

Motorcycle ride with dad revs up bond

Pair savor journey on Blue Ridge Parkway

By Dana McMahan • Special to The Courier-Journal • June 15, 2008

"This is my daughter. We started in Staunton, Va., and we're riding the length of the Blue Ridge Parkway -- it's our first father/daughter trip."

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I lost track of how many times my dad introduced me like this to fellow motorcyclists. Then, he invariably would add, "And she rode 500 miles her first day. She'd never been on the bike more than an hour."

If only I'd known years ago that's all it took to make my dad proud.

"Share the journey," read my dad's souvenir T-shirt. And that's just what we did. We shared six days and the 469 miles of the splendor of the parkway, which winds through Virginia and North Carolina. We shared picnic meals on the side of the road wherever and whenever we felt like it. We shared tales of the adventures we've both experienced since I moved away from home, and my dad told me stories about his life I had never heard before.

Maybe it took the open road and silent wonder of the mist-cloaked mountains to make me listen.

I never anticipated how much I'd enjoy throwing my leather-clad leg across the big Honda Gold Wing 1800 touring bike each morning, looking forward to more roads curving through mountain and valley. I certainly didn't expect that after the trip was over, I'd miss something like rising early to see my dad polishing the bike. In fact, I had wondered how I'd readjust to the role of daughter, and how my dad would respond to my insistence on making decisions.

We roared out of Louisville on a Friday morning, and I found I needn't have worried. As we lunched at a rest stop in Hurricane, W.Va., my dad consulted with me on the afternoon's route. He didn't say, "I trust your opinion and judgment, now that you're an adult." He just pulled out the atlas and told me about the second-highest bridge in the country -- the New River Gorge Bridge -- near Fayetteville, W.Va. Together, we plotted out the detour along Route 60.

The Midland Trail National Scenic Byway is a motorcyclists' dream, its shaded lanes splashed with waterfalls and redbuds. The road ahead on the GPS looked like spilled yarn, twirling in fantastic red loops. I loved being off the interstate, leaning into the curves from the back seat, laughing as we blew by 20 mph warnings under the snaking curve-ahead signs.

When we weren't caught behind coal or log trucks, we powered through the hills, the wind keeping us cool. I closed my eyes against the sun and grit and lost count of the trucks booming past in the oncoming lane, hot coal-scented wind in their wake. "This must be what riding is about," I thought. And the next five days were just as enthralling.

We stayed overnight in Staunton, Va., and visited its downtown farmers market early Saturday morning, where we chose some delicious homemade cheese and bread for a picnic lunch. Next stop: the Frontier Culture Museum, where we were the first visitors of the day. We had the place to ourselves as we wandered through the living-history exhibits that demonstrate how early settlers made their way. I talked one of the staff

into letting me help with the sheep shearing -- until I saw how easy it would be to accidentally slay the sheep with those deadly shears.

We stopped for a roadside picnic on the way to Monticello, southeast of Charlottesville, and then joined the guided tour of Thomas Jefferson's home.

We speculated at his disregard for the climate with such decisions as installing multiple skylights that lost precious heat in the winter and planting ill-suited maple trees for syrup. We cut out of the grounds tour early as dark clouds gathered overhead. In only 24 hours, I had already become more attuned to the weather.

We rolled onto the Parkway at 5 p.m., stopping for the obligatory snapshot in front of the entrance sign. Five minutes later, we suited up in our rain gear. Here was a moment I had dreaded -- riding in the rain. But, as the Monticello guide had quoted Lewis and Clark as saying, "We press on." And with bluegrass music thrumming and the asphalt ribbon curving away from us, it wasn't so bad. In fact, a smile spread across my face that lasted much of the next few days.

We rode about 100 miles a day -- a lot of ground on a 45-mph-limit road. Vistas at more than 200 overlooks tempted us repeatedly. "I think we need a picture of that," my dad would say, and we'd glide into a spot to burn through the memory chip with photos of the endless peaks disappearing into blue haze.

I was fascinated by the changing microclimates as we climbed and descended, our days transformed from spring in full bloom to chilly, leafless winter and back again in 20 miles. Leather and layers were vital.

Each evening, we stopped before dark (after Saturday's post-sunset ride, when we encountered 27 roadside deer). Our lodging ranged from a frowsy motel in Bedford, Va., to the Inn at Yonahlossee, N.C., a sumptuous mountain lodge in Blowing Rock, N.C. Every night was the same, though -- after we both showered off the day's road grime, my dad would knock on my door: "Do you have the pictures yet?" he'd ask. "What about your blog?"

He had promised his buddies they could follow our trip online. Each night my dad's smile, as he read my words, was all I'd hoped for since the days when I had brought home report cards.

Our most unremarkable evening -- an overnight at Miracle Farm, a vegetarian, organic bed-and-breakfast in the wilds of Virginia -- proved to be the most memorable. Our cabin offered birdsong and the sound of the nearby creek as its only entertainment. No TV, no radio, certainly no WiFi. Uneasy about encountering more deer, we decided not to ride to the nearest one-light town 10 curvy miles away for dinner. We supped in the room on grilled-cheese sandwiches, listened to the same handful of songs on my laptop iTunes, and played poker and blackjack until dark settled on the hills.

I slipped into a happy routine along the ride. Up early, uncover the bike, load the trailer and hop on to marvel at mountains, play name-that-band with the in-headset XM radio and swap tales and advice with other travelers at our many stops.

I believe in coming home from vacation while it's still fun. We left without a particular day to return in mind, and rode the final mile of the Parkway on Wednesday. I couldn't decide if I wanted a glass of champagne to mark the occasion or a tissue to wipe a tear.

Before turning north to head home, we still had to conquer the "Tail of the Dragon," an infamous stretch of U.S. 129 known for its 318 curves in 11 miles. But really, the journey was over when we exited the Parkway.

I knew I had followed my self-imposed guideline when I turned to look back wistfully at the southern entrance sign to the Parkway.

I've always disliked when people say it's time to come back to the "real world" when vacation ends. While it's true that I had to return to my routine afterward, this trip was the real world, too; thankfully, a beautiful corner of the world I explored with my dad for six days from the back of his motorcycle.