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# PASSING ON A PASSION

BY GARY MACE

**L**ike so many others of my generation, as I approached 40, I decided to return to motorcycling. The juggling of a career, family and home ownership took me away from the riding I enjoyed in my youth. I felt a return to riding would help me manage stress associated with my job as an air traffic controller.

What started as a simple pastime soon became a passion. Fortunately my wife, who has been by my side for 35 years, shares my passion. Over the next decade and a half, we have shared many two-wheel adventures together. In 2004, we rented a GL1500 in London, England, and toured 10 European countries over 16 days. The highlight of that trip for us was riding the German countryside and in the Swiss Alps. In 2008, we flew to Las Vegas and rented a motorcycle to tour nine national parks over a week and a half. And we feel we are just getting started!

Motorcycling soon became one of our family activities. I started taking my two sons along as passengers starting at the age of 5. They would make sure I did not forget whose turn it was to go on the next ride. My sons and I restored a 1971 Honda CB750 with a sidecar so they could both ride with me at the same time. I also got them a small dirt bike to ride trails with me on my KLR650. When they turned 16, one of the first questions from each of them was, "When can I get a motorcycle of my own?" The discussion of this question was a frequent conversation between my wife and I. The one question my wife and I asked each other often was, "How would we feel if we got the boys a motorcycle and something were to happen?"

When my oldest son turned 18, he started hinting that he would be getting a bike as soon as he could afford it. The question soon shifted to, "How would we feel if he got a bike and something happened because he lacked proper training?" After much

discussion, it was agreed that I would pick up a smaller bike that I could use to train both of my sons to ride. We agreed this bike would remain my bike and my sons could ride it only when I accompanied them. The motorcycle I chose is a well maintained 1995 Honda Magna 750 Deluxe. It is small enough to handle easily, yet has enough power not to be outgrown after a few rides. At my insistence, they both completed the MSF beginner rider course and obtained their motorcycle endorsement.

Shortly after my training rides with them began, my oldest son Gary was selected for a new position that would take up most of his free time and meant we would have very limited time to ride together. We decided that before he started his new career path that we would take off and do something special together. Only having three days, I decided we would ride the entire Blue Ridge Parkway together. Having done this entire ride several times with my wife, I knew this would be something he would likely have fond memories of. Plus, the 45 mph speed limit and fairly well maintained surface made it a suitable adventure for a young, new rider and a good opportunity for me to help him hone his cornering skills.

The first day of our trip was a ride on Interstate 81 to reach the northern end of the Blue Ridge Parkway. During this ride, I took the opportunity to help him learn some of the challenges and traps of driving on high-speed interstates. I explained how I felt riding the interstate was much like being in the movie *The Matrix*. While in the matrix, citizens could morph into dangerous agents instantly. Similarly, while on the interstate, drivers can morph into dangerous, careless idiots instantly. We also discussed lane positioning for optimal visibility. Another subject was avoiding getting trapped between vehicles with no escape route. After several hours, he expressed



Gary Mace and his oldest son, Gary, at a stop during their three-day ride on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

how he really did not like riding on the interstate that much. Like father, like son! So, once we got north of Roanoke, Virginia, I exited the interstate and we rode the remaining miles on the much more scenic and pleasant Route 11.

We spent our first night in Staunton, Virginia, in a cabin at the Walnut Hills KOA, a nice, clean and well-maintained campground. For dinner we ate at Mrs. Rowes, which has been serving home cooked country-style food since 1947. Anyone riding the Blue Ridge Parkway must make this a meal stop. My son got a huge burger and I ordered a hot roast beef sandwich. Both were excellent. On past trips, I have tried their Reuben sandwich and fried chicken. Again, all done to perfection. And do not miss the fresh pies.

The next morning we woke to perfect weather. Cool, low humidity, temperatures were rare for mid-August. I warned my son to watch out for deer and off we went. Shortly after, he had his first encounter with deer as one darted from out of nowhere right in front of him. He did well. He braked hard but steady and missed the deer by about a foot. I aged at least four years in those three seconds. I was impressed how he braked so hard with no lockup. He believes the exercises in the MSF beginner class taught him that. Several times we stopped and discussed safe cornering. I explained how I felt the best lines for cornering on public roads were not the fastest lines one might use on a closed track. To me, the best lines are the ones that keep you clear of the yellow line near the apex. I told him to watch and see how many riders coming the opposite direction and making left turns had their tires on or near the yellow line with much of their bike and body hanging



into our lane. The number was surprising.

For lunch we stopped at Peaks of Otter Restaurant located at mile marker 86. The menu is very limited but the food was well prepared and service was excellent. For a more varied, less expensive menu, one might consider driving another 30 miles south and exiting at Route 24 west to Jerry's Family Restaurant. We continued south on the parkway stopping often to enjoy the incredible views. We stopped at Mabry Mill at mile marker 176. This is a do-not-miss stop. During business hours, they often have staff performing demonstrations in blacksmithing, spinning or other mountain life activities. If your trip brings you by on a Sunday, you may even catch some live mountain music. This is said to be the most photographed place on the Blue Ridge Parkway.



We ended our day at Freeborne's Eatery and Lodge at mile marker 248. This is a 1950s lodge right along the parkway. They cater to motorcyclists. The rooms were older, but clean. The food was standard pub fare and very tasty with healthy portions. I would most certainly stay here again.

I enjoyed a lengthy discussion with a couple from Iowa. They had plenty of riding experience, but these mountain roads seemed to have put them a bit out of their element. I shared a few tips that I hope made their second day on the parkway less stressful. Having been born and raised in the mountains, it is easy to forget some riders do not see roads such as these on a frequent basis. I took the opportunity to re-emphasize to my son the importance of staying clear of the yellow line because the next rider coming around could be someone not used to these types of roads. My son and I were both fairly tired and turned in early. We only had two days to ride the parkway. I would like to note that although this is certainly do-able, in my opinion, the parkway is best enjoyed for the first time in three days, four days if you enjoy hiking at some stops.

The next day, we started out to run the southern half of the parkway. On the first day, I had my son lead so I could watch and critique his cornering technique. Today, I led so he could better see what we had discussed on the first day. We also picked up the pace a little. He told me that he was enjoying today's ride much better. It is easier when someone else is setting the pace and you can use them to help judge turns. Plus, riding behind me, he could enjoy the ride without Dad watching him every second. For me, it was more stressful. I had to force myself not to dwell on my mirrors, yet I couldn't help but to worry about my rookie rider son.


We then stopped at Blowing Rock, North Carolina, to visit The Blowing Rock attraction and get lunch. Without being too negative, if there has to be one stop to skip on your parkway trip due to lack of time ... Blowing Rock would make a great candidate. We ended up finding a Five Guys in Boone for a quick lunch stop. If I had it to do over, I would have waited another 50 miles and had lunch at Switzerland Inn. I have eaten there before and highly recommend the Brats 'n' Knocks over kraut. Also, there are great views and service.

Today, besides stopping at several incredible overlooks, we stopped at Mount Mitchell State Park,



the highest point east of the Mississippi River. Mount Mitchell Restaurant also makes an excellent meal stop if the timing works for your trip. It is the highest restaurant east of the Mississippi. When available, the trout is very good. You will find the turnoff to Mount Mitchell at mile marker 355. At mile marker 431, we then stopped for a souvenir photograph at the highest point along the parkway sign.

We exited the Blue Ridge Parkway and safely arrived back at our east Tennessee home two hours later. Although I have ridden the entire Blue Ridge Parkway many times before, this trip was both the most rewarding yet the most stressful ride I have ever had. I suppose any parent can understand. I am so proud of my son for both completing this trip and for showing a genuine desire to become a safe rider. It is my sincere hope that as his passion continues to grow, he will always keep safe riding in the forefront. I knew that I will not always be there to help guide him and share in his future adventures, but am grateful I had the opportunity to help plant the seed of safety. I so look forward to riding with him again soon.

Now, before you start feeling sorry for my younger son for being left out of this adventure, please know he will likely join us next year on a two week motorcycle/camping trip from our home in Tennessee to Durango, Colorado, via Sturgis, South Dakota, as his graduation reward trip. 

*Gary Mace, GWRRA #391215, has lived in the Appalachians his entire life. Living in eastern West Virginia while an air traffic controller, he moved to eastern Tennessee after falling in love with the area during the 2003 Honda Hoot in Knoxville. His sons are 19 and 17.*