

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS | POTOMAC HIGHLANDS | SPRINGFIELD, MISSOURI

# WING WORLD



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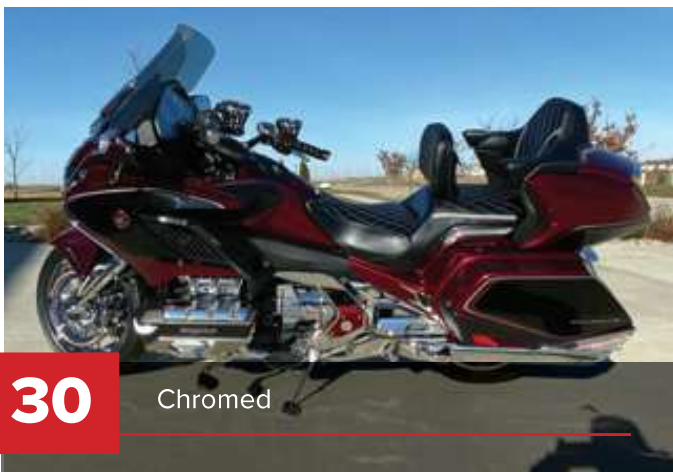
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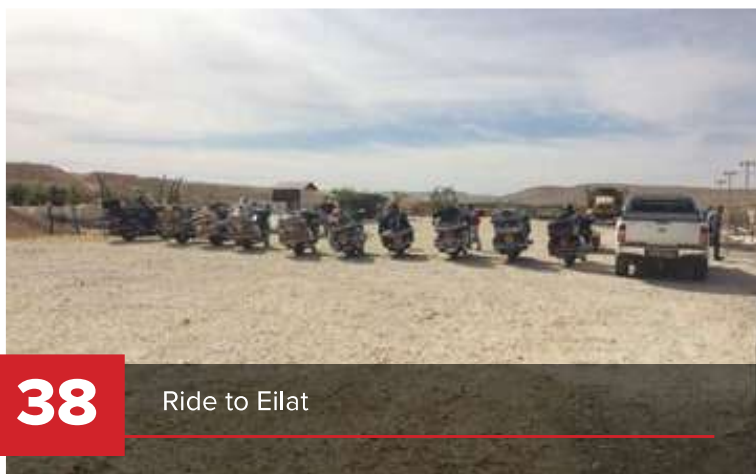
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**ON THE COVER:** Tony Facchinello's 1993 Candy Red Honda ST1100 and 2018 Ardent Red and Black Gold Wing Tour Airbag DCT. Photo courtesy Tony Facchinello.



# Potomac Highlands Loop

By **Gary L. Mace**

**O**ctober 2019, my wife, Lisa, and I loaded our trusty 40th Anniversary GL1800 into our toy hauler travel trailer and departed eastern Tennessee for a weeklong trip back to our childhood stomping grounds in western Maryland. For our base we chose the Rocky Gap State Park. My dad took me fishing at this lake before it was a state park. In 1976, I performed with the Mount Savage High School Band for the dedication to become a state park. A few years later I worked here for a summer between high school and college. It has since grown into a full-blown resort with a golf course and casino. For anyone looking for a camping or motel base for some great riding adventures, this is an excellent choice. It would make the perfect location for a regional GWRRA event in my opinion.

We spent over a week here riding many great

roads in western Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. What follows is just one of the routes we enjoyed. It is partly on western Maryland roads but is mostly in the Potomac Highlands area of West Virginia. It has a nice mix of history, a lot of scenic roads, and more than ample opportunity to work on those embarrassing chicken strips. It is a somewhat longer route at 260 miles, so I suggest you get a good night's sleep and plan an early start. Road conditions are mostly very good, and traffic is normally light. Stay alert for wildlife. During our week of riding we had several deer and a black bear cross our path.

### The Loop

We start our adventure by exiting Rocky Gap heading east on state Route 144. Route 144 is one of the roads that connects to and roughly follows the



Rocky Gap State Park, Maryland.

path of the historic National Road (aka National Pike and Cumberland Road), which was the first road built by the federal government. Its purpose was to connect the Potomac and Ohio Rivers and was built between 1811 and 1837. At Flintstone, Maryland, exit Route 144 and head south on Murleys Branch Road then Brice Hollow Road to state Route 51. Follow Route 51 to Oldtown, Maryland.

At Oldtown, I suggest a stop at the C&O Canal, Lock and Lockhouse #70. The C&O Canal was originally planned to connect the Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio River at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Construction was only completed from Washington, D.C. to Cumberland, Maryland. The canal operated from 1831 to 1924. Today the remains are part of a National Historical Park and is a popular hiking and bicycling trail. Lisa, our sons, and I have bicycled the entire 185 miles of the C&O towpath.



C&O Canal Lockhouse #70.



Oldtown Toll Bridge.

After the C&O stop, you will need to pay a hefty toll of 50 cents to ride your motorcycle over the wooden Oldtown Toll Bridge to cross the Potomac River. It is the only privately owned toll bridge in Maryland.

Once in West Virginia, follow Green Springs Valley Road to state Routes 28, 50 west, and 220 south. At Upper Tract, West Virginia, you will turn right onto Smoke Hole Road. You will now follow one of my favorite lesser-known scenic rides through the Smoke Hole Canyon. The canyon was formed by the south branch of Potomac River. Its name comes from early explorers who reported that fog rising from the narrow canyon appeared to look like smoke from a hole. This road is narrow and in some areas the pavement is patchy with loose gravel, so this section is best enjoyed at a casual pace. You will want to enjoy the views anyway.

After exiting Smoke Hole Canyon, you will turn left onto state Route 28 and follow it south until you reach Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area.









Seneca Rocks.

This is a very impressive example of the core of an eroded mountain. These rocks tower 900 feet above the surrounding area. There is a 1-mile strenuous hike to the top, which I have done a few times. The views and unique knife edge ridge at top make the hike well worth the effort. But this will take a fair amount of time, so if you plan to hike, allow yourself extra time to do so. The visitor center has clean restrooms and informative displays.

After departing Seneca Rocks, you will wear down the sides of your tires a bit more on state Route 33 west to Route 32 north until reaching the next stop at Blackwater Falls State Park. There is a very short hike with a few steps to reach the impressive waterfalls. During our visit the area had been in a period of drought, so the amount of water was far less than normal. But it is still one of the prettier falls we've visited.

Along Route 32 you will pass the Canaan Valley State Park. This is also a very nice place to use as a base. They have a nice lodge, rooms, as well as cabins and a campground. This loop could also be done starting from here by simply altering the start and end points to this location instead of Rocky Gap.

After enjoying the falls, continue north on Route 32 and join Route 219 north in Thomas, West

Blackwater Falls.







Virginia. If you feel the need for a short break, there are several unique and quirky places to grab a bite and a drink on the lower street. The Purple Fiddle is a local favorite. Shortly after taking Route 219, you will turn right onto Kempton Road and follow that to a point called the Fairfax Stone.

Among other things, this marks the location of the mountain spring that is the very beginning of the Potomac River. There is a tie-in to one of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, but I will let you discover that. We now rejoin Route 219 north to Route 50



them. However, they can be admired.

The next stop is just down the road in Lonaconing, Maryland, and is an old iron furnace from 1839. It was the first coke-fired iron furnace in America. Also at this stop is a bit of history for baseball fans to enjoy.

Finally, we continue just a bit further on Route 36 to pick up Interstate 68 east for the final short leg back to base. Bet you sleep well tonight!

I have uploaded both a GPS file and a printable turn by turn sheet in a PDF to my blog that you can use to follow this loop. They can be downloaded at [www.macesoftware.com](http://www.macesoftware.com) in the GPS section. As a bonus, there's also a 115-mile loop from the same base camp that takes you to 11 different covered bridges in Pennsylvania. This covered bridge route should not be attempted with a large group as most bridges have very limited parking. This is a wonderful tri-state area to visit with plenty of history, countless fun and scenic roads. [WW](#)

### Route stats

**Base camp:** Rocky Gap State Park

**Alternate base:** Canaan Valley State Park

**Distance:** 258 miles

**Estimated seat time:** 5 hours 52 minutes

**Fuel:** Sheetz in Moorefield and Keyser

**Suggested stops:**

- C&O Canal Lock #70
- Oldtown Toll Bridge
- Eagle Rock – Smoke Hole Canyon
- Champe Rocks
- Seneca Rocks
- Blackwater Falls
- Fairfax Stone
- Vintage Western Maryland Railroad engines
- First coke-fired iron furnace

### Potomac Highlands Loop



WM Engine 303.

east and enjoy another section of mountainous twists and turns. You will next turn onto state Route 220 north to Route 135 to Route 36.

Two more stops then we will get you back to base camp for a cold drink and warm campfire. The first you may not find interesting, but as a train buff, I simply could not pass this up. There is a place along Route 36 where several old Western Maryland Railroad engines sit. Please note that these are not open to the public and sit on private property, so I suggest not climbing around on