

Tail of the Dragon: A thrilling Smoky Mountain drive

If you're looking for an adrenaline-fueled adventure in the Smoky Mountains, it's hard to beat the Tail of the Dragon. This 11-mile section of U.S. Route 129 has become a hugely popular destination for motorcyclists and sports car drivers. Featuring 318 curves, this winding mountain road is unlike anywhere else in the world.

While the present day Tail of the Dragon is frequented by bikers and motorists, centuries ago, it hosted very different travelers. Much of the 11-mile route was worn down by herds of buffalo roaming across the unspoiled frontier. The Cherokee used the trail for hundreds of years and Euro-American settlers began hunting and trapping along the route in the early 1700s.

When the Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced the Native Americans to leave the Smoky Mountains, many Cherokee used the Tail of the Dragon to hide from the soldiers enforcing the law. During the Civil War, the notorious Kirkland Bushwhackers, a gang of deserters, would ambush Union troops along the trail. The grave of Bas Shaw, a victim of one of these attacks,



can be seen around mile 6.5 of the Tail of the Dragon.

After years of collecting tolls along the path (with the threat of hanging for those who did not pay up), the trail was converted into a road. U.S. Route 129 was paved around 1934 and existed in relative obscurity for the next half-century.

The Tail of the Dragon came to national attention in the 1990s when motorcycle enthusiast Doug Snively launched the Deals Gap Hot Lap newsletter and formed the Deals Gap Riding Society. Deals Gap is a mountain pass along the Tail of the Dragon at the North Carolina-Tennessee state line.

Over the years, more and more bikers

have discovered the thrills of riding the Tail of the Dragon. The road has even been featured in a number of movies, including Thunder Road, Two-Lane Blacktop, The Fugitive, and In Dreams.

Riding the Tail of the Dragon can be extremely dangerous for the ill-prepared, so it is only recommended for experienced motorcyclists and motorists. Here are a few quick tips to keep in mind as you plan your trip:

- The Tail of the Dragon is not for sight-seeing; keep your eyes on the road.
- April through October is the best time to drive the Dragon.
- Bikers should definitely avoid US 129 during the winter.
- Do not drive at night.
- Get your motorcycle checked before heading out.
- Always wear a helmet with a face mask, jacket, and gloves.
- Carry a Global Satellite GPS Messenger in case of emergency.

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