



Back Roads

Take Me Home

Almost Heaven: West Virginia

I had heard about riding in the "Mountain State", West Virginia: a motorcyclist's paradise, where twisties are the norm, traffic is mild, and the scenery is spectacular. At last, I was able to plan a vacation to see it for myself.

I couldn't afford the time to ride my own motorcycle there, so I arranged transportation with **West Virginia Riders**, who offer rentals of Kawasaki motorcycles. I chose to

take the ZR-7 standard instead of the Drifter cruiser. Also, as I only had four days to ride and didn't want to waste a minute of it, I arranged to have a guide take me to some of the area's best riding. West Virginia Riders has many pre-arranged tours, but I asked for a custom four-day ride based around my own preferences, a goal that they achieved—in spades.

Reaching their home base in Morgantown proved easy enough. I flew to Pittsburgh and caught a shuttle bus to my hotel. I could have

taken a commuter plane straight to Morgantown, or if I'd been staying for a week instead of just a long weekend, West Virginia Riders would have sent someone to pick me up in Pittsburgh. But the shuttle bus was on time and convenient enough.

Brian Schreurs, of West Virginia Riders, met me at my hotel the night before the tour to go over paperwork and provide me with the ZR-7 I'd be using for the next several days. Reserved, yet friendly, he quickly knocked out the forms and gave me an overview of my machine.



The Kawasaki ZR-7 is a standard—well, we call it a “naked” now, but it’s a standard. Upright riding position, pegs directly below the rider, comfortable seat. It’s even air-cooled. It has enough power and handles very well. My rental was clean and seemed to be meticulously maintained.

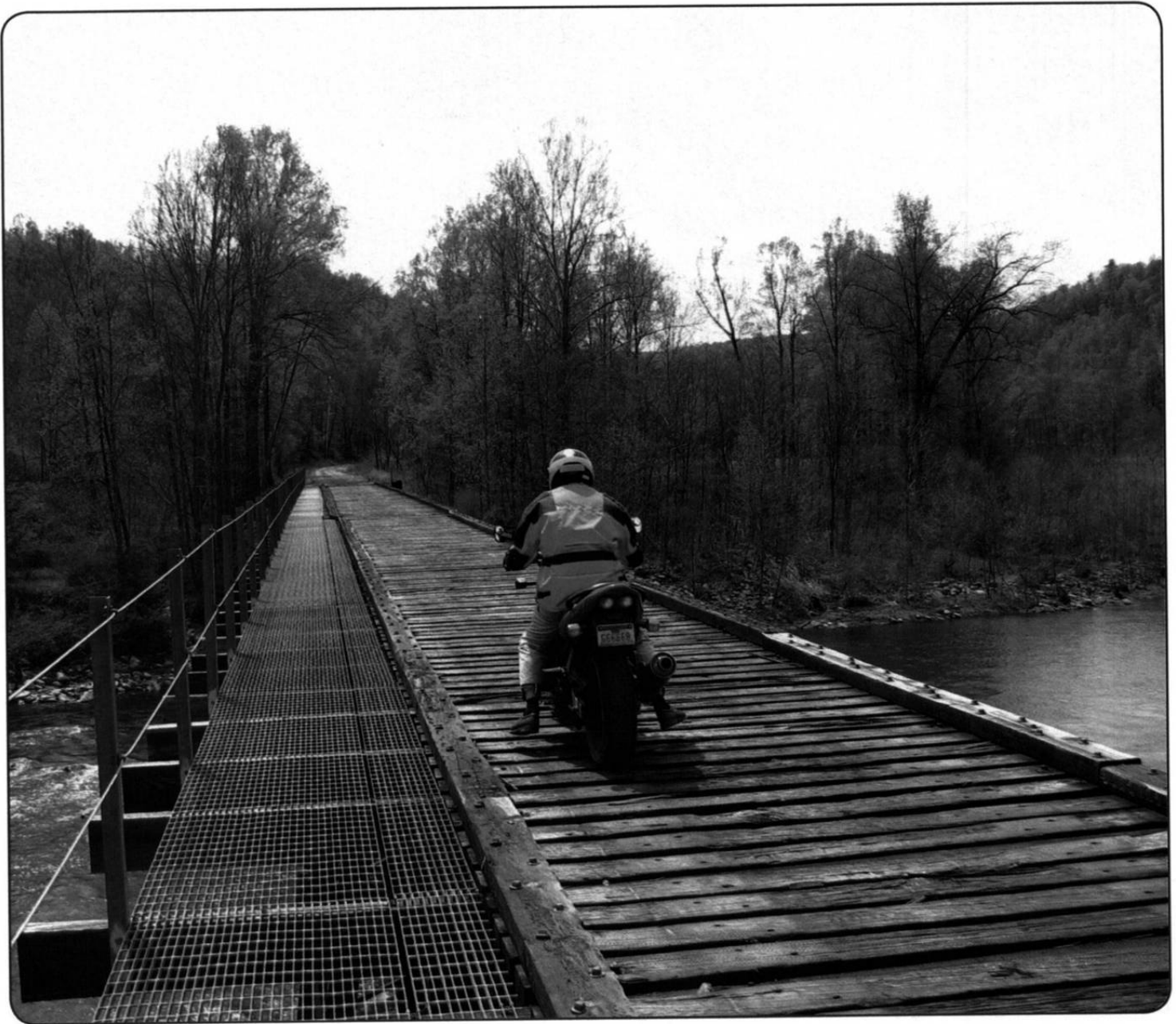
Next morning I got to put that ZR-7 to the test. Brian met me at my hotel to start our first day of touring and we were out of town cruising the hills within minutes. The chilly morning air kept me bundled up, but I was not

so cold as to be uncomfortable. Our first route followed well-maintained two-lane highways and we set a pace around 60 mph between small communities. The highway generally followed the valley’s contours, delivering up wide sweepers with occasional ridge crossings and providing glimpses of farm life.

Around one bend near Blacksville, much to my surprise was an F-86 Sabre! It was mounted on a pedestal at the entrance to a salvage yard lined up with a series of old pickup trucks. Brian explained that the air-

craft had once belonged to nearby West Virginia University. In the 1960’s wanting to be rid of it, they offered it for \$50 to anyone who could move it. The salvage yard had the means and the desire, and it’s been mounted here ever since that time.

We stopped to inspect the Fish Creek Covered Bridge, one of the seventeen 19th-century covered bridges still standing in West Virginia. The bridge remains open to traffic, so I made sure to ride across it. Modest though it was, the level of craftsmanship involved was plain to see,



making it all the more of a marvel that such effort would be put into crossing such a small body of water.

We left the state highway and entered a wildlife management area, the tour completely changed character. Gone were the fast sweepers and the quick pace, replaced with a leisurely ride through a park like setting, dodging a few potholes and marveling at the natural beauty that

threatened to swallow up the road. Here was "God's country" with just a ribbon of asphalt to trespass the area.

After exiting the wildlife area the road snaked down the side of a ridge in tight switchbacks, then meandered along a lush valley with occasional signs of human habitation.

The afternoon provided more of the same pattern: traveling un-

crowded state highways, only to dive off down nearly invisible back-country roads, fast-paced, smooth pavement; then turning to the very skeleton of the hills, hugging the sides of ridges and the banks of creeks. The ever-changing rhythm kept the ride engaging. We paused to gather our thoughts at a lake with a short bridge to its island before turning homeward. When at last we returned to Morgantown, I felt as



though I'd had a good taste of what was to come.

Next morning we headed off in a different direction: southeast, to the Monongahela National Forest. The route we took favored the state highways again, to cover the distance. This is not meant to imply the route was dull, however; hardly any road in West Virginia can manage to go in a straight line, and even "cov-

ering distance" means only that we attacked the curves with spirit rather than as sightseers.

Our route took us down US-50 across Laurel Mountain, a stretch of road often cited in "10 Best" lists as a must-ride for motorcyclists. It's a short segment, only a few miles long, but it is in excellent condition and well banked for hard riding. It's a wonder the nearby Cool Springs

wasn't packed with bikers. I only saw a couple motorcycles taking on the curves while we were there.

At last we came to a sign that could only be good news for motorcyclists: "Narrow road—sharp curves next 15 mi—road closed to thru truck traffic"! The temptation was to dial it up and see if the other side could be reached in 15 minutes, but all such thoughts were banished when I saw





what would be surrounding us over those miles. The road crawled up the side of a mountain, hugging its ridge, and affording wide and deep views of the valley at every curve. Black Fork River was close enough for wading at some points and so far below at others that its burbling couldn't be heard.

I stopped often to enjoy the view or take photos and Brian was accommodating to the leisurely pace, circling back, when necessary, to check on me. We saw quite a few deer along this segment, attesting to their boldness in protected lands.

When the sharp curves came to an end, we passed through Canaan Valley, a high-altitude valley covered with state parks and ski resorts. On the other side of the valley we visited Blackwater Falls, a short hike down from the parking lot and manageable in riding gear. With the spring waters, the falls were striking, beautiful and powerful.

It was then time to meander home and we began to generally work our way downhill. We stopped to explore a wind farm along a ridge, and then hit the backcountry roadways, eventually coming out at a quiet riv-

erside community that still primarily remained agricultural. Crossing over to the next valley, we picked up a state highway that took us home via Arthurdale, a planned community designed by Eleanor Roosevelt.

Today was to be a more thorough exploration of Laurel Mountain. We left the motel parking lot punctually, heading south first and then east. Brian mentioned he normally might have taken me along some street bike-friendly dirt roads, but with the recent rains they were likely to not be passable. I was relieved then that we stuck to paved roads for the day.

At Laurel Mountain we were crawling all over the ridge, using roads that I just had to wonder why they existed. There was even a chapel in one hidden valley showing signs of regular use yet out of sight of any other human habitation! We spent a good deal of time bashing about on these remote roads, which in some places were for all practical purpose merely paved trails, and that I would never have found had I ridden solo.

We stopped by the International Earth Station, a collection of satellite

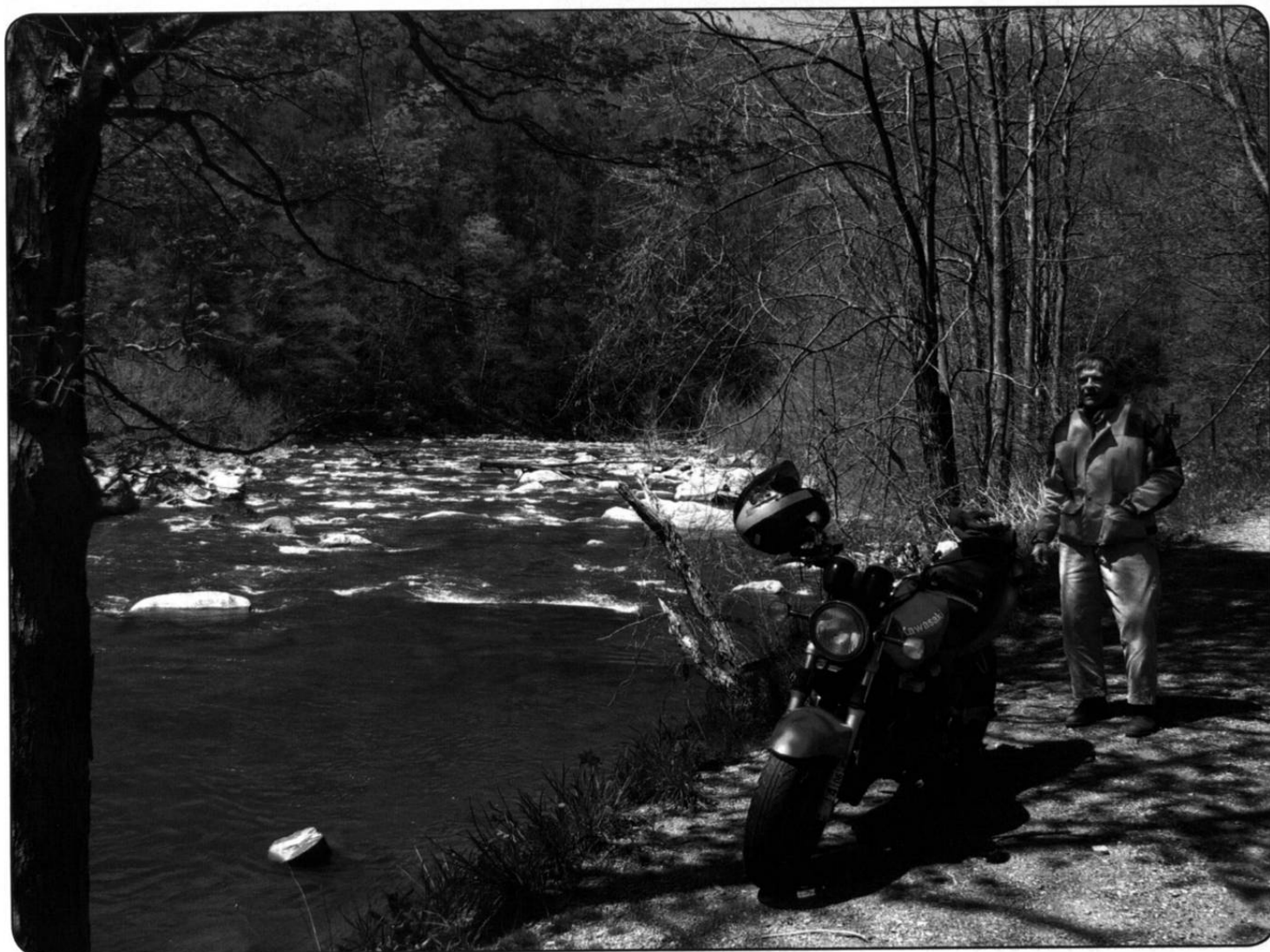
dishes hidden in a valley. This station played a critical role in the testing of ARPANET (what would eventually become the internet) in the 1970's, experimenting with transmitting signals to its counterpart in England.

Presently it handles over half of all communications entering and leaving the United States. Unfortunately, no one answered the phone at the gate while we were there, so a tour was impossible.

We headed north and picked up a road that followed the Cheat Riv-

er. A shallow, wide, and fast river, it bubbled alongside us energetically. Whitewater rafters launched from its banks to test their mettle against its rapids.

We stopped to investigate a curious manmade cave cut into the side of a mountain. I could not discern its purpose, and Brian hadn't been able to find any information on it either. It was extensive, with a high ceiling, something seemingly from a caveman movie. It wasn't blocked off, nor was it marked in any way. Surely, this is a modern day mystery.





Soon after exploring the cave we ran across an old railroad bridge across Cheat River. It, too, was not roped off, though the rails were long since gone; but the ties remaining were closely spaced, and on inspection it seemed to still be in use by ATVs. Naturally, I took the trusty ZR-7 across it a couple of times to get a taste of it.

Riding a motorcycle across an old trellis bridge, several stories above the shallow river, with no rails, was a breathtaking and adrenaline rushing experience.

With that excitement coursing through our veins, we made fast work of the state highway.

We took a detour to visit Cooper's Rock, a state park with an over-

look far above the Cheat River as it wends its way to the lake that bears its name. Brian then escorted me into the backcountry again, to an area known as the Laurel Highlands, where only mountain laurel is capable of growing, at least from what I could see. The wilds, once again, closed in around us.

On our way home, we made one last stop at Lake Lynn Dam, an old 1920's hydroelectric dam that is the cause for the existence of Cheat Lake, and delivers 52 megawatts to the surrounding communities.

Dawn of the final day and Brian had made plans for us to spend as much of it as possible on roads without a centerline. We first followed the Monongahela River, stopping to

inspect the Opekiska Lock and Dam, and a CSX diesel locomotive pulling dozens of railroad cars that were full to overflowing with coal.

We soon turned away from the river and rode state roads for a little while until we could find our way back into the bush.

Railroads are still key to the economy here. Along the way we encountered another diesel locomotive, again pulling nothing but railcar after railcar of coal. It was startling to see the effects of an energy-hungry nation in such stark terms.

Away from the two-lane roads and back on the sliver of rippling pavement, we massaged the foot of the hills with our machines as the



road danced below us. I had to stop for photos on several occasions—that we'd been riding this terrain for days did nothing to spoil it for me.

Road quality ranged from very good to borderline paved, and conquering it was its own special reward. But when at last the back road ended at another high-speed two-lane, Brian had another surprise in store: US-250. This is a top-ten road that favors motorcycles leaned over and scraping hard parts, so gnarly and convoluted in its course that there was little worry of a run-in with the law, no matter how hard I pushed, because just reaching the speed limit posed a serious challenge!

Exhausted by the end of it, we took a break before pressing on through the back roads. We passed the site of the former Elite Glass Co., long abandoned. West Virginia was once known for its glassware, but now only a few factories remain working. Our travel in this segment favored ridge-lines that afforded views into the valleys below that were dotted with the occasional farmhouse.

I spotted a cemetery behind a chapel, high on a hilltop, with a set of Bernard Coffindaffer's crosses standing sentinel. Brian was game for riding our machines up the thin trail to the summit, where I spent some time studying the inscriptions among the headstones. The small community nearby offered up many of its boys to fighting in WWII.

We crossed the Warrior Trail, a path used by Native Americans for five millennia to reach the Flint

Ridge area in Ohio. They used the flint there to make tools that they brought back to their tribes in the east. In 1784, Patterson's Pine Apple was built, and still stands. I was not able to tell whether it was an inn for travelers or just a homestead.

The ridge run continued for many miles, punctuated only by short valley crossings to get to the next ridge. When we finally did reach lower elevations for good, we passed directly below a working coal mine. Yes, below—its conveyor belts were built high above the road, transporting the black gold from its home under the mountains to a processing center we passed.

Brian led us back to Morgantown via the Monongahela River, where I could see moorings for barges full of yet more coal, and another giant structure built for the moving of coal from mountains to furnaces. Alas, inevitably we reached Morgantown and my adventure in wild, wonderful West Virginia came to an end.

The next morning I caught the shuttle back to the airport. The four days of riding was exhausting but unforgettable. And I'll be back.

"Take me home country roads, to the place where I belong, West Virginia...take me home country roads."

Beat the Heat!!



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