

In Franklin, we hook up with Highway 441 north. While we normally eschew four-lane roads, this short stretch is a lot of fun, promoting an exhilarating ride at any speed over its long, sweeping bends. Gem mines, campgrounds, and other down-home diversions dot the roadside.

Lunch is in the offing and the town of Sylva is in sight, so we hand the reins to Neale. He once hung his hat here and, knowing the landscape, he recommends Annie's Bakery. It's an excellent choice. Our made-to-order sandwiches on fresh baked bread are hearty and wholesome too, unlike the fried-and-true road fare that usually tempts me.

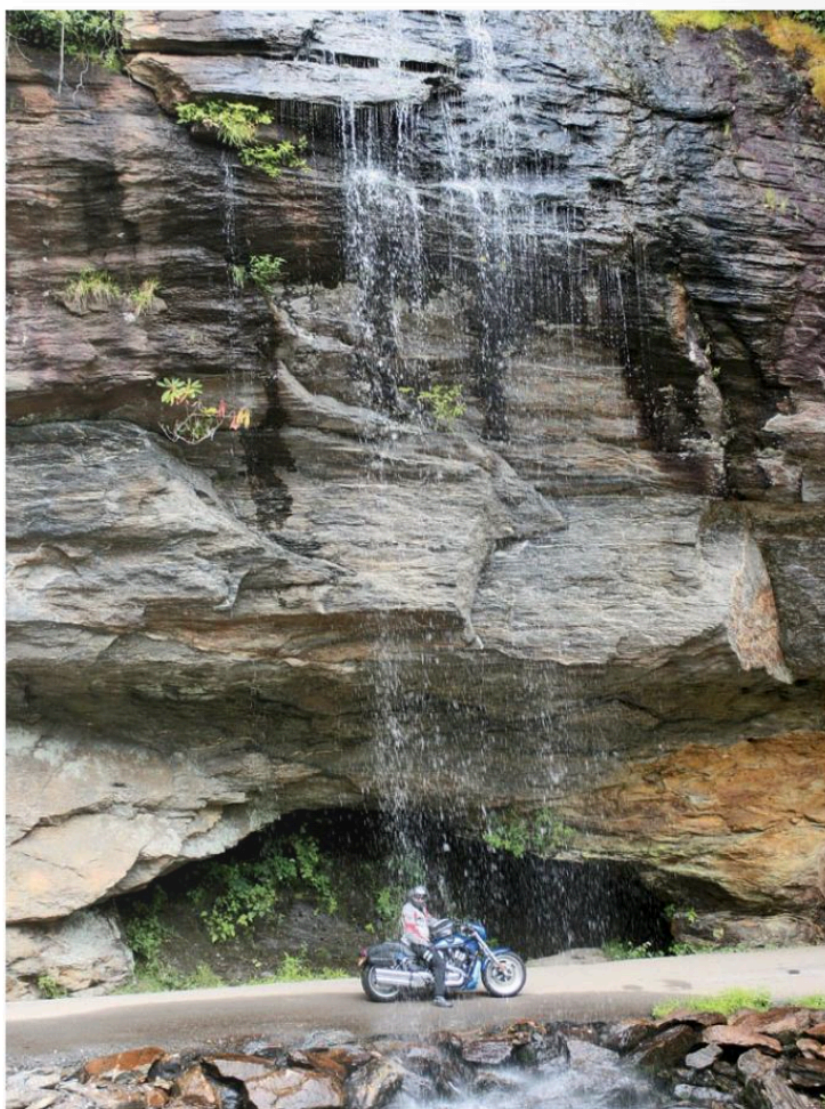
After lunch, we start strolling Sylva's lively streets but the display windows in a former department store soon pull us up short. Fashion mannequins and sale items have been supplanted by airy arrangements of fascinating imagery. This site has become The Penumbra Gallery and local photographer Matthew Turlington is there when we wander inside to admire his work. The area's inspirational mountain beauty has long drawn artists like him, he says, but that lure now extends well beyond the creative set. Apparently a number of the folks who vacationed here every year have just stopped going home.

Riding to the east end of Sylva, we pick up Route 107 and begin the climb back toward Cashiers (the locals say Cashers). This road has just enough curves to be interesting but not enough to really challenge us, so it's perfect for a post-lunch romp. Heading west on Route 64, we zip back through downtown Highlands and veer south on Route 106. As the road slowly descends toward Dillard, Georgia, the curves ebb and flow before culminating in a breakneck drop through a section of chassis-challenging twisties. It's surely been an intense day of riding, but the



📍 *The view of Whiteside Mountain from Route 64 is amazing.*

📍 *I'm already hitched, but Bridal Veil Falls is still a treat.*







📍 *Thick woods and cool, shaded roads are a big part of the Smoky Mountain allure.*

🗣️ *“Uh, what corner is this, Neale?”*



fun isn't over yet. After a relaxed jaunt along Route 2/76 out of Clayton, we bend left on Route 197 for an early evening dessert of curvy pudding. Though this traffic-free rollercoaster ride has us careening along the shores of Lake Burton, we have little opportunity to look at the water; and by the time we get back to Helen, we're more than ready for a drink, something to eat, and early bedtimes.

### Dahlonega

We're in the mood for a big breakfast this morning and Hofers of Helen German Bakery and Café delivers. While Neale and Christa opt for the all-American egg dishes, I order a platter of Bavarian cheeses and cold cuts served with oven-fresh bread. I could get spoiled on this stuff. And again, we leave town to the street sweeper's nod.





Scouting south, we arrive in Cleveland and bear right on a piece of motorcycling's rock 'n' roll hall of fame: Route 129. This is the highway that eventually becomes the infamous Tail of the Dragon at Deal's Gap. And while the Dragon's 318 curves in 11 miles is a ways away, it soon becomes obvious that the reptilian slithering isn't relegated to that notorious stretch. The well-engineered road begins with a deceptive crawl across the foothills, quickly building to a symphony of screaming engines and grinding pegs that reaches crescendo at Neels Gap on Blood Mountain. We stop for a well-deserved breather at Mountain Crossings at Walasi-Yi. Built in 1937 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, this large, stone cabin near the summit sits right on the Appalachian Trail. As hikers



📍 *Annie's Bakery dishes up small-town charm with their excellent sandwiches.*

pass beneath the building's breezeway, they're treading on the only portion of the over 2100-mile path that's covered by a manmade structure. The view from the broad, flagstone porch is stunning. On the horizon, the distant mountains seem to fuse with the sky's countless shades of hazy blue. Fittingly, the Cherokee refer to these hills as Shaconage (sha-CON-a-gee), land of the blue smoke.

We drop off the steep mountain into another asphalt blender and soon hang a hard left on Route 180 toward Suches. While this road has all the spiral appeal of 129, it's not nearly as civilized. The very narrow "two-lane" tarmac curves, swoops, and switches back up and down steep hills, boring through thick green vegetation and dense stands of hardwoods. In many places, the best advice is "don't look down." At the intersection of Routes 180 and 60, we stop in at Two Wheels Only Motorcycle Resort and Campground. And as the name implies, TWO is open only to motorcycles. Automobile travelers can stay here, but they have to have bikes on a trailer – a great rule in my book. Owner GT Turner has a reputation for serving up some great grub and he certainly lives

up to it by our lights. Judging from the size of the patties, many a cow makes the ultimate sacrifice for GT's tasty burgers.

The call of the north has us back out on Route 60 heading toward Morganton, and the quality of the riding is almost hard to believe. Midweek traffic is practically nonexistent and the roads are as good as any I've ridden on, period.

Working around Blue Ridge Lake, we pick up Aska Road and head back south through a series of serene valleys. Once on Route 52, we track easterly and end up in Dahlonega. This charming town is home to North Georgia College and State University and has an obvious collegiate energy. A number of shops and restaurants surround the downtown square that rings the Lumpkin County Courthouse. No longer a legislative center, the oldest courthouse in Georgia now houses a museum venerating America's first large-scale gold rush, which was centered in Dahlonega. Twenty years before anyone had ever heard of Sutter's Mill in California, the discovery of the shiny stuff drew countless prospectors to these very hills.





Rambling on across the rolling landscape, we count down the few remaining miles back to Helen. It's been another spectacular day of riding and we still have another day of exploration to look forward to.

### Franklin

We're greeted with another sunny morning on our final day in Helen. After a quick shot of java, we're wheeling north, but not for long. We find Route 348 and begin yet another crazed, mountain-road tire test. But soon some of the low-hanging clouds so prevalent in the Great Smokies close in and wrap us in mist as we ascend. Though not blinded, we do throttle back a bit until the way clears on the other side of the mountain.

*In these parts, there are many opportunities to air it out a bit.*

In Blairsville, we stop for a glass of iced tea (sweet, of course) and plot our next move. We've heard that Brasstown Bald is the highest point in Georgia, but we become intrigued by another Brasstown mapped just across the border in North Carolina. What we discover is a delightful little crossroads community with an irresistible general store, Clay's Corner. Perhaps more notably, Brasstown, NC, is also the Opossum Capital of the World. Squashed and scorned, this much-maligned marsupial is celebrated with a great deal of gentility in these parts. This opassion for opossum is hard to explain, but in Brasstown they're more than happy to get you up to speed.

Vowing to find Brasstown Bald, to compare and contrast later in the day, we push on. Through Murphy and north on Route 74, we follow the four-lane. But just as the highway starts to get a little humdrum, the road shrinks to two and the trees thicken. Then, like that, we're in the deep forest shade of the Nantahala Gorge, tracking along the wild, roiling Nantahala River. This stretch of rapids is world renowned in the whitewater community and countless kayakers and rafters can be seen tumbling over class I, II, and III rapids. Numerous outfitters along the way can get you out on the river; that is, if they're not all booked up.

A little further east, Neale has another trick up his sleeve. We hang a right on a rather unassuming little back road marked Route 28, and within minutes our inner Valentino Rossis emerge as the narrow lane spits out rapid-fire curves that never seem to end. All the way to Franklin, we're treated to a swerving smorgasbord that demands every bit of our skill and attention. As soon as we get to town, we drop the kickstands at the Havana Bistro for some authentic Cuban-style sandwiches and very strong, delicious coffee.

Still intent on finding Brasstown Bald, we need to hurry. So we jump on Highway 441 and skedaddle south to Route 76 in Clayton. This curvy stretch takes us back to Route 17, where we would dive south toward Helen; but first we divert on Route 180 when we see the signs for our final stop at the bald. The climb to the mountaintop park is steep and narrow and, with little room to pass, patience is a virtue here, especially in tourist season. An inexpensive shuttle is available to take sightseers from the parking area to the pinnacle; or you can pretend you're still a teenager and hike up. I don't recommend this incredibly steep, half-mile trek unless you're in pretty decent shape. Neale and I made




it just fine, but our legs and lungs certainly felt the burn. From the visitor center atop the 4,784-foot summit of Brasstown Bald, we enjoy the 360-degree prospect that encompasses land in four states: Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

With Helen just a few miles down the road, this view, we all agree, is a fitting end to our Smoky Mountains tour. Sure, we work together on a regular basis, but that's "work," a catch as catch can of emails and Monday morning meetings. We all log countless miles each year, but the riding hardly ever occurs at the same time, much less in the same area. So, it's been a blast riding with my coworkers on this four-day trip. We should probably do it more often. And with a neat place like Helen and some of my new "most favorite" roads so close, that's a proposition that may turn out to be easier done than said.



📍 *The 4,784-foot summit of Brasstown Bald is a good tour-ending highlight.*

*[For more photographs of the Helen, Georgia Shamrock® Tour, visit our website at [www.roadrunner.travel](http://www.roadrunner.travel). Feel free to leave*

*your comments, and don't forget to check out clips from the new DVD chronicling our Smoky Mountain adventures.]* 

### The Helendorf River Inn and Conference Center



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[www.helendorf.com](http://www.helendorf.com)

After spending the day riding incredible, twisty roads and enjoying the beautiful vistas of the North Georgia Mountains, a comfortable place to coddle your bones is a must. Problem solved – if you're carrying a room key from the

Helendorf River Inn and Conference Center. The riverfront rooms have refrigerators, microwaves, coffeemakers, and private balconies that overlook the banks of the Chattahoochee River, guaranteeing a relaxing evening and a good night's sleep. Other nice touches for the wandering motorcyclist include an enclosed pool for the after-ride dip

and an on-premise laundry facility. And if a little saddle tenderness becomes an issue at the end of the day, it's good to know that your digs are a brief walk from downtown Helen's shops and numerous restaurants. In fact, I enjoyed my stay and the surroundings so much that I returned with Kathy two weeks later for a few more days of riding and relaxing.

