

FAVORITE RIDES & DESTINATIONS

The Kickstand Lodge Story by Bob "Joker" Denney ROK Member, Photos provided by Kickstand Lodge and ROK Members



It's no secret to many motorsports enthusiasts that the Blue Ridge Mountains and surrounding areas have some great roads; the kind that are both beautiful and challenging. Beautiful in their surroundings thanks to the panoramic views, rivers tracing alongside the roadways, bridges, dams and mountain lakes springing up around a corner. They are also challenging in their construction, as you can imagine riding the profile of a mountain range like the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP), spinning through a pass like Deal's Gap or just wandering along the mountainsides like the Cherohala Skyway. The entire area is motorcycling Valhalla; if it's fun rides you want, you'll find them here in abundance.

Even considering that you'd have to work at it to find a bad one, mapping a good route is still preferable if you're on any kind of a schedule. I do have a handful of favorite routes that I've ridden, some short and some not so short, all fun. I'm going to describe a few of them for you here and hopefully make it a little easier for you if you get the chance to visit to the area. Don't be afraid to take a side road though, it's almost guaranteed to be another good one. While I fully understand that many, if not most riders, including myself, subscribe to the "it's not the destination, it's the ride" philosophy, I'm still going to use a favorite destination as the jump-off point. It really is a great spot in itself and pretty near perfectly located to the roads and rides I like.

Nestled alongside Highway 28 near Stecoah, N.C. there's a spot aptly named the Kickstand Lodge (KSL) and the name pretty much tells you what it is—a campground for motorcyclists and motorcyclists only. It wasn't always the picturesque retreat for motorcyclists that it is today. Just a few short years ago it was a run down, abandoned former campground called the "Stecoah Valley Camping Resort." Enter Fred and Mo Kunkel, a couple of great folks who also happen to be motorcycle enthusiasts, Vulcan® Nomad™ owners, and members of a riding club called the Vulcan Riders and Owners Club (VROC). Fred and Mo had been looking for just this kind of opportunity, something they could transform from the veritable sow's ear into a silk purse of their own design. They'd had a dream for some time of opening a campground for motorcyclists, a place that would be more than a place to pitch a tent, a place that would be a "home away from home," and this was perfect. Ok, it was far less than perfect. It was a disaster-area complete with dilapidated mobile homes, rotted buildings and a concrete-lined mosquito breeding ground that used to be a swimming pool. Still, Fred and Mo saw potential and went to work.

Fast forward a couple of years and the hard work is evident. The facilities have been completely renovated and now there is a bunkhouse, shower facilities, camp cabins and tent sites, a babbling

brook meandering down the back side of the place and a peaceful fishpond as the centerpiece. The only thing that gets better reviews than the facility itself is the hospitality. Fred and Mo really know how to make people feel at home. It's been said that if you're not like family when you get there, you are when you leave.

In just a few short seasons they've established a regular clientele and become a "must stop" for any number of wandering riders. Organized rallies and club events are peppered across their calendar, as the atmosphere and location are ideal. Back to the rides and roads: as described, they all leave from the KSL. For more details and routes you can check out the maps here and on their Web site.

One of my favorite rides runs first to Murphy, then loops through Suches, Clayton and Franklin. Along the way you'll see the Hiwassee Lake and Dam, and the town of Helen, a kind of transplanted Alpine village complete with shops, shops and shops. You'll also get to "Run the Wolf" (GA 180, Wolf Pen Gap Road), which has some of the tightest turns in the state. The loop is about 274 miles and will take most of the day.

The next ride takes you through the famous Deal's Gap and the Cherokee Skyway. While Deal's Gap provides without question, the most challenging and exciting run in the area, the Cherokee provides, arguably the most beautiful scenery and overlooks. A note of caution regarding Deal's Gap: it is truly a dangerous road for the uninformed. It's just intoxicating enough to draw many a rider in over their head and leave them in a pile on the roadside. Be careful! Riding this complete loop back to the KSL will cover just about 141 miles.

Yet another favorite runs up through Cherokee to the Blue Ridge Parkway and then over to Asheville. This is one excellent section of the BRP you won't want to miss it. Continue south to Chimney Rock and then over to Highlands and through Franklin and back to the Kickstand. This last ten miles or so of Hwy 28 from Franklin to 19 is the favorite for many riders, myself included. Twisties, sweepers, even a switchback or two, and you'll be grinning the whole time. You'll also spend pretty much all day making this run as it covers 261 miles.

So there they are: three among many rides around the area. And as I said, don't hesitate to experiment as you can't find a bad road. Make the trip, give yourself a few days and enjoy yourself. The weather can be somewhat unpredictable; it is the mountains, but springtime is probably the best and summer is a close second. If you want to see the leaves changing, obviously fall is when you'll shoot for but be aware of one autumn hazard - wet leaves. The overnights can deposit a lot of moisture on the roads and when that moisture combines with leaves, the combination can be as treacherous as ice. Again, be careful and ride safe!

A little postscript about the Kickstand Lodge: On October 19, 2006 Fred was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. After a mercifully short bout, Fred passed away on January 1, 2007. Fred's last months were spent with family and friends, celebrating the time he had rather than agonizing over the time he didn't, because that was Fred's way—his spirit was irrepressible. Mo plans to continue running the KSL, working doubly hard to see that their dream continues. If you're in the area, stop by and make yourself at home. If you're not in the area, make the trip. The roads are perfect for motorcycling, the mountains are gorgeous and the accommodations are, well, they're all a traveling motorcyclist could ask for. For more information, visit kickstandlodge.com or call 828-479-6069.

