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West Virginia is for Riders

The following is an excerpt from a feature printed in the March 2008 issue. Tear it out and take it with you, or print the pdf version you can find at ridermagazine.com.

GREATROADS

While western states strike riders dumb with sheer massiveness, West Virginia seduces with magically insignificant roads corkscrewing into intimate nowheres. The Mountain State's peaks are not as grandiose as the Rockies or Sierras, but huddle so close together that getting anywhere requires squirming around their feet or scampering up their sides. Fifty-plus inches of annual precipitation hyper-feeds the dense hardwood forests rooted to their slopes.

- The hot spot in West Virginia is the New River Gorge Bridge, the biggest steel span bridge in the Americas: 3,030 feet long, 876 feet high, 1,700-foot arch span, 88,000,000 pounds and three years to build at a price of \$37 million. We wound our way down the single-lane Fayette Station Road to the bottom of the New River Gorge and looked up into the bridge's massive, woven steel underbelly to fully grasp what a beastly thing of beauty it is.

- On WV 41, we squirmed down a lovely set of twisties into a shallower section of the Gorge, crossed the river and twisted back up the other side. Little traffic bothered us as we cautiously zigzagged through thick hardwoods. Off 41, we detoured into 4,100-acre Babcock State Park adjacent to the river. We snapped a tourist shot of the Old Grist Mill, which actually isn't old but was assembled from pieces of several mills of the 500 or so that used to work the river.

- U.S. 219 is draped into the broad Greenbrier Valley. For the next 30 miles the two-lane highway alternates between meandering through pristine farm valleys and crooked climbing. Along this section of 219, Droop Mountain State Park commemorates one of the state's few significant Civil War battles. The lookout tower gives a good view of the surroundings.

- We headed north for WV 66 and Snowshoe Mountain, West Virginia's premier ski resort. Off 66, little County Road 3 climbs up to Snowshoe Village through some tight switchbacks and sports 180-degree views of surrounding peaks.

- One of the state's great roads is CR 2, Smokehole Road. Only recently paved, this "layover road" hugs clear streams wedged between steep rock walls, then climbs and darts in and out of the rumples of North Fork Mountain. Feeble-looking guardrails separated us from painful drops. Through holes in the canopy we were treated to wide-angle shots of tight clusters of peaks blanketed with thick forest.

- Going west on WV 28/55, the highway slants southwest and soon craggy rock formations jutted straight up above the tree canopy. The rocks are part of a backbone formation of Tuscarora quartzite exposed over millions of years of erosion. The most imposing of them is Seneca Rocks, rising nearly 900 feet above the North Fork River below. 📍



Top: The Old Gristmill in Babcock State Park, which is assembled from pieces of several mills that used to work the river. Above: Wildflowers along West Virginia Highway 28.

