Experience Arkansas

The Ozark Moonshine Run

Photos and Text:
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Recently I was asked if I had a favorite day trip ride, and if so, where was it and would I share it with the rest of the riders out there.

Without a second's hesitation I responded with an exuberant "You bet!" Right here in my backyard is some of the finest riding in the U.S.A., if not the world. When the local riders want to become "one" with their motorcycles and experience a little bit of what the Ozarks has to offer, there is a day ride route of approximately 110 miles that takes the rider along mountain top ridges, into lush valleys, along the beautiful Buffalo River, and through countryside full of Ozark history and charm.

It wasn't too long ago when the hills surrounding the Harrison area were full of copper kettles and moonshiners practicing their crafts. There were several routes used to distribute the end product. It was this bit of history that inspired the naming of the following route, "Ozark Moonshine Run". This route will take you on a tour of the area that will be a close representation of the path that would have been run by the Moonshiners of days gone by.

We will start our riding adventure in the city of Harrison, early on a Saturday morning. We meet at one of the many local eateries, Big Daddy's, where locals gather to talk and catch up on the latest goings-on and get a good meal at the same time. There's nothing like a good country breakfast with some "stick to your ribs" biscuits and gravy before heading off into the wind. As we get ready to head on down the highway, I remember the slogan that

is on the "Welcome to Harrison" sign, "Adventure Awaits You".

Highway 7, an Arkansas Scenic Byway is probably motorcyclists best known road in Arkansas. Leaving Harrison heading south, Highway 7 stays fairly straight for about 8 miles until we pass the Highway 206 junction and then Highway 7 starts to live up to its reputation. Approximately one mile past the 206 junction, we come upon the Highway 7 Spur turnoff. This is where you will find "The HUB", mid Americas' largest motorcycle resort. No need for us to stop at The HUB this morning as we have full bellies and the journey has just gotten underway. Scenic Highway 7 with all of its twists, turns and sweepers will keep you on your toes. There are plenty of road signs to let you know what is coming up. The speed limit signs are there for a reason and one would do well to pay attention to these. There are several hairpin switchbacks and tight curves so stay alert.

On our way south to Jasper we pass over a wonderful old bridge at the Pruitt Access to the Buffalo River. This is a neat place to stop to walk down to the river. The views of the bluffs on the river are spectacular. This is also a favorite local swimming hole. A little further south on Highway 7 there is the Crawford General Store, a convenient place to stop and catch your breath, put a little fuel in the tank, grab a quick snack or some liquid refreshment.

The quiet little town of Jasper offers some sites of interest such as the Hillary Jones Wildlife Museum, The Ozark Café and wonderful little shops like Emma's Museum of Junk.

After a short time in Jasper it's back in the saddle to head south on Highway 7. After a short climb out of Jasper, things open up a little and the views become panoramic. It's easy to become distracted so try to keep focused on the road. There are several places that you can stop along the highway and take in the beauty of the Ozarks. The favorite, and the one we stop at, is the Scenic Overlook Gift Shop. Here there is a tower you can climb up into and really get a bird's eye view.

A little bit further down Highway 7, we come to our first turn which is Highway 374 to our left. One of the guys traveling with us describes this as one of the most visually stunning roads in the Ozark Moonshine Run; awesome views of farms and fields, old homesteads with the mountains in the background and the road ahead as it serpentines upwards towards Highway 123. At the Highway 123 junction we turn south. Highway 123 is marked with signs that warn "Very Crooked and Steep". This is Northwest Arkansas' version of the "Dragons Tail at Deals Gap". Not quite as many turns and they are a little more spread out but "WOW" what a ride!

If you watch closely on the right hand side of the road you will see a wooden sign which reads "Sam's Throne". A detour to the right will take you to the most popular rock climbing site in this area with fantastic bluff formations that are climbed daily by both amateur and professional climbers from around the globe. A short distance past the Sam's Throne turn off there is a scenic overlook where you can stop and take in the views of Sam's Throne and the mountains and valleys.

As you make the descent on Highway 123 watch for the signs that will take you back to Highway 7 northbound. Once on Highway 7 North, you can always stop at the "Whodathoughtit" gift shop in Booger Holler. Great place to catch your breath and check out some of the old interesting items. Highway 7 North a couple of miles and the signs for Highway 16 come into view. This is where we want to take Highway 16 toward "Deer", "Nail" and "Swain". Pay attention here as Highway 16 makes a sharp switchback to the South. Highway 16 meanders

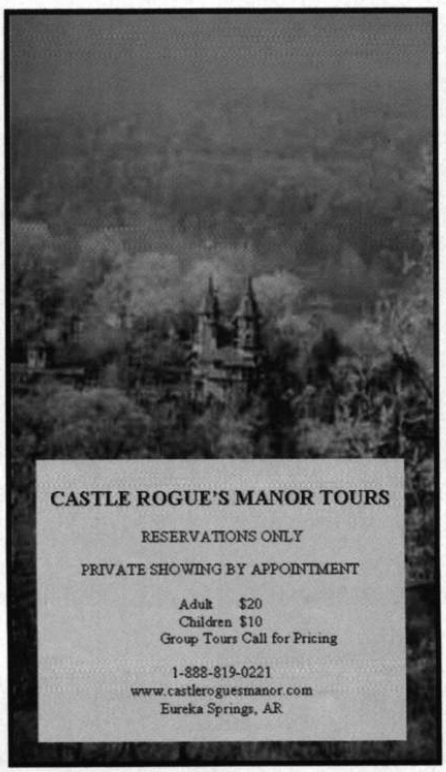
through these three little Arkansas farming communities on our way to Highway 21 where we will turn north towards "Boxley".

We are now in the Boxley Valley which is in the Buffalo National River Park. Highway 21 travels through the valley past river marshes and farmland that was settled over 200 years ago. Along Highway 21, you will pass several historical buildings, one of which is the Boxley Church and Community Building. A short stop here is always fascinating with a cemetery next to the church that is full of history dating back to pre-civil war times. On many trips you can view the vast elk herd in this valley.

Traveling down Highway 21 a few more miles we come to the Highway 43 junction. This can be a little confusing. We travel straight ahead on Highway 43. If you make the left turn here you will still be on Highway 21 which is a great ride also, but we will cover that at a later date. For now we want to be on Highway 43 heading toward the town of "Ponca". As we come into the town of Ponca there is a turn off to the right which is marked as "River Access". This is a favorite stopping point for many riders, as there are restroom facilities, a swimming hole and great photo opportunities of the Buffalo River.

Back on Highway 43 we come into the little community of Ponca. Right as we enter Ponca on the right side of the road, there is the "Elk Education Center". This is a must see attraction. They have life-sized exhibits of Elk as well as exhibits of the other wildlife and flora of the area. And the best part is the admission is FREE! Just down the road from the Elk Center there is the Buffalo Outdoor Center. The Buffalo Outdoor Center has canoe trips, horseback riding and other activities.

After a short walk around Ponca we are back on our bikes and starting the ascent out of Ponca Valley heading toward the top of Gaither Mountain. The road sweeps and turns in front of us with amazing views of the mountains and valleys. On your way up the mountain, there are several pull offs where you can stop and get that photo to take back to your friends, because words cannot describe the beauty and majesty of the landscape. When you get to the top of Gaither Mountain there is another favorite Scenic Overlook. It is right at the junction of Highway 43 and Orchard Point Road. At just about any given time of the daylight hours, you will find several bikes and cars stopped here taking it all in.



From the top of Gaither Mountain, it is a downhill ride back to Harrison where we started the "Moonshine Run". It has been just at 110 miles for the Run and we have been out for about 6 hours. This could easily have been 8 or 10 hours had it been our first time making the Run. There is much to see and there is always conversation with the locals and visitors along the way. The Ozark Moonshine Run is a must do ride for any motorcyclist that is visiting the Northwest Arkansas area. The Run is becoming popular but not yet overcrowded like some better promoted routes.

We might even run into each other at one of the stopping points along the Run or at The Dogpatch Biker Bash, September 7th - 9th. located on the first leg of the Ozark Moonshine Run. You can check out the info on the rally at **www.DogpatchBikerBash.com**

Or give the Harrison Convention and Visitors Bureau a call at 870-741-1789 **www.HarrisonArkansas.org**

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