Cherohala Skyway / Deals Gap (The Dragon) Loop

This ride runs about 237 miles in a loop, starting and ending at the Creekside Lodge. The loop includes the Cherohala Skyway and world-famous Tail of the Dragon, US 129 at Deals Gap. The Cherohala Skyway, so named for the Cherokee and Nantahala forests which it traverses, is a relatively new (opened October 1996), 2-lane stretch of some of the finest asphalt in the east. The Skyway stretches from Robbinsville, NC to Tellico Plains, TN, a distance of about 41 miles. The road consists mostly of beautiful high-speed sweepers, but be warned, there are a few tight hairpins and switchbacks, and some very sneaky declining-radius turns. With light traffic and few intersections, this road is a motorcyclist’s dream. Enjoy it carefully!

Estimated riding time - 6:30-7:00 plus stops.

Here’s the route:

• Exit the Creekside Lodge and turn right onto Soco Rd (US 19 south).
• Follow US 19 south about 16.5 miles to the traffic light at US 441 Business in Cherokee.
• Turn left at the light onto US 441 Business south.
• Follow US 441 Business south about 1 mile to its end at US 441.
• Turn left at the traffic light onto US 441 south.
• Follow US 441 south about 3.5 miles and keep right, merging onto the Great Smoky Mountains Expressway, US 74.
• Follow US 74 (Great Smoky Mountains Expressway) west about 10 miles to the spot where it rejoins US 19.
• Continue west on US 19/74 about 19 more miles to the intersection of US 129 north.
• Turn right onto US 129 north.
• Follow US 129 north about 13 miles, through the town of Robbinsville, to the intersection with NC 143 west.

It would be advisable to fuel up in Robbinsville. It’s about 64 miles to this point, and there are no service stations before Tellico Plains, TN, another 55 miles away.

• Turn left onto NC 143 west (signs are posted for the Cherohala Skyway). The first 10 miles or so of NC 143 were only recently designated as state highway. They are former secondary roads and may have some rough spots, gravel patches, etc. Use caution.
• Follow NC 143 west about 10 miles to Santeetlah Gap, the beginning of the Cherohala Skyway.

Cherohala Skyway

• Follow the Cherohala Skyway (NC 143) west about 18 miles to the Tennessee State Line. The Skyway continues into Tennessee as TN 165.
• Follow TN 165 about 23 miles to the intersection with TN 360, which is just before downtown Tellico Plains.

If you need fuel again or lunch, the Cherohala Market on the left side near the intersection with TN 360 is a good spot to refuel and refresh. There are other choices further into Tellico Plains as well.

• Head north on TN 360. Follow TN 360 north for 22 miles to the intersection with US 411.
• Turn right onto US 411 north. Follow US 411 about 2.7 miles to the intersection with TN 72.
• Turn right onto TN 72 south. Use caution, there is a sharp curve about 2¼ miles down this road where numerous accidents have occurred. Follow TN 72 south for a total of 8.7 miles to the end at US 129.
• Turn right onto US 129 south and follow it about 10 miles to the Tabcat Creek bridge. The nearby Calderwood Dam overlook is a scenic view and a popular spot for Dragon riders to assemble.

Deals Gap

• Continue south on US 129. The next 11 miles are the famous “Tail of the Dragon” with its 318 turns.
• The Dragon “officially” ends at the “Crossroads of Time”, the intersection with NC 28. There is a gas station/shop/deli here where you can fuel up for the return trip to the Creekside.
• Turn left onto NC 28 south and follow it 31 miles to the intersection with US 19/74.
• Turn left onto US 19/74 east and follow it about 5 miles to the beginning of the Great Smoky Mountains Expressway (US 74).
• Follow US 74 (Great Smoky Mountains Expressway) east about 10 miles to the exit for US 441 to Cherokee.
• Follow US 441 north about 3.5 miles to the traffic light at US 441 Business.
• Follow US 441 Business north about 1 mile to its end at US 19.
• Turn right on US 19 north and follow it about 16.5 miles to the Creekside Lodge on the left.
Deals Gap (The Dragon) / Cherohala Skyway Loop

This ride runs about 237 miles in a loop, starting and ending at the Creekside Lodge. The loop includes the Cherohala Skyway and world-famous Tail of the Dragon, US 129 at Deals Gap. The Cherohala Skyway, so named for the Cherokee and Nantahala forests which it traverses, is a relatively new (opened October 1996), 2-lane stretch of some of the finest asphalt in the east. The Skyway stretches from Robbinsville, NC to Tellico Plains, TN, a distance of about 41 miles. The road consists mostly of beautiful high-speed sweepers, but be warned, there are a few tight hairpins and switchbacks, and some very sneaky declining-radius turns. With light traffic and few intersections, this road is a motorcyclist’s dream. Enjoy it carefully!

Estimated riding time - 6:30-7:00 plus stops.

Here’s the route:

- Exit the Creekside Lodge and turn right onto Soco Rd (US 19 south).
- Follow US 19 south about 16.5 miles to the traffic light at US 441 Business in Cherokee.
- Turn left at the light onto US 441 Business south.
- Follow US 441 Business south about 1 mile to its end at US 441.
- Turn left at the traffic light onto US 441 south.
- Follow US 441 south about 3.5 miles and keep right, merging onto the Great Smoky Mountains Expressway, US 74.
- Follow US 74 (Great Smoky Mountains Expressway) west about 10 miles to the spot where it rejoin US 19.
- Continue west on 19/74 about 5 miles to the turnoff for NC 28 north.
- Turn right onto US 129.

Since we have come about 68 miles to this point, it would be advisable to fuel up here. There is a Deli/Shop/Gas Station here where you can get some food, souvenirs, etc., as well as gassing up the bike. Be sure to seek out the “Tree of Shame” here as well. This little monument will help you to understand that the Dragon does bite back!

- After the fuel stop, exit the station turning right (north) onto US 129. The next 11 miles make up the famous “Dragon”. You will cross the border into Tennessee about 2 miles north of the gas station.
- At the north end of the Dragon is the Calderwood Dam Overlook. You will likely want to gather there to re-group before either riding the Dragon again or continuing on the rest of the loop.
- After a break at the overlook, continue north on US 129 about 10 miles to the intersection with TN 72.
- Turn left on TN 72 north and follow it about 8.7 miles to a stop sign at US 411.
- Turn left onto US 411 south and follow it about 2.7 miles to the intersection with TN 360.
- Turn left onto TN 360. There is a gas station here and you may want to top off the tank if you made several trips through the Dragon. If not, you will need to fuel up in Tellico Plains, about 22 miles away.
- Follow TN 360 south for about 22 miles to the intersection with TN 165 near Tellico Plains.

If you need fuel again or lunch, the Cherohala Market near the intersection with TN 165 is a good spot to refuel and refresh. Or, you can turn right onto TN 165 and head into Tellico Plains where there are a few more choices for food and fuel.

Cherohala Skyway

- Leaving the Cherohala Market, turn right onto TN 165 east. If you’re coming from TN 360, turn LEFT onto TN 165.
- Follow TN 165 about 23 miles to the North Carolina state line. Continue east on NC 143 for another 18 miles.
- At Santeetlah Gap, there will be a small parking area on the left, at the end of the Cherohala Skyway. This is a good place to take a break and regroup.
- Exiting the Santeetlah Gap parking area, turn left to continue following TN 143 east. Continue about 10 miles into Robbinsville and the intersection with US 129.
- Turn right, onto US 129 south (turning left here would take you back to Deals Gap, about 15 miles away).

It would be a good idea to fuel up at one of the gas stations in Robbinsville.

- Continue south on US 129 about 13 miles to the intersection with US 19/74.
- Turn left onto US 19/74 east and follow it about 19 miles to the beginning of the Great Smoky Mountains Expressway.
- Follow US 74 (Great Smoky Mountains Expressway) east about 10 miles to the exit for US 441 to Cherokee.
- Follow US 441 north about 3.5 miles to the traffic light at US 441 Business.
- Follow US 441 Business north about 1 mile to its end at US 19.
- Turn right on US 19 north and follow it about 16.5 miles to the Creekside Lodge on the left.