

Crooked and Steep Next 27 miles

On writing this article, Carrie and I have just come back from a 9 day, 3,000 mile, 9 state vacation ride on our bike. We made a trip to the Smoky Mountains in Eastern Tennessee and North Carolina then across Tennessee to through Missouri to northern Arkansas and the Ozark mountains. Along the way there were MANY ups and downs and LOTS of curves. That is really the focus of this article, riding in the hills and mountains and in “strange” territory.



First off, most all of us are “flatlanders.” The roads around here are straight, smooth and featureless for the most part. We calculate how long it takes to get some place based on the distance and constant speed (ie...45 miles = 45 minutes). We get places “fast” because our roads are long and straight (I’m not going to address traffic here).

Being in the mountains and hills is being in a time warp for us. We have to “slow down” and concentrate much more on what we are doing. Those same 45 miles can take an hour and a half.

Mountain riding brings in to play a whole new group of hazards that we don’t have to deal with here in the Houston area. Carrie and I had some difficulties and I want to share with you all some of them so you can be prepared if you are in some of the same situations.

Our very first problem came while entering the Natchez Trace, a beautiful road that allows no commercial vehicles and has a constant speed of 50 MPH throughout. On pulling up to the entrance to the Trace, the road was up-hill and slanted severely to the right at the stop sign. Now y’all know I have short legs and am on the balls of my feet at stop signs any ways. At this particular stop sign where the road slanted hard right, the tire decided to go hard right as I stopped and when I went to put my foot down to stop the hard right lean there was no road under my short right leg! Oh it was there alright just farther down than I could reach! Over we go....I, of course felt like an idiot and after some effort (remember the bike was also headed up hill) we got ‘er up and was on our merry way, a little humbler for the experience. The lesson to be learned here: Watch the angle of the road when you stop. See if it slants one way or the other...lean to the low side ☺.

Some other areas of concern are, blind curves, blind hills, riding at night, and unusual roads and strange things on them.

Blind curves and blind hills are particularly frightening. You don’t know what’s around the bend or at the top of the hill. SLOW DOWN! Don’t over drive your line of sight. The problem you may encounter may not have anything to do with how you are riding (ie. vehicles coming over in to your lane, or debris in the road). On the curves, stay as far away from the center line as you safely can. This allows for those instances when encroachment in to your lane may occur. Keep your eyes on the road. This is no time to sightsee. We did “the Tail of the Dragon.” As far as I know, it was a series of wicked curves, up and downs and the white line on the right and the yellow line on the left. I have no idea what anything else looked like. Carrie said it was very scenic! Blind hills are some of the same. Slow down as you near the top of that hill. There could be a deer, a dog or a buffalo just off the rise. There could also be a car pulling out of its driveway just like it does every morning and usually there is no traffic. Blind hills are scary because you usually have some speed built up when you get to the top.

Riding at night in the mountains is another time to exercise extreme caution. There are many things us flat-landers are not used to. Fog collects down in the hollows (valleys) and makes visibility extremely difficult. Animals are a big problem at night. The night time brings them all out to forage for food, armadillos, possums, raccoons, skunks and deer just to name a few. If you see one, slow way down. You just don’t know what they are going to do or where they are going to go. Once again, don’t over-drive your line of sight at night and make sure you are seen by other drivers.

Strange roads and unusual conditions can occur in the mountains. One problem is the leftovers from the last paragraph. Road kill abounds every morning in the mountains from drivers that weren't as careful as hopefully we will be. That leaves us with two special problems, avoiding them and more importantly avoiding the buzzards that are feeding on them. If you approach a dead animal on the road, be very watchful for vultures hanging just out of sight. They are big and slow and sometimes not too willing to give up their new found meal. Meeting one while riding could be disastrous. Something else we don't see much around here is rock slides. You see signs in the road for them. That means they are a real problem to be on the look out for. Fallen tree limbs are also abundant on the forest and mountain roads. The light/shade from the trees in the forest of the mountains makes it very difficult to see the road surface. The dappled light hides things like bumps, holes and obstructions.

Riding in the mountains is an awesome experience if you just temper it with some common sense riding. The memories we will take back from our trip will last a life time. The next time you see that sweet road sign that says "crooked and steep next 27 miles" just smile, ride smart and enjoy, because if you see a sign like that, you are nowhere near here!

Till next time....think safe, ride safe, be safe. It's not about the destination, it's about the ride!

Ted and Carrie Geier, Chapter Educators

Certified Tour Riders

ATGATT is where we are at!