

SMOKY MOUNTAIN TOUR TO AHCA CONCLAVE IN BRANSON, MO

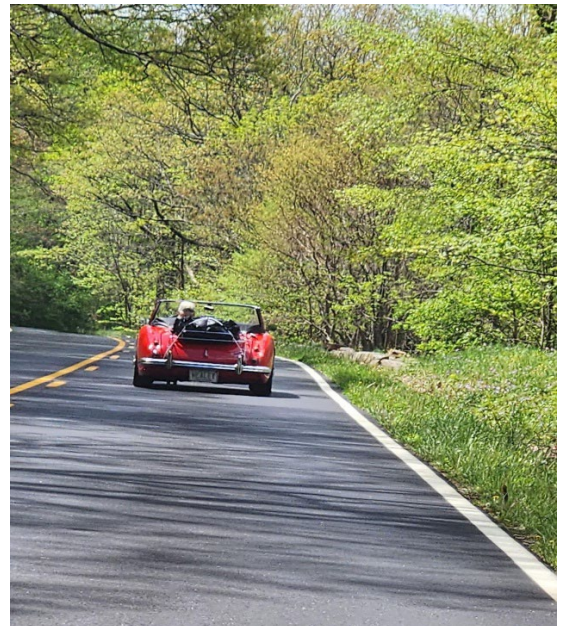
by Bob Britton

25- 5267-278. These numbers represent the number of days, the miles driven and the gallons of gas consumed during the odyssey tour that Linda and I took from NH to Branson MO and back to attend the 2025 AHCA Conclave in May. Back last winter we learned that Steve Kirby of the Austin Healey Associates of So. CA was putting together another one of his epic Healey tours through the Smoky Mountains, eventually ending in Branson, MO to attend the AHCA Conclave. Having joined Steve and 29 other Healey owners 2 years ago on Steve's Scandinavian tour to attend the European Healey Meet in Geiranger, Norway we decided to join 30 other Healey owners to tour some states in the south east and mid-west we have never been to. While getting my Healey to Norway was only a matter of delivering the car to Newark, NJ, this tour required us to drive 1250 miles to Nashville, TN to meet the rest of the group from the west coast who had their Healey's shipped to Nashville. And, then on the return trip we had to drive another 1500 miles from Branson back to NH. Needless to say, the to and from journey required quite a bit of highway driving. Not a problem for a big Healey with a Toyota 5 speed, but as you can imagine it would have been a much more enjoyable drive on hilly and winding roads like the ones that were waiting for us in the Smoky Mountains and the Ozarks.

On the trip from NH to Nashville we meet up with AHCA President Roger Hamel, who was doing the tour solo, in Binghamton, NY. The first long day got us as far south as Harrisonburg VA driving on I-81 from Binghamton. The next day we ventured off the highway and spent some time meandering down both Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge parkway in VA. These were very delightful roads on which to enjoy the majestic mountains in the Shenandoah Valley National Park at a much slower pace. Fortunately, being so early in the season we mostly had these two epic roads to ourselves.



Bob, Linda, and Roger on Skyline Dr



Driving on the Blue Ridge Pkwy

After another night near the VA/NC border we arrived in Nashville midafternoon to meet up with the rest of the Healey group. We were fortunate that most of the members from the Michigan ACHA club that we traveled with in Norway were also doing the Smoky Mtn Tour including AHC-NE members Dave and Barbara Siwa. So, just like in Norway this group traveled together as the Green Flight during the tour until we reached Branson.

The Smoky Mountain tour consisted of 2 weeks visiting both larger cities and quaint country towns scattered throughout TN, NC, KY, and MO. In the larger cities like Nashville and Lexington, KY and Asheville, NC we spent several nights which allowed us to see the sights of the cities and tour the local areas. Steve provided a turn by turn book for each day's drive along with many optional sights and roads that that were available to explore.

In Nashville we enjoyed a private dinner at Nudies Honky Bar on the Broadway, a legendary street in the heart of Nashville known for its vibrant and bustling country western music scene that has earned it the nickname “Honky Tonk Highway.” Another group dinner was at the Bavarian Bierhaus, which features 1 liter draft beers. Other sites visited during our stay in the Nashville area included Lane’s Motor Museum, the Parthenon, a full size replica of the ancient one in Athens, the famous Natchez Trace Parkway, the Carnton Plantation, location of the Battle of Franklin, one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War and Andrew Jackson’s home the “Hermitage”.



Natchez Trace Pkwy bridge we drove over



Acropolis Replica in Nashville

After 2 days of exploring Nashville, we were off to Chattanooga for our first day on the road. The first stop was at Jack Daniel’s Distillery in Lynchburg where we enjoyed a private tour and tasting of their various whiskey’s followed by a private luncheon at the famous Mary Bobo’s boarding house which has been in operation for over 100 years. Jack himself was a frequent visitor to enjoy a dinner of fried chicken and catfish cooked to perfection by Ms. Bobo. After lunch we drove up Lookout Mountain which has a national park battlefield at the top of the mountain. The views were spectacular overlooking Chattanooga in the valley below.

The next day we were off on beautiful backroads to Ashville, NC to visit the Biltmore Estate. This lavish estate, the largest home ever built in the US with 35 bedrooms, 43 bathrooms and 65 fireplaces, was built by George Vanderbilt, grandson of Cornelius “The Commodore” Vanderbilt and was built between 1889 to 1895. This place makes the mansions in Newport look like guest houses!



View from Lookout Mountain over Chattanooga



BJ 7 in front of the Biltmore Estate

We spent 2 nights in Ashville which allowed us a full day to explore some of the best roads in NC. One of them was the “Rattler”, a road with 290 curves in 24 miles. The Rattler is considered one of the top five roads to drive in the south and some say, including myself, superior to the more famous, but shorter, “Tail of the Dragon”. We enjoyed the road so much we drove it both ways.

The following day we were off to the historic Tapoco Lodge for the night along highway 64, which is a NC Waterfall Scenic byway. Along the way we passed by Toxaway Falls and stopped at Bridal Veil Falls, which we climbed down to and walked behind the falls. After stopping for lunch, we drove lovely backroads with spectacular scenery through the Joyce Kilmer National Forest, eventually arriving at the Tapoco lodge where the Tail of the Dragon begins. This was no doubt the most charming place we stayed during our 2 week journey. While the Healey group was scheduled to run the Tail of the Dragon the next morning at 7AM, we opted along with two other cars to run it at 7PM after dinner. A good choice as we did not encounter one car for the entire 11 miles of the Dragon before turning around and doing it again.

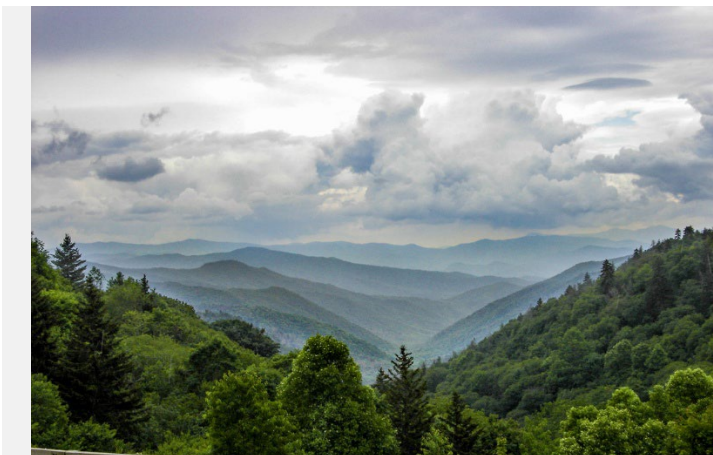


Just 1 of the 290 curves on the Rattler



Bridal Veil Falls

After the morning group that ran the “Tail” got back to the Lodge to enjoy a scrumptious breakfast the group left for Gatlinburg, TN through the Smoky Mountains National Park via HWY 441 and the Newfound Gap, the lowest pass in the Great Smoky Mountains at 5046’. A tour diversion was offered in the guidebook for those who wanted to drive to and climb the Clingman’s Dome, which at 6644’ is the 2nd highest peak east of the Mississippi. Unfortunately, an overcast day spoiled the views after the steep ½ mile walk to the observation tower.



Newfound Gap



The Clingman Dome, 6644’ above Sea Level

After touring the wonderful roads in Tennessee and North Carolina we were off to the Blue Grass state of Kentucky, which is world famous for horse racing, breeding, and bourbon. Our first stop was Lexington. Lexington is known as the "Horse Capital of the World" due to the hundreds of horse farms in the region, as well as the Kentucky Horse Park, The Red Mile and Keeneland race courses. We spent 3 nights at the new, modern Origin Hotel, which was conveniently located right next door to the Fritz Farm shopping center with numerous eateries and upscale stores to explore.

The trip to Lexington was the longest drive on the tour at 273 miles but nicely routed on rural roads with plenty of sights to take in. Driving through the Daniel Boone National Forest our first stop was the Pinnacle Overlook at the Cumberland Gap National Park. Long used by Native American's the gap which is 1304' above sea level was explored by Daniel Boone in 1775 when he blazed a wilderness road through the gap that provided access to Kentucky's rich lands. This route connected the existing settlements in Virginia to the fertile valleys of Kentucky, allowing thousands of settlers to migrate westward in search of new opportunities. From the overlook in the park, you can see TN, KY and VA. After leaving the park we stopped at Cumberland Falls, known as the "Niagara of the South". Well, it surely is not as spectacular as Niagara Falls but the locals like to think it is. After the falls we stopped to gas up and enjoy an afternoon treat at America's favorite dairy barn, Dairy Queen before the final trek to Lexington.



Which State is she in?



Tri -State View at Cumberland Gap

With two "freestyle" days to explore the Lexington area there were several driving tour options from which we could choose. The first day Linda and I started on the Parks and Paddock tour which included a tour through downtown Lexington, a stop at Keeneland Racetrack, the Kentucky Castle and Pisgah Presbyterian Church built in 1812. Unfortunately, the weather did not cooperate and with heavy downpours and poorly operating wiper blades we headed back to the hotel before completing the tour. Wouldn't you know it the sun came out shortly after we arrived back!

The next day we ventured south of Lexington to visit several sites including the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, which features 34 historic 19th century dwellings. Consisting of 3000 acres, this was the 3rd largest Shaker Village in the US between 1805 to 1910. We also visited Old Fort Harrod, which was a revolutionary fort built in 1774 and included a cemetery with gravestones dating back to that time. The final stop was at the Perryville civil war battlefield. This battle was the largest and most destructive civil war battle in KY, fought by 70,000 Union and Confederate troops which resulted in over 7000 casualties and 1400 deaths. A very serene place to visit.



The Centre Family dwelling at Pleasant Hill



Perryville Battlefield Monument

After leaving Lexington we enjoyed another scenic ride along the famed KY Bourbon Trail. First stop was a guided tour and tasting at Maker's Mark distillery. After the tour we had a group luncheon at a local establishment known for their Southern Fried Chicken, which was delicious. After lunch we headed to historic Bardstown, KY where our group booked all the rooms in a newly renovated 50's style motor lodge. Bardstown is known as the "Bourbon Capital of the World" with 6 distilleries located within the town limits and many more in the area. As we arrived early in the afternoon we could choose to visit some of the local distilleries for another "tasting", but decided to tour the historic town which has upwards of 200 historic structures.



Applying the famous red wax seal



We had a slight buzz after this tasting session

The centerpiece of downtown Bardstown is the Old Courthouse built in 1892 and across the street Old Talbott Tavern, built in 1779, is the oldest surviving building in KY. Many guests and inn keepers have reported ghostly encounters over the years. Some famous people who have stayed include Danial Boone, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Jesses James to name a few. We enjoyed a walking tour of this historic town, one of the first towns settled in KY.



The famous Talbott Tavern, circa 1779



What happens when you do not pay your bill

The next day we were off to Bowling Green, but first with a stop at Hodgenville, KY to visit Abraham Lincoln's birthplace and then a visit at Mammoth Cave National Park, the longest underground cave system in the world for a 2 hour cave tour. A wrong turn on the way to the caves got our group on a very narrow back road in the national park but we eventually found our way to the main entrance. This road was so enjoyable that we took it back out of the park instead of following the main road to Bowling Green.



Low headroom in many parts of the cave



Some of the 540 stairs we had to climb in Mammoth Cave

After a night In Bowling Green, we enjoyed another guided tour at the Corvette Museum. The Corvette was introduced in 1953, the same year the Austin Healey 100 started production. We all know which is the better sports car from that era!



1953 Corvette with 6 cylinder engine



The famous Corvette Museum Skydome

Following another group lunch at Shady Cliff Resort on Lake Malone, we headed to Steve Kirby's wife Cindy's hometown of Greenville, KY for an impromptu car show in front of the historic Courthouse. Seems Cindy still has some connections here, including the mayor, who stopped by to see all the Healey's on display. Luckily he did as the weather forecast was getting nasty with predicted hail, thunderstorms and tornadoes passing through the area that night. The mayor arranged to have our Healey's stored at a local indoor horse arena to protect them from the pending storm. Fortunately, the deadly tornados missed us but not before killing 20 people in its destructive path in the next county. We did get hail, fierce winds and torrential downpours throughout the night. We were fortunate that our cars were safely tucked away for the night.



Healey Car show in Greenville, KY



30 Healey's in the horse arena for the night

The next two days we travelled to our final destination, the **Chateau on Lake** in Branson, MO to attend the annual Austin Healey Conclave. First stop along the way was for lunch at the famous Lambert's Café in Sikeston, MO. Lambert's has been in operation for over 80 years and is known as "Home of the Threwed Rolls". Lambert's is an immensely popular tourist destination where the waiters toss rolls across the room for patrons to grab. Fun entertainment while enjoying your lunch.



Tossing rolls at Lambert's Café



Our Final Destination the Chateau on the lake

The last night on the tour we spent in Popular Bluff, MO. As the 4 hour planned route to Branson the next day was mostly on 4 lane state highways with 65mph speed limits Linda and I and one other Healey in our flight group decided to venture on a 2 lane back country road along the AK border to Branson. WOW is all I can say as this route had some of the most enjoyable roads we had driven since departing Nashville. With almost no traffic (it was Sunday, and most locals must have been in church) we traveled on winding, hilly and ultra smooth roads through farmland and rolling hills with stunning vistas for over 200 miles passing through small country towns spread miles apart. It was the perfect finale of our two week tour.

We arrived early in the afternoon to check in for the annual 5 day Austin Healey Conclave. The next few days more driving followed on the delightful rural roads around the Lake of the Ozarks. Besides participating in a rally, Gymkhana, Funkhana, Healey car show and several driving tours we visited the Titanic Museum and the Dolly Parton Stampede dinner show. When the five days of Conclave was over, we left early the next morning for our 3 days, 1500 mile drive back to NH. By this time my muffler, which had been grounded numerous times during the previous few weeks, started to roar loudly on the drive home, finally blowing out as we turned into our driveway. We were glad to be finally home after an exhausting yet exciting 25 day journey touring the great southeast and mid-west. And to top it off I now have a brand new, shiny and quiet stainless steel muffler on my Healey!



Linda driving in the Gymkhana



Home at last after 5267 mile