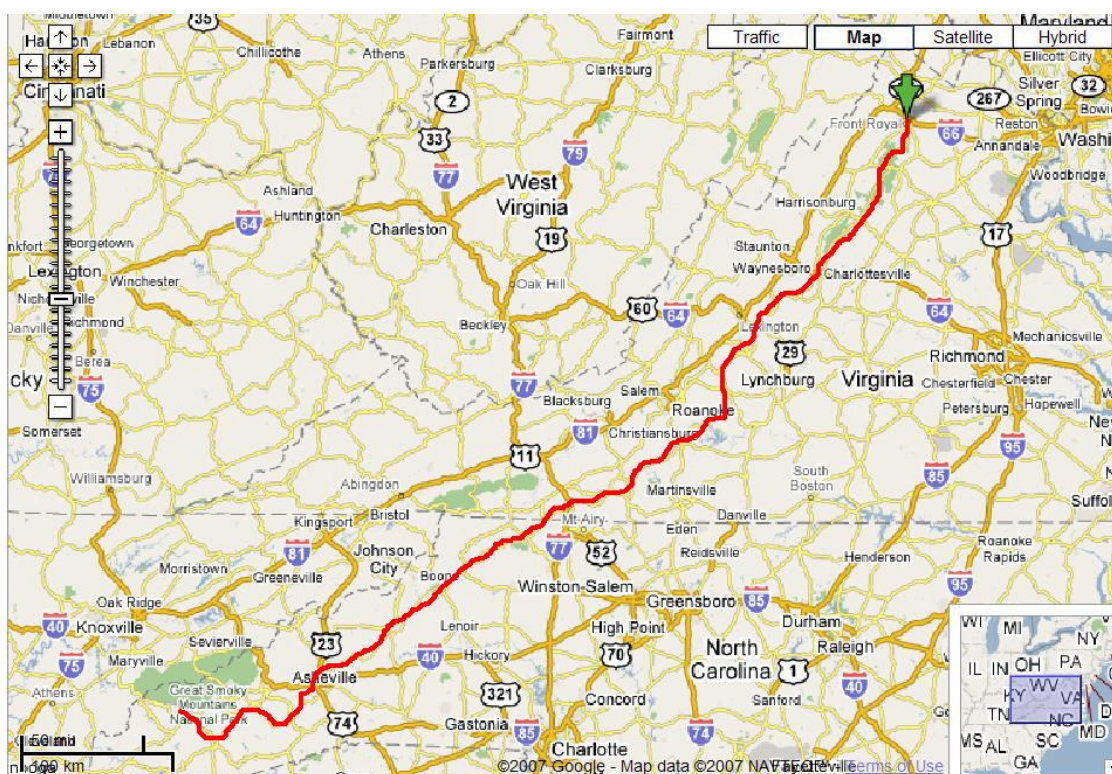


# Black Bear Adventures' Skyline Drive/Blue Ridge Parkway Bicycle Tour

August 11-21, 2007

By: Mike McGeough

Karen and I went on an 11 day bicycle tour of Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway with Black Bear Adventures, ( <http://www.blackbearadventures.com/> ), from August 11-21, 2007. Curtis Cramblett, who is also an ACTC member, Ed Karrels and his wife Nancy Caron, who live here in Silicon Valley, and Steve Geist from Denver, CO, were also on the tour. The tour originated in Front Royal, VA, (80 miles west of Washington, DC), and ended in Cherokee, North Carolina at the entrance to the Great Smokey Mountains near the Georgia border. The trip was advertised as riding on clean smooth pavement with little traffic and no stop signs. I really didn't believe that, but the pavement was fabulous and there was not a single stop sign or stop light over the 575 miles of the tour.



Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway Route.

All riding was in the Shenandoah and Blue Ridge Parkway National Parks. All cross roads used overpasses with traffic control on the connecting side of the road, not on ours. There was not a flat spot on the tour. All riding was either climbing or descending. The curves were all gentle and rarely required braking on the downhills. The extended climbs were normally in the 4-6% grade range with a few short pitches reaching 11-12%. These were all gentle hills compared with our Billy Goats. The longest climbs were in the 3000 ft range. Our highest point on the tour was at 6,578 ft elevation on Mt. Mitchell. It would have been at the top of Mount Mitchell, the highest point east of the Mississippi River, at 6684 ft., (400 ft. higher than the more famous Mt. Washington in NH), but the observation deck was closed for reconstruction. I registered 625 miles with 60,359 ft of climbing on the tour. (These were "Donny Axtell" rides each day with 100 ft. of climbing per mile). Please note that Black Bear Adventures has rides for all types of riders. This was one of the most demanding rides they host. Visit their web page for information on their other rides.

This was our 4<sup>th</sup> bicycle tour in 4 years. Our first tour was a camping tour, the others were in hotels. We have been accustomed to nice hotels and buffet meals on tours. We were very pleasantly surprised at the food and lodging arranged by Paul Woods, the owner of Black Bear Adventures. Paul and his father-in-law, George were very gracious and courteous hosts. They even refused to allow us to carry our luggage to our rooms. We stayed in lodges and hotels in the parks along the route. The hotel rooms were very large with great views. They were luxurious as rated by this rider. We ate at fine restaurants and could order anything we wanted from the menu. We actually got tired of prime rib, filet mignon, and luscious appetizers. Desserts were a must except for 2 nights when we followed dinner with a visit to a local ice creamery. One of our riders even ordered multiple entrees such as prime rib and trout since he was so hungry after riding. Alcoholic beverages were not included in the price of the tour. When we signed up for this tour, I thought it was expensive at \$2,700 per person plus flights, an extra hotel night, bicycle shipping charges. However, after experiencing the luxury of Black Bear Adventures, I realize it was a very good deal. We hope to ride another tour with Black Bear Adventures soon.

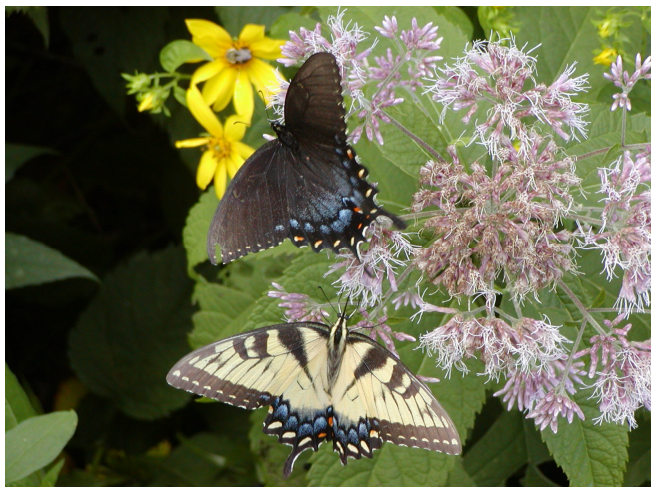
Support was most often accomplished by Paul and George packing up the van for the start of the ride or after a rest stop. The 6 of us would head out for the ride. George stayed back with the van so we could get a ways down the road. After we were on the road, Paul, who is a very strong, fast cyclist, would then chase us down and check up on each of us as he passed us by. This accomplished a sweep for each segment of the ride. George would also come from behind and check on us as he passed us in the van. By the time we would get to the next rest stop, both Paul and George would be set up and waiting for us.

We started the adventure on day 1 by flying to Asheville, NC, which was the end point of the tour. We arrived in Asheville the evening before the tour started. Asheville is considered the Berkeley of the south east. There are lots of very “interesting” people in Asheville. We especially enjoyed the drum circle in the park near the hotel. That was entertainment! On the first day of the tour we rode in the Black Bear Adventures SAG from Asheville, NC to Front Royal, VA, to meet up with the other riders. We stayed at the Wayside Inn in Middletown, VA which is the longest operating inn with continuous operation since 1797.



The Wayside Inn, Middletown, VA. The entire route was filled with historical points of interest. On the right you can see Ed and Nancy were excited to start riding. Behind them is Black Bear Adventure's SAG with our bikes.

Day 2, our first day of riding took us 54 miles into the park, or half way through Skyline Drive to Big Meadows in Shenandoah National Park.



The scenery was spectacular, both in the micro and macro views.

Day 3, the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of riding took us 58 miles to the end of the Shenandoah National Park and Skyline Drive. We shuttled in the van to the hotel just outside of the park. The next morning we shuttled back to the intersection of Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway for the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of riding. We covered 88 miles and 8508 ft. of climbing to the Peaks of Otter.



The end of Skyline Drive and the start of the Blue Ridge Parkway along with our gang of 6 guests with Paul Wood, our host, in the middle.



Here you see George taking good care of Nancy while Karen fights off the busy traffic on a long climb.



Not all adventures were done on our bikes!



Here you can see poor Ed close to starvation. There just wasn't enough good food to eat! On the right you see our hosts loading the van for start of another day.



Busy traffic going through this intersection. On the right is the Mabry Mill which is the focal point of postcards for the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Our 4<sup>th</sup> day of riding, day 5 of the tour, was a 94 mile ride to Woodberry Inn. There are no services in the area, so Paul arranged a chef to create a special meal for us. After we were all full, our chef came around with a platter of beef offering us as much as we like. Even I refused more!



Mountain top overlook along the Parkway. The highlight of the evening for the tourists is watching the cattle walk into the sunset at Bluffs Lodge.

Day 6 took us 69 miles, crossing from Virginia into North Carolina, to Bluffs Lodge. We walked a short distance to cross the parkway to go to the only restaurant in the area. It specializes in fried chicken. And it was quite the treat. I think I am the only person that ate his entire meal...my friends started passing me leftovers.

Day 7 was a 60 mile day to the gorgeous Chetola Resort in Blowing Rock, NC. I dropped my camera at dinner the night before and could no longer take zoom photos. Many of my photos from day 6 on were blurry and had to be deleted.



Here is the only photo of Curtis being a tourist! We, however, did everything touristy including a stop at the Moses Cone Mansion which is a part of the National Park and is now a high end arts and crafts store.

Blowing Rock is a very touristy area. The attraction is the beautiful scenery in the area and the legend of The Blowing Rock which is a love story rooted in Cherokee Indian Lore. We had a rest day, Day 8, in Blowing Rock. The smart riders used the rest day to get a massage, lie around the pool and spa and enjoy the arts and crafts fair in town. Karen and I on the other hand, used the day to tour on foot. We walked about 12 miles to see The Blowing Rock, the entire town of Blowing Rock, the arts and crafts fair, the local museum, souvenir shops, etc. My legs were more worn out from that walk than from any other day of bicycling.



The Chetola Resort where we had a rest day. Instead of resting we walked until our legs were tired. On the right is the focal point of the city, The Blowing Rock.



Karen at the arts and craft fair. And, oh, did I mention we took 3 trips to Kilwin's candy and ice cream shop in Blowing Rock?

Day 9, our 7<sup>th</sup> day of riding, followed 1 ½ days of lots of eating and walking. Getting back on the bike was a welcomed event. We rode 55 miles, (including a 6 mile detour to the mineral museum), to Little Switzerland where the local logo is LSD for Little Switzerland Downtown. We all gathered at the Little Switzerland Café for lunch. The others checked into the hotel while we rode back down the parkway to see a museum on local minerals, gems and mining operations.



On the way to Little Switzerland we crossed over the postcard perfect viaduct which was the last section completed. We also took a hike through the woods to see Linville Falls.



The few times there were sharp turns they made darn sure you knew it as this sign shows. On the right is Karen entering one of the many tunnels we rode through.

We were starting to go through tunnels. The further we rode south, the more numerous the tunnels became. We were warned they were dark and we should be cautious. Well, the first long tunnel was on a downhill. I didn't slow down enough to get my light out, put it on my bike and lower my sunglasses. I entered the tunnel with my eyes focused on the bright opening on the other end. My headlamp was in my right hand. My left hand was on my brakes, and my dark sunglasses prevented me from seeing anything except the light ahead. True tunnel vision. I started slowing as I got dizzy and disoriented. I was targeting the center of the light ahead, but feared I would hit the gravel on the shoulder of the road on the side of the tunnel. I told Karen I was slowing, she told me not to slow down. I fiddled with my brakes and light until I exited on the other end. I didn't do that again!!! After that I was prepared to enter the tunnels as slow speeds, with my lights attached to my handlebars, my lights on, and my sunglasses off! I'm surprised I didn't crash in there.

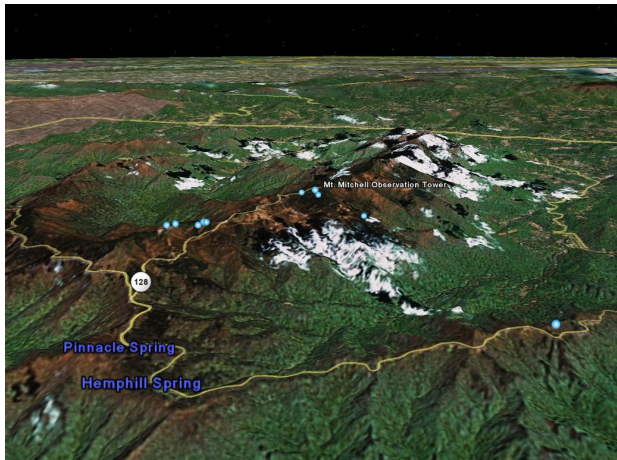


Little Switzerland Inn front and back.

Our 10<sup>th</sup> day, 8<sup>th</sup> day of riding, was 86 miles and 10,054 ft of climbing including our side trip up Mt. Mitchell. Mt. Mitchell is the highest point in the USA east of the Mississippi river. But since it is really only a high point on a long ridge of high points, many over 6000 ft, it is not as impressive as many other mountains that get all the attention like Mt. Washington. We all raced the supplemental 4.8 mile climb to the parking lot at 6,578 ft. The observation deck was closed for reconstruction, so we could not get to the 6,684 ft. summit. However, while everyone else was riding the long descent back to the Blue Ridge Parkway, Karen, Steve, and



I enjoyed the museum on top of the mountain. It described the environment, geology and history of the mountain and the Appalachian Mountains in general. We then had the road to ourselves as we headed to the 3000 ft climb up Pisgah Mountain to the Pisgah Inn. The meal at the inn was fabulous and the wait staff was an eclectic mix that kept us entertained.



Mt. Mitchell as viewed from Google Earth and our gang at the parking lot on top; Steve, Curtis, Paul, me, (Mike with the beautiful helmet hair), Karen, Nancy and Ed.



Did I mention it is dark in the tunnels? Here is the view of the limitless mountain scenery.

And then came the last day, our trip from Pisgah to the terminus of the Blue Ridge Parkway in Cherokee, NC. Although it was mostly downhill, dropping to 2100 feet at the end of the parkway, there was still 6,600 ft. of climbing over our last 65 miles. We dressed in our Black Bear Adventures jerseys and headed out again.



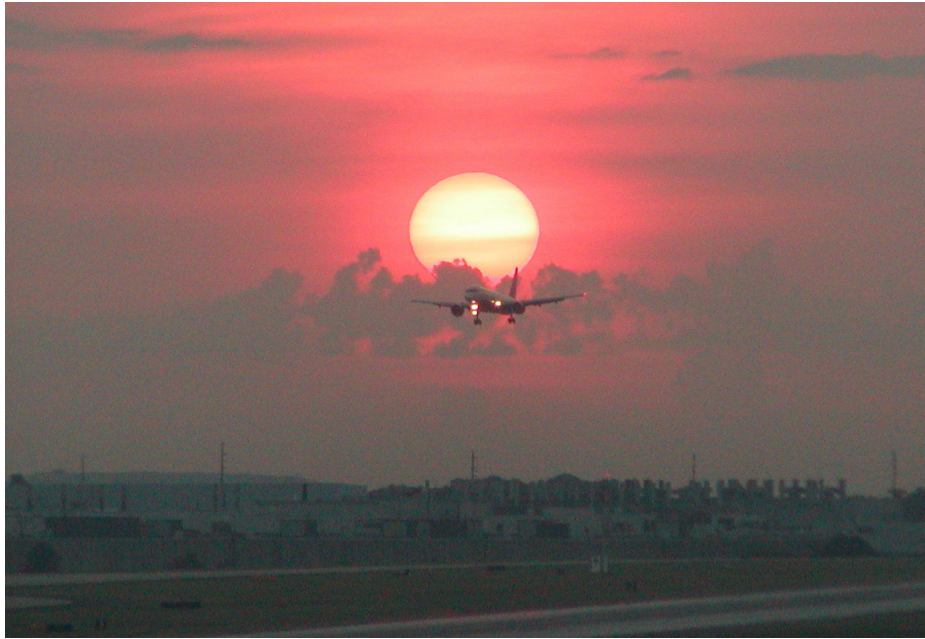
Here we are on the start of our last day. Paul, Steve, Nancy, Ed, George, me, Curtis, and Karen headed out on the gorgeous Blue Ridge Parkway for our last hurrah.



Before the end, we still had some climbing to do before reaching the highest point on the parkway and dropping down 4000 ft to Cherokee, NC on the edge of the Great Smokey Mountains.

For 11 days we had beautiful weather. It was the worst heat wave ever to hit the south east. However, up in the mountains where we were riding it was generally quite comfortable for cycling. Our weather luck came to an end with about 10 minutes left to ride. As we approached the end of the parkway, the thunder and lightning appeared and it started to pour. The pure rain water washed away the sweaty salt stains from our gloves and shorts. We had been sweating all day, every day, and the rain felt great. There were mile markers every mile along both Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway. We stopped at the last marker, number 469 for a final photo.

After reaching the southern terminus of the parkway, we shuttled back to the Hayward Park Hotel in Asheville to pack up our bikes, shower and have a wonderful Tapas meal at Zambra's



We had a very early flight home from Asheville. I caught this photo of an airplane landing in front of the rising sun as we were waiting to board our plane.