



TARA'S BIG TRAVELS

BLUE RIDGE BIKE TOUR

FOR HER DEBUT *PHOENIX* MAGAZINE TRAVEL STORY, THE VALLEY TV PERSONALITY UNITES RUBBER AND ROAD IN THE SMOKY MOUNTAINS.

BY TARA HITCHCOCK

For years, my *Good Morning Arizona* cohort Scott Pasmore would ask if I wanted to jump on the back of his Harley for a ride. “You watched me almost crash a Vespa on television,” I would remind him. “I’m never going near anything with two wheels.”

Years later, I was asked the same question by the guy I ended up marrying, Kenn Francis: “Want to take a Harley ride?”

Naturally, I had a different answer: “Are you kidding? I love being on the back of a bike!” A girl will try – and say – anything to impress her future husband.

Guess what? Kenn and I just finished our fourth Harley *trip* – not just a quick jaunt to Greasewood Flats, but a full-blown, leather-jacket-wearing, “there may not be room for your curling iron” vacation. And this time, I’m not trying to impress anyone. Who would have thought that a girl who likes her big-Texas hair just-so, would love being on the back of a bike? Trust me when I say four hours with a helmet on your head doesn’t leave a lot of room for improvement, no matter how much product and patience you bring on a trip.

But that’s the beauty of hitting the road – getting outside your comfort zone, having a more visceral experience, and really making the trip about the journey. Some of the best photos I’ve ever taken – Vermont’s fall foliage, Charleston’s mossy-covered cemeteries, the lakes of Banff in British Columbia – I snapped from my open-air seat on the back of a Harley. The same goes for our latest conquest: the legendary Blue Ridge Parkway. Dubbed “America’s Favorite Drive” by locals, the 469-mile ribbon of asphalt passes through two states, Virginia and North Carolina, hugging cliffs and sweeping through Appalachian highlands along the way, connecting two of our country’s treasures: the Shenandoah and the Great Smoky Mountain national parks. It’s a tailor-made joyride for bike enthusiasts. The Discovery Channel even named it one of the “Top 10 Motorcycle Rides in North America.”

Plus, riding a bike smells a lot better than the inside of a car. A car may be climate-controlled, but give me the smell of decaying fall leaves as the fog sets in any day.

PUTTING DOWN THE KICKSTAND

We usually rent a Harley Road King for our trips. This time, we tried out the Harley Electra Glide Classic – a similar, tour-type bike that requires a bit more muscle in the handling department but is supposed to fare better in wind – which we rented from a dealership in Knoxville, Tennessee. Honestly, I think we actually rented a La-Z-Boy with wheels, as my weekend seat was one of the most comfortable riding cushions I've ever been on. The only thing missing was an armrest with a hole in it for a beer.

We opted to begin the journey at the mouth of the parkway near Waynesville, North Carolina. On our three-day trip, we'd only have enough time to make it as far north as Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina and a charming town called Blowing Rock (see map).

A trip on the Blue Ridge Parkway is all about the mile posts. Detailed and easy to read, the parkway map (which you can get online or at any visitor center) highlights



every mile and is filled with suggestions and sights you can ignore or indulge along the way. There's a new itinerary around every bend and over every hill and honestly, you can't go wrong. Just when you think you've reached the most spectacular overlook, there's another one to top it five miles ahead.

Our route north would take us through lush points of interest like Mt. Pisgah, Craggy Gardens and Crabtree Meadows – each beautifully blanketed in Chestnut Oak and hickory. But the biggest draw was the road itself.

Cresting a hill just outside of Balsam, I couldn't help but silently thank the hard-working mountaineers of the 1930s whose labor made my trip possible. I know if they saw how many people enjoy what's become one of America's most scenic highways today, they'd be proud of their work.

THE DRAGON

"Are you going to do the Dragon?" There wasn't a rider we passed who didn't ask us if we were braving the 318 curves in



an 11-mile stretch of U.S. 129 known as The Tail of the Dragon. Who wouldn't want to brave those sharp turns, bearing names like "Pearly Gates," "Copperhead Corner" and "Gravity Cavity"? The Dragon is not part of the Blue Ridge Parkway, but close enough to the North Carolina end to justify a detour. This thing was so hyped up, I al-

BLUE RIDGE FACT BOX

WHERE I STAYED: The Balsam Mountain Inn. balsammountaininn.net, 800-224-9498; and the Gideon Ridge Inn, where "breakfast is served on the side porch and you don't want to miss out on the chef's steel-cut oatmeal." gideonridge.com, 828-295-3644

MUST STOP: The Tupelo Honey Café in Asheville, NC. After stuffing myself with their famed cheese biscuits and sitting back on the bike, I had to double up on my photography so I wouldn't feel unproductive!

FUN FACT: Grandfather Mountain is the highest point in the Blue Ridge Mountains (5,946 ft.) and geologists say the Quartzite is more than a billion years old!

THE FINAL WORD: Touristy? You bet. A must if you're a rider? Absolutely. Sometimes, stretching the truth and telling your life-partner you love doing something that actually scares you results in experiences you wouldn't trade for anything, even if you can't take your curling iron with you.



most re-did my will and made a few final calls to my parents and step-kids in case something went wrong. Instead, I loaded up on Dragon's Tail hot sauce for gifts (which unfortunately was later confiscated by some overzealous TSA agents) and sent off a text to my girlfriend.

My husband is a good rider and I trust him. He always seems to know exactly the right speed to take a turn. It helps that the government lowered the speed limit to 30

Clockwise from opposite page top: Hitchcock and husband execute a turn on the Dragon; a view from the Black Mountain Overlook; the original Mast General Store in Valle Crucis, NC; the Balsam Mountain Inn in Balsam, NC.



THREE AZ RIDES

Interested in taking up bike-borne road-tripping? Tara recommends great Arizona routes to get you started.

1. Hwy 64 from Cameron to the Grand Canyon. Stop at the Trading Post in Cameron for sure.
2. The Apache Trail (Hwy 88) through Lost Dutchman and Canyon Lake to Tortilla Flat. A beautiful ride capped with great beer and burgers!
3. Route 80 from Benson to Bisbee. An overnight stay in a Bisbee B&B will make the trip special. Make sure to stop for drinks in Tombstone.

mph years ago. But I did feel for Kenn as the occasional Ducati rider would shoot past and give him a quick "Dude, sorry you're stuck with your wife on the back" look.

KILLING THE ENGINE

Our final highlight was driving up to Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina for the 360-degree views afforded by Mile High Swinging Bridge, a 228-foot suspension bridge that cost \$15,000 to build back in 1952. It's one thing to be afraid of heights, but add the word "swinging" to the mix and you'll get a 43-year-old Arizonan named Tara hugging the rails and doing her best snail impression as she makes her way across.

At the base of Grandfather Mountain is the Linn Cove Viaduct, the last section of the parkway to be completed and one of the most recognizable sites on the road. We ended our ride just north of the viaduct in Blowing Rock, a town named after an immense cliff 4,000 feet above sea level. Rumor is, the wind is so strong at the cliff that it will return objects thrown over the side. According to legend, a Chickasaw woman prayed to the Great Spirit and the winds returned her Cherokee lover back to her. Mine was already with me, so there was no need to challenge the theory. Plus, it was time for a bottle of wine, dinner with friends, and a spectacular sunset to close out the day. ■

Watch *Tara's Reel Travels* Thursday mornings on CBS5 KPHO or visit taraontv.com.

OVERNIGHT TIPS

The first thing I do when it comes to a motorcycle trip is plot our daily destinations. For a mobile weekend adventure, it usually means three nights in three different places. I'm a bed-and-breakfast girl – always have been. I love supporting the people who take pride in managing a B&B and I love swapping stories with others on the road. In my opinion, the key to finding a great B&B is "cross-referencing." Select Registry is a great site, but tends to feature the most high-end B&B's. Two others are bedandbreakfast.com and bnbfinder.com. I never plan a trip without consulting Trip Advisor, but I also take reviews lightly. Someone's experience with the wrong linen thread-count may result in a brutal review, whereas I'm just thrilled to have a bed with a sheet on it at all.

BIKE TALK

Despite the fact that I talk a lot, and not just on the job, I'm blessed to have a husband who still prefers the sound of my voice to a radio. Years ago, he surprised me with a pair of helmets outfitted with voice-activated communications systems. He won't admit it, but I'm sure there've been a few times where he "accidentally" turned off his head speaker. However, he's forgiven, as I'm usually too busy taking pictures from the back, on a seat perched slightly above his, for a better view.