

MOTORCYCLING



What do you do when your boyfriend invites you to ride on a famous **SPORTS CAR/MOTORCYCLE ROAD** with 318 curves in 11 miles?

Chase the Tail of the Dragon

“TREE OF SHAME,” READS A LARGE SIGN NAILED TO A 40-FOOT-HIGH sweet gum tree covered in motorcycle parts — fenders, seats, exhaust pipes, clutch handles — as well as a hospital ID bracelet. The tree is a makeshift shrine to the many riders who have crashed on the notorious “Tail of the Dragon,” an 11-mile road with 318 curves, known as the world’s No. 1 motorcycle and sports-car route. This piece of Smoky Mountain asphalt in Deals Gap, N.C., on the Tennessee-North Carolina state line, has no stop signs, no intersecting roads and no houses. The road is as high as 1,955 feet above sea level with enough hairpin turns and drop-offs to trigger many accidents, thus explaining the Tree of Shame.

I am not a motorcycle rider, but I have come to do the Tail of the Dragon on the back of my boyfriend, Jamie’s, BMW R 1200 GS. It’s not something I want to do. Until I met Jamie, my image of motorcycle riders was black leather, silver studs and tattoos. Jamie has none of those features. But relationships are about compromises, and he’s agreed to join me on a vacation in Asheville, N.C., if I’ll do

this scary ride with him. Of course, he doesn’t use the word *scary*; he says “thrilling” and “fun” and “exhilarating” and tells me I’ll love it so much I’ll want to do it at least twice.

I doubt that — certainly not as I look up at the bike parts riders have added to the Tree of Shame to immortalize their dance with the Dragon. One red-and-white Superbike fairing reads: “I could not help it. The faster I went, the faster I wanted to go.” On an upside-down neon-green fender is the lament “The Dragon bit me.” A dented black helmet reads, “Ouch.” Leaning on the tree trunk is a brake disc that reads, “My fishing buddy, you’ll be missed. RIP.” Jamie puts his arm around my shoulder and says, “Come on, don’t look at that stuff. Let’s go have some fun.”

Going on a motorcycle ride is not like getting in a car, buckling the seat belt and taking off. Even when you’re riding behind an

Want to tour Asheville, N.C., and ride the Tail of the Dragon?
US Airways offers eight peak daily flights to Asheville (AVL) from Charlotte (CLT).

experienced driver like Jamie, who's been riding for years, there's an entire production to getting ready. First, I zip up my "armor," a BMW ballistic jacket padded with foam on the elbows, shoulders and back. Next, I put on my helmet and buckle it — tough to do because I can never find the second metal ring. Then, I carefully thread my sunglass stems over my ears inside the helmet, don my leather gloves and wait for Jamie to start the bike. When he nods for me to get on, I climb over the back seat the same way I'd get on a saddle. But, unlike a horse, his bike has hard motorcycle cases on either side, so I have to mount without smashing my knee.

We start up the trail and I wrap my arms around Jamie's waist, something I usually find comforting — but not now. My mouth is so dry I can barely swallow. I've done some pretty scary things, from rappelling headfirst down a gorge in New Brunswick, Canada, to rolling down a mountain inside a giant inflatable globe, but everything seems tame when compared to this. I try to take my mind off it by reliving the great time we had in Asheville

the previous day, beginning with breakfast at Double D's Coffee & Desserts, which is in a converted double-decker bus from Bristol, England. Next was a trip to the Biltmore Estate, George Vanderbilt's 250-room mansion. We took the Architect's Tour, so we could look out at the endless panoramic view from the roof. Then we went to a Vanderbilt Collection Exhibition at nearby Antler Hill Village.

If You Go

Double D's Coffee & Desserts
41 Biltmore Ave., Asheville, N.C.
(828) 505-2439
www.doubledscoffee.com

Biltmore
One Lodge St., Asheville, N.C.
(800) 411-3812
www.biltmore.com

"The Vanderbilts at Home and Abroad" Exhibition
The Biltmore Legacy in Antler Hill Village
One Lodge St., Asheville, N.C.
(800) 411-3812
www.biltmore.com/visit/village-winery

I was looking at Napoleon's 19th-century chess set when I saw Jamie studying a Harley Davidson Model 20-J motorcycle. Above the bike, a sign noted that from 1913 to 1917, Vanderbilt owned six motorcycles that his staff used for mail delivery and security. I read the employee rules, dated July 1914: "Racing, scorching, or fast running are prohibited." Jamie explained that scorching meant burning rubber. A security guard was also looking covetously at the motorcycle, so I asked her, "What have you heard about the Tail of the Dragon?"

"Lots of dangerous turns," she answered.

"IT'S GOING TO BE MUCH MORE THAN dangerous," I think as I peer around Jamie's back and see he's climbing the Dragon's Tail at 65 mph. We left Asheville very early in the morning to be first up the trail, and, thankfully, there's no one ahead of us. I searched motorcycle expressions on the Internet before we came, and I call out to Jamie, "Keep the dirty side down," meaning keep the rubber on the road. But he can't

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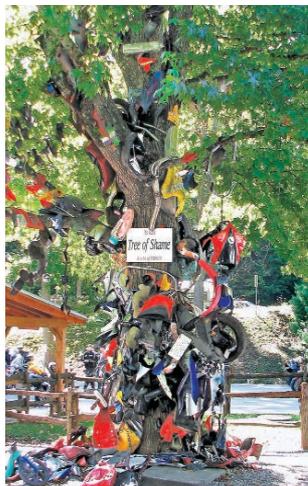


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hear me over the engine noise. We have only one signal: If I put my hand in a fist, that means stop, but it's not worth telling him to stop just to spout out my new phrase. A motorcycle driver hunched in his seat comes toward us, but I'm too scared to take my hand off Jamie's waist to wave.

We begin to carve our first turn, and Jamie slows down, thankfully. He also leans into the turn, and I lean with him as he has instructed me. Just as we get halfway around the arc, Jamie suddenly accelerates. What is he doing? We come out of that turn alive, and he slows down again for the next turn, but only momentarily. Then he guns it. We hit the third curve. Each time, he slows down to 20 mph and then speeds up to 70. My stomach



The Tree of Shame honors Tail of the Dragon riders who had accidents.

has dropped. It's like a roller coaster, except that instead of getting whipped, we're doing the whipping, and every turn is scarier than the last. A trailer loaded with horses passes in the opposite direction, and I remember this route isn't just a sports drive but also a public road. That doesn't give me any confidence. Two sheriff cars pass in the opposite direction. Accident?

Jamie passes a red Corvette on the straightaway and this time I feel the torque. I can still hear my heart pounding, but suddenly it's not out of terror. It's more exhilaration. Maybe this is scary, but it's a good scary; a major adrenaline rush. No wonder Jamie loves riding his bike. A Miata is ahead, and I'm thinking: "Pass him, Jamie! Pass

him!" We surge past the car and I scream "YAY," even though no one can hear me. A parade of brightly painted Mini Coopers moves in the opposite direction. But, I think, they're just a little circus train and we're King of the Road! I sit up taller in my seat and loosen my death grip around Jamie's waist.

A photographer on the side of the road snaps shots, and I flash him a gloved thumbs-up sign. A sport-bike rider zooms past us leaning into the turn, his knee intentionally dragging along the asphalt. So that's why they have those thick hockey-puck knee pads. That might be fun to try sometime. We pass a blue Harley and another Miata, and suddenly we're at the end of the Dragon. Jamie turns around, and just before we head back down, I high-five him. Maybe I don't have tattoos, but I'm feeling pretty tough, like a real biker chick, smug and proud that together, we slew the Dragon. 🏍️

MARGIE GOLDSMITH, a New York City-based writer, has written for *Robb Report* and *Elite Traveler*. In the June 1, 2013, issue of *American Way*, she wrote about learning to play the harmonica.

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San José, Costa Rica – 3 de abril, 7:00 p.m.

México D.F., México – 29 de abril, 7:30 a.m.

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