

Another Tale of the Dragon's Tail

A Rookie's Visit to the Famous Deal's Gap

By Gary G. Marconi

I was really disappointed last January that a local group that was planning a trip to Deal's Gap had decided to go over Memorial Day as I have five race tickets. Because I had never done anything quite as ambitious as the Tail of the Dragon in my Miata (Red 2001), I was a little reluctant to face the trials of the Dragon on my own. Nevertheless, my wife Linda and I felt that if we really wanted to do this we should take the plunge ourselves. Mid to late June seemed to be a less busy time down at the Gap and mid-week was chosen to avoid a weekend rush. We were able to make reservations at Tapoco Lodge for June 25th - June 27th.

The intervening months (I made the reservations in March!) were spent planning routes and activities. Much of the pre-trip work was done on the internet. Web pages for Deal's Gap (www.dealsgap.com) and Tapoco Lodge (www.tapocoresort.com) were especially helpful. When it came to packing, there were not a lot of options considering the limited capacity of the Miata. Since I am something of a gadget geek, the GPS receiver, video camera, and CB radio were loaded first; everything else was packed around these items. We decided to take I-74 to Cincinnati then I-75 through Knoxville to Highway 129. This seems to be the natural invasion route from this part of the country to that area. We left promptly at 6:30, top down and tank full. Our Great Adventure had begun.

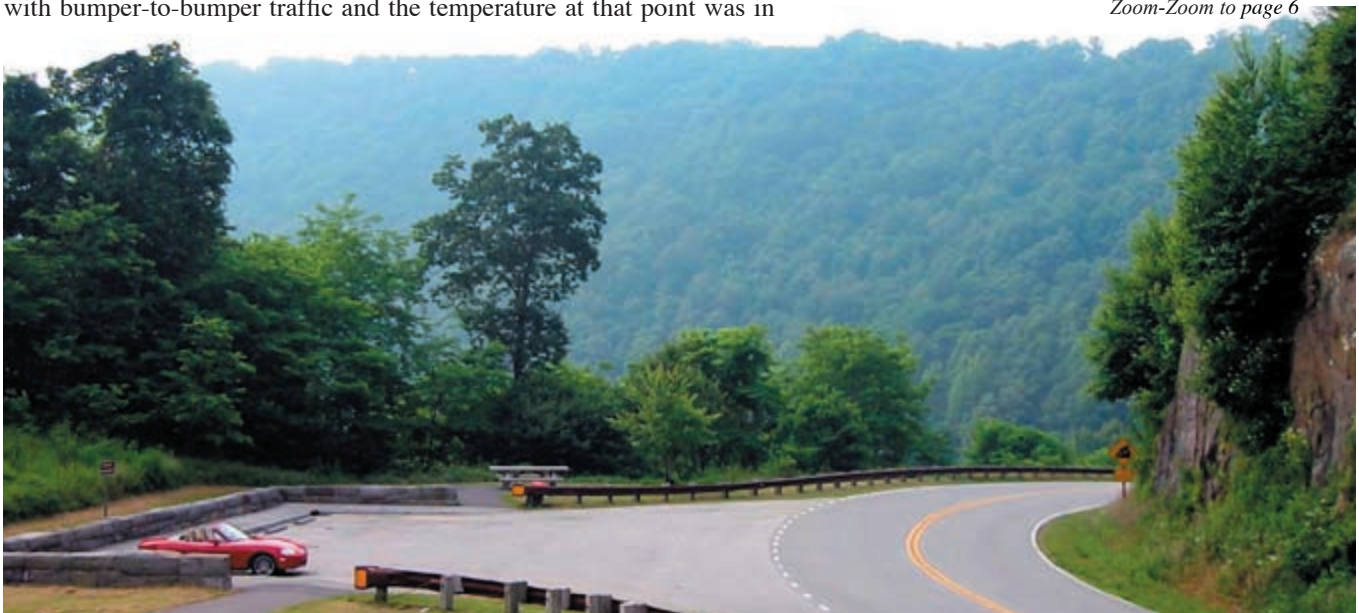
For the most part the trip was uneventful with little traffic, few trucks, not much construction (one reason for choosing I-74 over I-65), and little congestion. Once in Knoxville, we faced the a traffic dance: one has to get off I-75 onto I-40 and about a quarter mile later exit onto US129; all the while trying to watch signs, dodge traffic, and change lanes. Undoubtedly because Linda is a former ballerina, she guided me through the toughest dance steps and we eventually slid out onto US129, the final leg of our trip - and the most congested. Going through Alcoa was slow with bumper-to-bumper traffic and the temperature at that point was in

the high 80s, which made for some discomfort.

We were not sure at which point on US129 the Tail of the Dragon started. The road began to curve more and more and I began downshifting more and more. Linda said that we must on the Dragon because she couldn't imagine anything with more curves. As I shifted to 3rd gear (in a 6-speed Miata) for the umpteenth time, I mumbled something about how I thought there would be some warning, like a sign saying "You are entering The Tail of the Dragon". In fact, we did pass a sign telling trucks to use extreme caution. That should have been a clue. Along one of the 10 foot straightaways, we saw a four-horse trailer that was being pulled by a crew cab truck pulled off to the side of the road. I could only imagine the driver wondering how he got that far and how he was going to get out. We saw only a few motorcycles coming in the opposite direction. We caught up to a Honda sedan that politely pulled over to let us pass. We saw no semis at all, much to our relief.

The road looked like it had been resurfaced just the week before. It was coal black with bright yellow freshly painted lines. It was a joy to ride on. The shoulder in the curves were extra wide so that if I went too far inside or outside the curve, there was some road to ride on. Both of us were exhilarated; fueled by the roar of the engine

Zoom-Zoom to page 6



One of the beautiful overlooks on the Cherokee Skyway. Gary and Linda felt as though they were the only car for miles.