



# Smoky Mountain Austin Healey Tour to the Conclave

June 12, 2025

First I had to get the spelling correct. Smoky not Smokey National Park is the official spelling so we use Smoky. The tour originator, Steve Kirby offered a tour of the Smoky Mountains in May 2025 that would start at Nashville and end at the Austin Healey Club Conclave in Branson Missouri. The tour was going to visit many of my bucket list items so Marsha and I signed up. We did a tour with Steve in 2022 to Norway so were familiar with his style. This one meant we would be away from home for 22 days. Boutique hotels and covered parking were the goals and were mostly met.

Thirty Austin Healey's meant three trucks from California to Nashville although there were a few tour participants that drove their Healey to the Nashville starting point (a Boxster, 427 Cobra, and Innocenti Mini the only non-Healeys). One truck took the Northern California cars and the other two trucks took the Southern California and Colorado cars. One Bugeye Sprite drove from Texas and the other Bugeye came on the truck. Steve had us upload the complete trip route directions into our Garmin navigation devices. That was good in theory but there were frequent glitches in practice.

The cars got unloaded in a downpour. Tops that were down for transport quickly went up for the Nashville rain. Thankfully our BJ8 top leaks less than most but I had a luggage packing scheme that assumed the top was down and the tonneau cover in use. Now I had to find room for the folded tonneau cover as we only had the top down once out of 20 days. That first night we took the shuttle bus to the Grand Ole Opry which was a fantastic show. The next night was supposed to be a show boat on the river but due to mechanical difficulties Steve implemented Plan B to Nudies Honkytonk. Mr. Nudie created all the fancy sequined and embroidered costumes for the Country stars. Many were on display in the Honkytonk. Downtown Nashville is a neon light mecca. During the karaoke singing, we discovered that the Bugeye driver, Jerry, could sing. Later we discovered he could play the trumpet also and at the most opportune times. We went to the Lane Motor Museum which was on my

bucket list. It is a collection of unusual and weird cars from around the world. It was a huge converted bakery built in the 20's so had a very good ambiance. That night was a Bavarian Beer Hall. It was huge also. If you didn't like beer you only had to wait a day because on the way to Chattanooga, Tennessee we stopped for the Jack Daniels Distillery tour.

At Jack Daniels we had a great guide who was also an official taster. We watched a large pile of precisely sized hickory sticks burned into charcoal for the filters. As part of the tour we tasted four samples. I did prefer the Gentleman Jack just slightly but the fireball type was good also. Steve had things figured out. After sampling we could walk to the restaurant called Mary Bobo's. There was quite a history to that house that had family style seating and serving in each main room of the house. College students got some credit for working there and had to tell their background as well as a Southern Belle host at each serving room.

From Nashville we traveled in a counterclockwise direction to North Carolina, Kentucky, and Missouri. The next day we went to Asheville North Carolina and the Biltmore Estate. Two bucket list items checked off in one day as we also sampled the Blue Ridge Parkway. Last year's hurricane damaged some of the good stretches of the Parkway but we still saw fantastic views with almost zero traffic. The shuttle bus driver was a woman that owned a Healey for only a day as a teen before her father made her return it. She made sure we knew the path back to the mansion for the best photo op. The house was built by the Vanderbilts and is called America's House. Back in the early 1900's there was a fitness craze. The exercise room showers were of the needle type probably slightly painful. The indoor swimming pool had to be emptied and refilled for every use because chlorine wasn't used.

Tapico Lodge in Tennessee was an old fashioned charming lodge on the Cheoah River and near the famous road called Tail of the Dragon. Mike Sonneman from Sacramento had his modern alternator fail on the way to the lodge so bought a battery to keep him going to the lodge. One of the Sprite drivers had a small battery charger to charge the battery overnight. The overnight charge was enough for the next day's driving. Fast modern cars and motorcycles were continually zooming by headed for the Dragon about 5 miles away. The Dragon is 300 curves in 11 miles, ending at a lake. Most of the Healey group decided to drive it at 7:00 AM to avoid the crazies. There are two small souvenir stores at the start of the Dragon. One has a Tree of Shame. Broken motorcycle parts are nailed to it. I enjoyed the drive with no traffic in my direction. I could go as fast or as slow as I wanted. I did hear a late Bentley lock up his wheels going in the opposite direction. That was hard to believe since the brake discs on

those things are so huge. One Healey driver did get a speeding ticket. That is all the souvenir I would need. Commercial photographers were stationed along the road to sell you a picture of yourself speeding by on their web site. I do look pretty cool in that picture. That was the only day we had the top down. While we were eating a great breakfast after driving the Dragon we were shaken by a 4.1 earthquake. It had very fast oscillations unlike the California ones I am used to.

After breakfast we started driving to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It is an amazing town. The Main Street has been turned into a carnival with rides, side shows, wax museums, etc. I thought it was sort of gross and although we stayed the night in a nice hotel by a creek, it rained again and I was glad to leave, heading for Lexington, Kentucky and the Blue Grass State. We had a very nice hotel in a modern yuppie shopping center that had an Italian shoe store. It was called The Origin and had a nice bar where we had lots of discussions with Northern California AH club member and President of AHClubUSA, Steve Kingsbury. He broke his 100 crankshaft. He did a lot of phone calls and found a machined and crack checked crankshaft in Louisville along with a shop to do the teardown and install. (it all worked out: flat bed to Louisville, rebuild the engine, and drive the 100 to Branson for the Conclave like nothing ever happened.

There was no free breakfast in that hotel but Whole Foods was near. Heavy down pours happened during most of the stay in Lexington. Marsha and I had a very nice visit to the Keenland Race Course. It was very accommodating to visitors while it was reported that Churchill Downs where the recent Kentucky Derby was run was not. We bumped into a great employee that told us all the history and how horse races operate. We had lunch in the stables cafeteria. It really poured on the way back to the hotel and that is when my generator light started going off and on, mostly on. I measured my battery voltage at 12.1 volts so borrowed the small charger overnight that Mike Sonneman had used. Mike had a new alternator shipped overnight to him. I went to Harbor Freight the next morning and bought a better battery charger and carried the battery to our room every night for a charge for the rest of the trip. Thank goodness I had brought along the battery carrying strap. Later analysis revealed that 30 years is about the usual life for the generator brushes so I can't complain too much. Before leaving Lexington, we checked out the downtown. It really poured again on the return to the hotel and I didn't want to use any electricity for headlights. We toured a stud farm that is also where the race horse Secretariat is buried. It was pretty. Those stallions like to eat mints out of your hand and get paid handsomely for their services.

We drove on to Bardstown Ky through some nice roads with steep whoop de do's to Maker's Mark Distillery. They had nice grounds with colorful horse statues. They pour hot wax over the bottle cap. The women that do that job take frequent breaks. We had to drive after the sampling this time. We followed the trumpet player, Jerry from Camarillo in his Sprite. Fred and Leanne from Modesto had fuel pump problems in their BJ8. I showed Leanne how to bang the fuel pump mounting bulkhead with their knock off hammer to reactivate it.

The next town was Bowling Green, Ky. so we could see the National Corvette Museum in the morning. Again it poured trying to get to the Museum. We followed a very talented Healey solo driver, Hayden, our red flight leader. I don't know how he did it except his Garmin was working that morning. Another bucket list item checked off with the Museum. I got souvenirs for my Chevy loving friends. The 2014 sink hole that swallowed some cars was mostly filled in but there was a peep hole to see how deep it was. One Corvette was on display in its as crushed state. Another was on display after restoration. The "ugliest factory Corvette" was a rear engine experiment. I guess I would agree. Among the celebrity Corvettes was Roy Orbison's Sting Ray. People are surprised because they think he was blind and didn't drive since he always wore dark glasses.

Our lunch stop was billed as having great catfish which was a welcome change from fried chicken. I gained 10 lbs. on this trip. After lunch we motored on to Greenville, Steve's wife Cindi's home town. A nice Healey car show was arranged at the Courthouse Square for a couple of hours before heading to the motel and a Tour Farewell Banquet. I like bluegrass music and had heard of a song about the Green River and coal mining. I asked a car show spectator if that song was true and he said yes. He and his friend had both worked for the Peabody Coal Company over the years. During the car show, the weather took a turn for the worse again. Thankfully the Mayor called in his friends and arranged for the cars to be stored in the County Fair Rodeo Arena and driver transportation to the hotel via church buses. We thought that was great small town hospitality.

Severe thunderstorms, hail, and tornado's were possible. The banquet room was a part of a converted ware house. We had all the bad weather with a steel roof and large garage door windows to observe the torrents. Jerry played Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head on the trumpet. It did let up when the meal was over so we could walk to the motel but the thunderstorms were back during the night. The tornado went through a couple of days later and killed some people.

The next morning, Jerry played Reveille to get us on the bus. I had to do a little driving of the church bus while the regular driver unlocked the doors. My passengers shouted "Garmin says do a U turn". The cars did all the oil leaking they wanted to do on the rodeo dirt overnight. I reinstalled my battery and we were good for another day driving to Poplar Bluff, Missouri. We ate lunch at a large restaurant that specialized in throwing the dinner rolls to patrons. The Poplar Bluff hotel was a very nice Garvey House with a large free happy hour buffet.

The next day we arrived in Branson for the Conclave after stopping at a restaurant, Hucklebucks, that clearly put out their firearm policy on the front door. Our flight leader, Hayden lost his clutch in his BJ8. He persevered using the starter.

The next 4 days were the usual Austin Healey Conclave driving events, car shows, closeout banquet, and some special entertainment at Dolly Parton's Stampede (sort of a Wild West Show). We caught up with more old Healey friends. Our friend Rogers lost his clutch in his BJ8 but was going to have his car shipped back to Denver anyway. Special cars that attended were a fuel injected 3000, Donald Healey's Nash Healey, a Sebring Sprite, and a Devon bodied Healey from the early 60's. Also a very rare Kellison hardtop (Kellison factory was in Lincoln Ca.) on a BJ8.

A bus was arranged to take us to the Springfield airport on Friday. Most of the California Tour contingent met the truck carrying their cars to California on Monday, Memorial Day and drove them home except for Fred. Since Leanne was driving their chase car, she wasn't available for fuel pump banging duties. Fred and Leanne had their BJ8 towed to Modesto instead. Steve Kingsbury safely drove his 100 to Crescent City with the new crankshaft. We had a lot of fun and only complained about the weather and too much fried chicken leading to a significant weight gain. But then most vacations are like that.

Ken Freese