



Helen, Georgia

Originally known as the Nacoochee Valley, the area around Helen was a center of Cherokee culture prior to the 1800s. Their villages were scattered throughout the valley and a ceremonial mound still remains just south of town. Though located on private property, the mound is clearly visible from Highway 17/75. Forced from the area on the infamous Trail of Tears, the Cherokee inhabitants were replaced by white settlers. In 1828, gold was discovered in the valley, prompting the first full-blown

American gold rush. By the end of the century, the gold had played out. There was still money to be made here, though. Huge stands of virgin timber attracted the attention of other opportunists, the lumber barons, whose profits soared with the arrival of the Gainesville and Northern Railroad. In 1913, a railroad surveyor renamed the valley Helen after his daughter. The Matthews Lumber Company located a sawmill in town on the Chattahoochee River, but by 1931, there wasn't much bark or pulp

left for them to strip and saw. In the late 1960s, Helen consisted of a few lowly concrete structures, and when local businessmen met to discuss plans to revitalize the town's image, a nearby artist proposed a winning concept. He sketched the buildings adorned in Bavarian trim and colors. The next year, the town was virtually unrecognizable, sporting a fresh Alpine air and European flair. Today, this mountain oasis is one of Georgia's major tourist destinations, attracting all kinds of outdoor enthusiasts.



Harley-Davidson VRSC™ Night Rod

The roads twisting through the North Georgia Mountains are a challenge for even the most capable sportbikes, so they're certainly going to test the heavy mettle of a ride like the Night Rod. Although the bike looks and feels small, it packs a meaty punch at weigh-in time, tipping the scales at 629 pounds ready to roll. Another factor limiting its twistability is a peg-grinding five inches of ground clearance and a long, 34-degree rake.



There's no denying the Night Rod is a handful when the swoops set in, but I found the challenge oddly endearing. With its liquid-cooled, 60-degree, V-twin

pounding out a claimed 120 horsepower and 80 pound-feet of torque, its got plenty of vamoose. No matter how wild the roads got, I never sensed any instability until hard parts started throwing sparks. Suspension travel is a bit short at four inches on each end, though all but the nastiest of bumps were handled with ease; and the dual front rotors with four-piston calipers up front and a single rotor with another four-piston unit out back provided strong, sure stopping power on the steep Georgia inclines – a virtue that's not usually associated with Harleys.

Honda ST1300

Honda's venerable ST1300 proved to be a fine choice for exploring the Smoky Mountain back roads. Comfort, power, and handling are the three aspects that make the ST such an appealing ride, and all were employed on this trip. The ride to the tour area was an effortless affair thanks to a wide, firm seat and plenty of room to stow gear in the integrated saddlebags. Also, the wide, flat fuel tank is the perfect perch for a tank bag or map pouch. Highway rides and back-road romps are handled equally well, with ease, by the



longitudinally mounted V-four that pumps out a claimed 120 horsepower and 85 ft/lbs of torque. And with its rigid aluminum

frame and surprisingly sporty suspension, you can get up a respectable head of steam in no time. On tricky roads like the ones in Northern Georgia, it's helpful to always remember that the ST tips the scales at 650 pounds, dry.

The pillion, like the rider's seat, is well padded and spacious, perfectly suited to all-day stints in the saddle. The electronically adjustable windshield offers both aboard plenty of protection when fully extended, or a pleasant dose of wind when all the way down.

BMW K1200R Sport

As a serious high-speed sport touring machine packing over 150 horsepower, the BMW K1200R was perfect for powering down the Interstate to start the tour. Then, once in the mountains, there was enough power to handle anything the twisting roads could throw at us.



with my camera stuff and extras attached to the rack.

The sum of its features makes the Sport one of the safest bikes on the road today, and its onboard computer is also one of the most comprehensive. Using

the good-sized, flat-screen monitor, you can check air temperature, fuel range, average mpg, and more. Accompanied by sensible white-faced analog gauges for the engine and road speed, the K Sport's dashboard is minimalist by design, but it's highly sophisticated in terms of the level of information provided.

Fast, fun, and providing reasonable wind protection from the sport fairing, the BMW K1200R was perfect for the job: giving me over 42mpg, being quick enough to easily leave anything but a committed sport bike rider in the dust, and possessing solid, stable handling characteristics.

Shamrock Tour® – Helen, Georgia

FACTS AND INFORMATION

In General

When one thinks of Georgia, images of flat expanses, pine trees, and lazy, muddy rivers come to mind. Well, you can toss out those preconceptions if you're heading to Helen. Northeast Georgia is comprised of rugged mountains, crystal-clear streams, and lush green stands of hardwoods. When you're here, you're in the mountains.

How To Get There

Helen is roughly an hour and a half from Atlanta, but there are no direct connections on major roads. Highway 23/441, between Franklin, NC and Atlanta, hooks up with Highway 17/75, which runs right through Helen. Take your pick of the many squiggles on the map that get you here – no matter which you choose, the trip is bound to be twisty and fun.

Food & Lodging

The city of Helen is built on tourism, so dining or lodging shouldn't be a problem unless there's a special event in town. Though parts of the tour area are somewhat remote, these mountains have been a summer playground for years, and hosting visitors is part of the regional fabric. Dahlonega, Hiawasee, and Franklin, NC, are also well equipped to handle visitors. Campers have a slew of choices too, and there are several motorcycle-only campgrounds awaiting your tent pegs.

Roads & Biking

Neale Bayly claims that the roads in North Georgia and Western North Carolina are some of the best in the United States, if not the world. And I can't, in all good conscience, disagree with him. Thanks to relatively mild winters, the

tarmac is generally in excellent condition, and some of the roads seem to have been engineered by a genuine motorcycle enthusiast. The twists wind endlessly through relaxing, rural scenery. And with only a few exceptions, traffic is very light.

Addresses & Phone Numbers

- Alpine Helen, Georgia · White County Convention & Visitors Bureau (800) 858-8027 www.helenga.org
- Two Wheels Only Motorcycle Resort and Campground (706) 747-5151 www.twowheelsonly.com
- Nora Mill Granary Grist Mill and Country Store (800) 927-2375 www.noramill.com
- Mark of the Potter (706) 947-3440 www.markofthepotter.com
- Penumbra Gallery and Studio

(828) 631-5278

www.penumbragallery.com

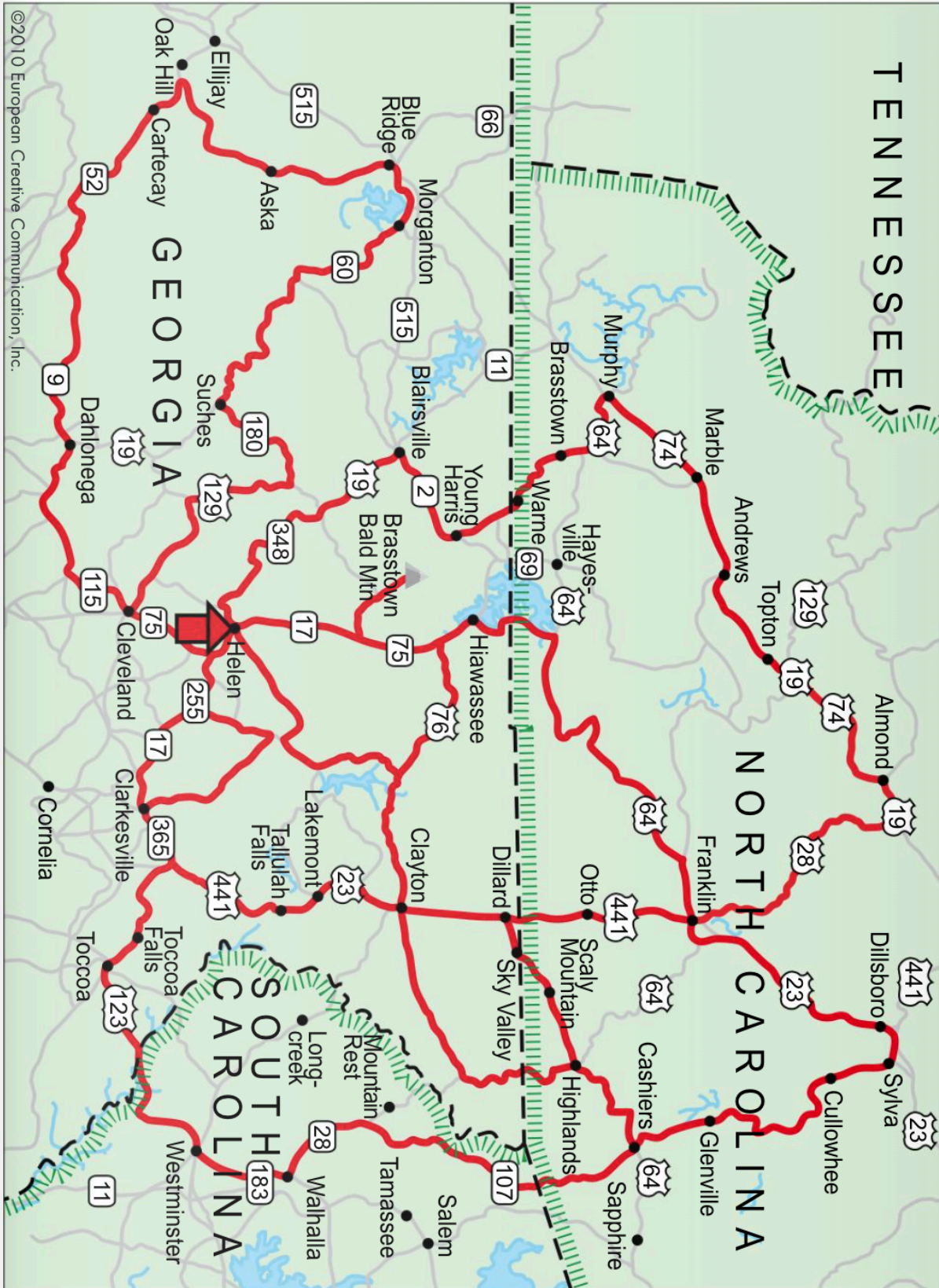
- Brasstown Bald (706) 745-6928 www.ngeorgia.com/mountains/brasstown.html

Books & Maps

I used my trusty AAA map of Georgia. The main roads are well marked on it, but some of the more interesting side roads are missing. For this, a county or regional map is suggested. Even better, refer to local knowledge. GT Turner at Two Wheels Only Motorcycle Resort suggested an excellent route that isn't on the map.

Another source of great riding in and around the Helen area is Scott Cochran's *Motorcycle Journeys Through the American South* (ISBN 9781884313615, \$24.95), available from Whitehorse Press at www.whitehorsepress.com.





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