

Mabry Mill

This adventure is easy to find, fun to ride, and offers the most photographed scenery on the Blue Ridge Parkway. You and your bike will be transported back in time as you near Mabry Mill. At the Mill, you can tour a homestead from the 1860s, and stop for breakfast, lunch, or coffee. Once you turn off the Blue Ridge Parkway, the road becomes twistier and the scenery more diverse. You'll ride through Tuggle's Gap, over Lover's Leap, and into Meadows of Dan, home to the motorcycle-only campground known as Willville.



GAS

Gas is available at the start and at miles 1.6, 7.6, 37.5, 43.8, 53.6, and mile 61.6 at the ride's end.

GETTING TO THE START

This ride starts in Virginia on I-77 at exit 8 (VA 148). Upon reaching the bottom of the exit ramp, turn north on VA 148 toward US 52. Reset your trip meter at the bottom of the ramp.

RIDE OVERVIEW

Leaving the ultra-efficient (and ultra-boring) I-77 behind, VA 148 and US 52 work together to get you back to the motorcycle roads you long for. In under two miles, these two will deliver you onto the welcoming pavement of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Once on the Parkway, you'll turn north and begin to see why it's one of the most famous motorcycle destinations in the world. The asphalt is in excellent condition, there's no commercial vehicle traffic, and the mountainous scenery is awe-inspiring. On the side of the Parkway, there are several interesting pullouts and overlooks, but a few really stand out. The first of these interesting sights is the Puckett Cabin, just over 11 miles into this run. You'll find the Puckett Cabin on the left as you're northbound on the Parkway. Built in the late 1800s, it's too fragile to go inside, but you can peer through the windows. This residence, surrounded by a fence row, was once the home of Orlena Hawks Puckett, who worked her entire life as a midwife. She attended her last delivery at the tender age of 102. Ironically, while Mrs. Puckett performed her midwife duties at over a thousand births, none of Mrs. Puckett's own

children survived infancy. Don't linger too long, there are more sights up the road.

One mile north of the Puckett Cabin is Groundhog Mountain Overlook. You'll find this lookout on the right side of the road with a large paved parking area, including restrooms. The lookout tower is well worth the 50-yd. walk from the parking area. Unlike the locked Puckett Cabin, this overlook is unlocked, but like the Puckett Cabin, it is a primitive log structure. Climb a few steps to the second floor to get a bird's-eye view of the surrounding area. Examples of different kinds of fencing used by the settlers of the area encircle the lookout tower. To learn all about the differences and advantages of picket, snake rail, buck rail, and post-and-rail fencing, spend a few minutes reading the informative signs.

Back on the Parkway, ride north toward the town of Meadows of Dan. Along the way, you'll pass the Mayberry Trading Post, open daily from 9 to 5, offering country crafts and refreshments, but no fuel. You'll cross Round Meadow Creek and may

TOTAL DISTANCE
65.7 miles

TIME FRAME
2 hours from start to finish.
Include some time to explore Mabry Mill or dine in one of the many restaurants vying for your travel dollar.

want to take the 20-minute loop hike that begins from the parking area on the left side of the road just after crossing the creek.

You'll ride over US 58 past Meadows of Dan. Don't worry—you'll be back there in a little while. This route continues north on the Parkway and back in time to 1910. You might notice the reduced speed limit before you notice the signs for Mabry Mill. On the right side of the road is the Mabry Mill Visitor Center, gift shop, restrooms, and of course, the mill itself. The restaurant is open from 7:30 am to 6 pm, with reasonable prices for breakfast and lunch items. The lunch special is usually barbecue. The gift shop next



Mabry Mill is one of the most photographed sights on the Blue Ridge Parkway.



*Hay harvest
on Groundhog
Mountain.*

door offers t-shirts, postcards, and nearly any other trinket you might need to prove that you visited Mabry Mill—oh yeah, the mill! Leave the restaurant/gift shop/information center and walk toward the mill. Built in 1910 by Ed Mabry, it was used to mill corn and lumber. After building it, Mr. Mabry realized he didn't have sufficient water flow to turn the millstone fast enough to grind the corn or saw the lumber, so he built two additional flumes. By capturing three streams, he had plenty of power. Today, the flumes still stand as a testament to Mr. Mabry's perseverance in bringing a mill to this remote area. Waterpower was used until the 1930s, when it was replaced by a gasoline engine. The National Park Service has beautifully and painstakingly preserved this mill, and it still grinds corn on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.

The park also includes a blacksmith shop, a cabin, and even a moonshine still. Park employees and volunteers wear period clothing and do necessary work as it would have been done in the late 1800s. A cabin, built in 1860, stands in the place of the Mabry's home, which was destroyed by fire. It

is open for visitors, and its furnishings include a small loom on which a blanket is being made. Outside, along the short path that leads you from the mill to the cabin and past the blacksmith shop, you might find a young man recaning a chair or performing some other task of the period. The moonshine still is not open for tours (or samples!), but you can see its many pots and wild twists of tubing. Moonshine had an undeniable influence on the area's economy during the 1890s. Before turning back northbound on the Parkway, take a photo of the Mabry Mill from the parking area's exit driveway (it's one of the vantage points for a picture).

Rolling north, take in some great sights as you enjoy the smooth and sweeping curves of this section of the Parkway. Two of these great sights are the Rocky Nob and Rock Castle Gorge overlooks. Both offer spectacular views from the ridge crest before the road begins to descend sharply toward Tuggles Gap.

As you near Tuggles Gap, you'll come to an opening in the trees and

turn left off the Parkway, then turn left again onto VA 8. Tuggles Gap is little more than a restaurant/motel/gas station combination located within a geographic gap between two mountains. But don't let the small size of Tuggles Gap Restaurant fool you—the food offered inside is delicious, and the choices are wide ranging. It's open from 7 am to 9 pm daily (until 10 pm on weekends), serving up breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Expect to spend just \$3 for breakfast (coffee and a biscuit) and up to \$12 for a steak dinner. The menu can best be described as “down-home Southwestern.” For example, at lunch the menu lists handmade burgers, as well as burritos with homemade salsa. Beer and wine are on the list, too. Most of the wine is from a local vineyard, and you can sample one of many micro-brew beers (they also have the national brands). If you're on a diet, skip to the beginning of the next paragraph, because you won't want to hear about Tuggles Gap pie. This delectable, devilishly indulgent creation is sure to send you into

dessert nirvana, layering cream cheese, chocolate, whipped cream, walnuts, and other “secret ingredients” in a piecrust to create the best dessert you'll ever add to your gut! Well, you're on vacation—enjoy. If you have too much pie, beer, wine, or a combination of them all, stay in the cheap Tuggles Gap Motel right next door, which has simple rooms for just \$36 a night. Give them a ring at 540-745-3402. Just don't expect room service or a mint on your pillow.

Leaving Tuggles Gap, VA 8 gets twisty and steep—so much so that it warns truckers of the steep winding road ahead. Often, what truckers hate is what motorcyclists love. VA 8 is well marked and free of debris, with asphalt in excellent condition. As the elevation changes (you'll be descending here) you'll feel your ears pop. The scenery is so pretty, your eyes might pop, too!

The twisties run out into the Smith River Valley, making the road a scenic but more tame stretch of asphalt. Enjoy a few sweeping curves as you ride past an apple orchard and through small farming communities.

The Blue Ridge Parkway rolls past the rustic Puckett Cabin, home of legendary midwife Olena Puckett.





***Willville
Motorcycle
Campground
makes a good
home base while
motorcycling in
the area.***

You'll see signs directing you to the Bob White and the Jacks Creek Covered Bridges. The Jacks Creek Bridge is to the right down CR 615. This 48-ft. covered bridge was built in 1914 and is visible from VA 8. To see the 80-ft. Bob White Bridge, built in 1921, you'll have to turn left onto CR 618 and ride 1.5 miles down to CR 869 where you'll turn right and travel another tenth of a mile. To see more covered bridges, take the *Covered Bridge Run* that begins on p. 92.

VA 8 will take you to US 58 where you'll turn right to head toward Meadows of Dan. Hills Store is at this intersection. After refueling your motorcycle's tank, refuel yourself with a \$1 biscuit or a \$3 sandwich. Take it to go so you can dine on Lover's Leap, just up the road a piece.

Just as VA 8 descended in a wild set of twists and turns, US 58 climbs with the same enthusiasm. After reaching nearly the top of Spoon Mountain, you'll come to Lover's Leap pullout on the right side of the road. This well-marked but poorly maintained overlook gives a narrow view into the Smith River Valley and of the mountains to the north. A quick check of the area shows that lovers

don't actually leap here, but they do express their love with spray paint. The beauty of the scenery subdues any distraction created by the paint.

After Lover's Leap, US 58 takes you through a series of twists and turns before you arrive at the top of Naked Ridge. You'll know you're on Naked Ridge when you don't see trees covering the top of the mountain (it's *naked*). Just past the summit, US 58 takes you past a Texaco station that still has the old-style glass cylinder fuel pump. The store is closed and the pump ran dry years ago, but it's an interesting sight. You'll see Meadows of Dan just round the bend. If you keep your eyes peeled, you'll see the spot where US 58 crosses Dan Creek, which becomes the Dan River. The meadows in this section of the Blue Ridge were named for the creek that flows through them. Stated more simply, these are the Meadows of Dan. Today, Meadows of Dan is a thriving small town with several gas stations, restaurants, and accommodations. Don't miss the Poor Farmers Market and Gas Station near the center of town. Inside, you can purchase a gallon of gas, a liter of locally made wine, a sandwich, a

tourist trinket, and even a rocking chair, if you can tie it to your motorcycle.

Lodging in Meadows of Dan is available for \$37 a night at the Blue Ridge Motel (540-952-2244). You'll find the motel on US 58 just north of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Also in Meadows of Dan, just half a mile north of the Blue Ridge Parkway, is the brainchild of a man named Will Beers. Will loved to ride motorcycles and loved the Blue Ridge Parkway but had a hard time finding motorcycle-friendly campgrounds close to it. In April of 2001, Will opened the Willville Motorcycle Campground. I wonder how many more visitors he would be getting if he named his campground "Beerville." Anyway, since then motorcycles have been filling the flat campsites with trailers, tents, and the sounds of purring engines. Built on 26 grassy acres, the campground charges \$12 to camp solo or just \$20 two-up, and that gets riders access to a comfortable bath house, restrooms, breakfast (biscuits catered from the Poor Farmers Market), and a covered picnic area that has the elusive "honor system coffee pot." Didn't pack a tent? That's okay—you can rent a tent and a sleeping pad from Will. If you find yourself in need of motorcycle parts, you'll even find motorcycle parts and accessories here. Will is a friendly man who enjoys company, so expect a warm reception, regardless of whether or not there's a chill in the air. Even if you aren't camping, stop in and spend a buck or two to help ensure that Willville will remain open for the season when you do want to stay here. Check out Willville on the web at www.willvillebikecamp.com, or by phone at 276-952-CAMP.

This adventure ends at the intersection of US 58 and the Blue Ridge Parkway. *Squirrel Gap* Loop (p.

122) begins in Meadows of Dan, the *Pipers Gap* ride (p. 123) starts a few miles south on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and *Roanoke Valley Run* (p. 78) runs nearby, cutting through Tuggle's Gap as it snakes its way back to Roanoke.

RIDE ALTERNATIVES

There are no ride alternatives, but carry this book with you, because several rides begin where this route ends in the town of Meadows of Dan, VA.

ROAD CONDITIONS

The twists and turns of this ride range from gently sweeping curves on the Blue Ridge Parkway to wildly twisty sections of VA 8 and US 58. The Blue Ridge Parkway is excellently paved and adequately banked with fresh, clean asphalt. The roads off the Parkway are twistier than the Parkway itself, and with the exception of an occasional patch of asphalt, are in good condition. No commercial traffic is allowed on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and signs warn truckers to avoid most of the other roads you'll ride on this adventure.

Expect some heavy traffic around Mabry Mill on summer weekend days; after all, it's the most photographed site on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

POINTS OF INTEREST

The Blue Ridge Parkway, Puckett Cabin, Groundhog Mountain Lookout, Mabry Mill and the Mabry Homestead (moonshine still, etc.), Lover's Leap roadside overlook, and Willville Motorcycle-Only Campground.

RESTAURANTS

You won't starve on this adventure! There are many places to dine, but a few really stand out.

At **Mabry Mill** (mile 25.3), you'll find a small restaurant open from 7:30 am to 6 pm, offering breakfast and lunch items from \$3 to \$10, with Southern barbecue a specialty. Tuggles Gap (mile 37.5) is home to the **Tuggles Gap Restaurant/Gas Station/Motel** (540-745-3402). The restaurant is open from 7 am to 9 pm (10 pm on weekends) offering breakfast, lunch, and dinner with a hard-to-find Southwestern flare. The tacos are just \$1.85 and burgers just \$2.25. You can expect to drop between \$6 and \$12 for dinner, depending on whether you're in the mood for chicken strips or a grilled steak. There's beer and wine offered as well. If you have too much to drink, the motel rooms are a paltry \$36 a night.

Down the hill from Tuggles Gap is **Hills Grocery** (mile 53.6). Don't let the fact that this little gem is in a gas station/grocery store fool you; it's quite a good restaurant. A homemade egg biscuit for breakfast will set you back only \$1, and the lunch sandwiches are as cheap as \$3.

At the end of the ride, in the town of Meadows of Dan is the **Poor Farmers Market**. It too is in a gas station/grocery store combo, but don't let that turn you off. It's a perfect place to hit if you're staying in Meadows of Dan (at the Willville Motorcycle Campground), because it opens at 6 am and closes at 10 pm. You can fuel your bike, fuel your need for souvenirs, and fuel your body with breakfast and lunch items available for \$3. For added energy, ice cream is available as well.

DETAILED DIRECTIONS

Mile 0—At the bottom of the exit 8 ramp from I-77, turn north onto VA 148.

Mile 0.7—At the T intersection, turn right onto US 52.

Mile 1.6—Turn right onto the ramp to the Blue Ridge Parkway. At the top of that ramp, turn left onto the northbound lane of the Blue Ridge Parkway. *At mile 11.2 is the Puckett Cabin. The Groundhog Mountain lookout is on the right at 12.5. Restrooms there, too. The Mabry Mill and the Mabry Homestead are at mile 25.3. Expect reduced speed limits and heavy traffic in this area on weekends.*

Mile 36.7—Turn left onto the exit ramp from the Parkway to VA 8 in Tuggles Gap. At the bottom of the ramp, turn left. *At mile 37.5 is the Tuggles Gap Restaurant/Gas Station/Motel.*

Mile 53.6—Turn right onto US 58. At the intersection, you'll find Hills Grocery (food and fuel). *You'll ride over Lover's Leap at mile 59. At mile 63.3 an old glass-topped gas pump is no longer working, but still cool to see. The Poor Farmers Market is on the left at mile 65.5 in the heart of Meadows of Dan.*

Mile 65.7—The ride ends at the intersection of US 58 and the Blue Ridge Parkway. *Continue west on US 58 to reach the Willville Motorcycle-Only Campground, or flip over a few pages and choose another adventure that starts in this small town.*

Mabry Mill

