

Natural Bridge Inn

by Mark Barnes

AS A RECENT participant in Larry Grodsky's Stayin' Safe Tour, covered elsewhere in this issue, I was introduced to a myriad of fantastic motorcycling roads in west-central Virginia. Not only does the famed Blue Ridge Parkway meander through this territory (at considerable elevation atop the Appalachian mountain range), but there's also a huge network of twisty state and county roads crisscrossing the Parkway and wandering through the wooded valleys and farmlands below. The pavement on the Parkway is impeccably well-maintained (although not so with the Skyline Drive further north), and the surfaces on the surrounding byways range from fair to quite good, with plenty at the better end of the spectrum.

When I was there (early October), traffic was light. This is significant on a weekend at the beginning of the fall foliage color-change season, when many people flock to the mountains. Luckily, for whatever reason, this area may not be hit as hard by four-wheeled tourism as other leaf-watcher Meccas, like the Smokey Mountains. It is, after all, a very rural section of the country; even on the interstate (I-81), cities are separated by large gaps. (Adventure-tourers take note, although I didn't personally inspect them, the forests around here are also said to offer a fine selection of trails and dirt roads.) It would be easy to roam around this area for days on end, sampling the delicious assortment of asphalt playgrounds, one after another—truly a rider's paradise. But to do so, you'll need a place to stay.

Larry Grodsky lodges his riders at the 180-room Natural Bridge Inn, and it's easy to see why. First of all, it's a prime location, convenient to the Blue Ridge, I-81 (between Roanoke and Lexington), and the spider web of rural roadways that provide virtually non-stop riding delight. Then there's the row of ground-level patio rooms in which we stayed (definitely a cut above your average national chain), with each rider's bike parked right along the curb in front of his doorway in an oblong loop of pavement, separated from the main lot and suitable only for single-track vehicles—sweet! (Make sure you ask for one of these if parking your bike nearby is a priority.) A set of cottages, atop the adjacent hill, likewise allows bikes to stay close to their owners. This place is definitely "rider-friendly,"




Ranked as one of the seven natural wonders of the world, the "natural bridge" (left) is 215' tall. The ground level patio rooms (bottom right) are perfectly arranged for motorcyclists, with motorcycle only parking along the curb.

and motorcyclists even get a 20% rate discount, called "The Two Wheel Steal," Sunday through Thursday. Other riding groups, such as the Concours Owner's Group and The Motorcycle Tour Company of Virginia, have chosen the Natural Bridge Inn for their gatherings, too.

You won't find any familiar commercial restaurants nearby, but that's no loss; the inn's dining hall is great. Although it's very nicely appointed, no one looked askance at us eating in our jeans, boots and t-shirts. The excellent breakfast buffet costs just \$7.95, while the average dinner runs in the mid-\$20's, and a decent wine list is available. Also on-grounds are a lounge, deli and creek-side café, and catering at indoor or outdoor gathering spots on the 1600-acre facility can be arranged for rallies and club events—10,000 square feet of meeting space can accommodate groups of up to 500. Room rates (without the discount mentioned above) range from \$59.95 to \$129.95 during peak season (June–October), and \$39.95 to \$99.95 otherwise.

In addition to the spectacular roadways already mentioned, a two-hour radius includes many festivals, concerts and historical and natural attractions, including the

Thomas Jefferson and George Washington National Forests, as well as the inn's namesake, a breathtaking 215-foot tall arch, worthy of its rank as one of the seven natural wonders of the world, and just a short hike from the inn's parking lot. The Natural Bridge Caverns, also very close, are the deepest in the Eastern US. Other day-trip destinations abound, all accessed by those wonderful roads...

The Natural Bridge Inn isn't just a nice place to stay, it's a place that truly caters to riders and welcomes our business—a pleasant contrast to the suspicion or disdain that a motorcyclist can encounter when approaching a good hotel's check-in desk wearing his riding gear. We'd recommend it as an excellent choice for riding groups, large and small. 

Natural Bridge Inn & Conference Center,
PO Box 57, Natural Bridge, VA 24578; (540) 458-3740; www.naturalbridgeva.com.
(When visiting the website, click "Groups" on your left, and then "Motorcycle Events." There you'll find nine downloadable maps of suggested rides in the area.)