did the "Dragon" and so many other roads running along mountain streams, overhung by a canopy of trees that we were in sensory overload. All the roads we traveled were in excellent shape with lazy sweepers and beautiful scenery, with the exception of route 129 "the Dragon" nothing lazy about that road. This is beautiful country and tends to make one want to slow down and enjoy the quiet beauty of the area. However, we had schedules to keep, and taking a page from Ben Franklin's "fish and visitors" after three days, early the third day we headed the LTs westward toward the Rose Garden for a breakfast stop. There was discussion of pie for breakfast but homemade biscuits and gravy, eggs and bacon won the toss. Don't tell Jerry's Cardiologists. The Pecan pie was hot and fresh, but we resisted the urge and made a fast exit before we could change our minds...but we have the location in the GPS.

We had determined, on the trip out, we would avoid St. Louis at all cost, and to that end programmed the GPS for the shortest route to Cape Girardeau, MO., nice back roads with light traffic. The weather warmed into the high 80s which with the humidity proved to be rather uncomfortable unless you are moving. A stop in Cape Girardeau for a large milkshake was a nice cool down and gave us time to plan the next leg of the trip. Being too early in the day and too far from home we decided to press onward to Farmington, Mo. for the evening. This turned out to be a good decision as some of the secondary Missouri highways are excellent for motorcycling. With the exception of getting stopped several times for road construction (see above statement about the fans on the LT) the trip was very pleasant. We had made no advance reservations in Farmington so finding a new Holiday Inn express was a nice lagniappe. The hotel as with most good ones, allowed us to park the LTs under the portico and close to the front desk. With our dietary restrictions (I'm diabetic and Jerry has the heart thing) we chose a buffet style restaurant within walking distance of the hotel to end the day without riding. Before turning in for the evening, we watched the crisis on Wall Street unfold on CNN and went to sleep knowing we, as retirees, would be on the street as beggars when the trip was over.

The following morning after a nice hotel breakfast we started across Missouri toward KC and Engle Motors to pick up some parts for JD's R100 Airhead he is rebuilding. Someone in the lead (me) missed the turn and we found ourselves in Jefferson City for lunch. North to Columbia (no ball game this time) and West on I 70 to KC for a parts stop. The guys at Engle looked at my LT and confirmed a bad micro-switch on the fuel rail for the cruise control. Not wanting to wait the 2-3 hours for the repair and with 2,800 miles without it, we rolled on to Lawrence, KS, and Jerry's home for another cool beverage, shower and good nights sleep.

The next morning, again at O'darkthirty, I left Lawrence for the 600 plus mile run home. Jerry mentioned, as I pulled out of his drive, he felt as though he should be going with me. Riding alone after over a week as a duo felt strange and oddly lonesome. However, since I have ridden alone a lot over the years, it didn't take long to settle into my "mile muncher" routine, ride, stop for gas, ride, stop for coffee and gas, ride stop for gas and bathroom break and ride some more. I used the Scala Rider Bluetooth/Zumo to talk with my wife, daughter, brothers, and anyone else I could think of during the solo jaunt across Kansas and Eastern Colorado. The weather was great with mild temps and light winds, most unusual for this time of year. As I said the trip home was uneventful with one exception, as I turned North on I-25 toward Longmont afternoon traffic was pretty heavy. An individual directly in front of me not paying attention as traffic suddenly came to a slow down, was driving too fast and slammed on his brakes without warning. Keeping my following distance and staying alert, I saw this and hit the brakes on the LT, however a cement tractor trailer behind me didn't, and as I moved into the right lane within inches of the vehicle of the idiot, the cement truck blew past me at road speed inches from my right mirror. It was so close I felt the wind move the LT!! 3,200 miles and I almost died with 5 miles of my front door!! Thank you guardian angel and perhaps the preacher who said a prayer for us to have a safe trip.

Final thoughts: The Smokey Mountains offer some awesome riding experiences, but they are a long way from Colorado. I still prefer the mountains and western states for riding motorcycles but that is a personal preference. Will I go back? You bet!

How did the bikes perform? We had no problems, not even a flat tire. I had ridden the LT on long runs before but not a trip of this magnitude. I came away with a new respect for BMW's and the LT in particular. In my not so humble opinion as an ass hauling long distance travel mount the LT has NO peer.

I have always said if you want to know the measure of an individual take a bike trip with them. Even though Jerry and I have been friends for over 30 years we had never really traveled together. I came home wanting to know "Where we are going next year?".

Don "Radar" Wreyford