

## Tail of the Dragon Tour by Lee Fowler

President Dave asked me to write a trip report for the Fontana Village/Tail of the Dragon tour and I said no. Emphatically! Then he got that hound-dog look and reminded me, “But you said that you would do anything I needed if I ran for president!” Tough! No trip report from me!

Then Ann handed me a bottle of wine and said, “Won’t you please support Dave?” I was persuaded! Not by her beguiling smile. But the fact that the wine she was offering was a lot more expensive than the rotgut stuff I usually drink. A buck ninety-nine for a gallon of Wild Irish Rose is my preferred wine.

It was a dark and gloomy morning for the start of the tour. But twenty-one intrepid souls showed up at the MAPCO on 72E. Fran Witt captured the moment with Dave’s perfect selection for a starting point. Notice the signs in the background. For those of you who will count the number of people in the photo, I counted the names on the attendance sheet. There’s seventeen in the picture. Fran is behind the camera; Suzanne is in the car and I don’t know who is missing.



We all signed the appropriate forms and listened to the mandatory safety briefing. Dave would lead the tour with Jim Cambron assigned to be “sweep” car in his 1988 911. He was chosen because the color of his car is red, which makes it easier for the lead car to see. Later during the trip, I wondered why I would follow Dave on any tour. I’m still amazed that he got us there.

First stop on the tour was at a rest area on I-24. There were a couple of us senior citizens on the tour and this is a necessary stop for those of us who chose to drink a cup of coffee before leaving home. We stopped again on the Cleveland bypass to regroup just in case that old 1988 911 couldn’t keep up.

We had a great tour through the national forest along the Ocoee River. The dam sluices had been opened and the kayakers were in full force navigating the rapids. On a damp, chilly day I preferred to be in my nice dry car.

The next stop would be Murphy, North Carolina. Everybody had the option to choose a restaurant of their choice. Forty-five minutes to grab lunch then meet at a local gas station where we could fill up with gas...for the cars. We elected to eat breakfast at Waffle House. I know, it was lunch time. But we missed breakfast so we could be at the start at 8:00 AM. Old retired people don’t get up that early.

Leaving Murphy, we would travel through Robbinsville then on to Deal’s Gap. This is the southern tip of the “Dragon.” Between Robbinsville and Deal’s Gap, there is a stretch of mountainous road with a lot of nice curves, so that prompted Dave to “light the fuse.” Strictly within the speed limits and PCA guidelines, of course.

When we arrived at Deal’s Gap, Suzanne said, “That was fun!” If she’d been driving, she would have been pushing Dave to go faster and I would have been holding on the “panic handle.” I’m never in the passenger’s seat on drives like this ‘cause I get sick on a Merry-go-Round and can’t handle the curves. Several folks opted to run the Dragon Saturday while the remainder headed South to Fontana Village. Later Dave would suggest that I was backing off when we entered curves. I explained to him that I was leaving more space between us just in case he spun out.

Fontana Village is in a remote area surrounded by national and state forests. Dave had arranged to have a separate room reserved in the restaurant so we could all have dinner together. The restaurant menu looked like something you would find

in an upper scale French establishment. Some of the stuff I couldn't even pronounce, although nobody else seemed to have that problem. But everybody had a good time.

Fontana Village and the Dragon draws people from all over the country. In fact, when we drove up to the lodge, we noticed a number of Porsches with Florida license plates. Gold Coast had about fifty of their members come up for a long weekend.

After breakfast on Sunday everybody followed their own schedule for running the Dragon. Suzanne and I retired to our room. We'd already run it twice and that was enough. Also, that gave me the opportunity to start editing the video I'd taken with my dash camera on the trip up. I loaned Dave the camera so he could record his "Tail of the Dragon" run. His plan was to run it northbound and turn around and run it back south.

The videos show that the Corbeilles ran the Dragon with their Boxster top down. Although it wasn't witnessed by this writer, I'm told that Rich decided that he needed to spray his windshield with the washer. Too late he realized that you don't do that with the top down.

Here's where it starts.





Later, those who didn't return home met in the lobby to plan the remainder of the day. This included the Schroetters, Roberts, Corbeilles, and Fowlers. A boat charter service offers a one-and-a-half-hour tour around Fontana lake. We all decided to sign up for that. Fontana does not have commercial or residential establishments on its shores, so the scenery is amazing. Our guide gave a running commentary on the lake and its history. There were seven towns in the area that are now under water. He was able to provide the names of inhabitants and their stories. He also had photos of the area prior to the dam being constructed. The area had experienced gold mining, copper mining, and of course timber logging.

Towards the end of the tour he took us right up to the base of the dam. It is 480 feet high, which makes it the tallest dam in the eastern United States. Its length is 2,365 feet – almost a half a mile. At the time of its construction in the early 1940s, it was the fourth-tallest dam in the world.

The dam impounds the 10,230-acre Fontana Lake, which spreads across a stretch of the Little Tennessee river along the southwestern boundary of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Appalachian Trail crosses the top of the dam. In fact, when we were checking out, we met a man who was hiking from Maine to Georgia along the Trail.

The concrete that makes up the dam continues to “set” over a period of a hundred years. The dam operators have to occasionally cut the dam to accommodate the concrete expansion. They start at the top and when they reach the bottom, the top has already expanded and sealed. Cracks were first observed in the face of the dam in 1949. In 1972, additional cracks appeared and started to expand in 1973. It

was determined that the cracks were caused by stresses in the curved portions of dam from thermal expansion. The cracking was exacerbated by alkali-aggregate reaction, which causes the concrete volume to increase and develop additional stresses. New slot cuts are made every 4–5 years to stop its growth. The last cuts were performed in 2016. About time for another cutting.

Here are photos from both sides of the dam.









Dave and Rich had scouted the route to the marina which was less than a mile away so when we met Rich and Nancy in the lobby, we opted to follow them. Got concerned when Rich continued down the road and we could see the marina down on the lake off to our left. We had to be there fifteen minutes prior to the boat weighing anchor so I started to be concerned, especially when Rich continued way on down the road. “No place to pull over” was his excuse. But we made it back in time to meet up with the Schroetters and Roberts. The eight of us enjoyed a great tour of the lake.



The black line is the high-water mark. The lake has been drawn down prior to any snowfall which could cause flooding downstream.



I vowed to never again follow Rich Corbeille. I figured that Dave was a safe bet since he led us up there on Saturday. What I learned later changed that opinion.

As I mentioned earlier, I loaned Dave our dash camera so he could record his run on the dragon. After he returned, he gave me the camera and I started reviewing the recordings. I forgot to tell Dave that once you plug in the camera to the power source it stays on, even if you turn off the screen.

I have solid evidence to never follow Dave on a tour again. As I watch him, on video, he stops to check which way he should go when leaving Fontana Village. When he gets to the highway he turns right. I'm saying, "No Dave, you should be turning left to get to Deal's Gap". So I watch him going down this road for a very long time. He stops at an intersection, obviously trying to decide which way to go. It's only eleven miles from Fontana Village to the Dragon so how could anybody go the wrong way? Continuing to watch the video I see Dave on a four-lane road. There just ain't no four lane roads between the Village and the Dragon. He then pulls over and stops for a few minutes. Then he pulls back onto the road into the left lane and makes a U-turn at the next opportunity. Aha, he's lost! That's when I add Dave to my "Do Not Follow" list. Fortunately, he found his way to the Dragon and successfully made the run up and back.

Following our boat tour, we all retired to our rooms for a little R and R, then met for dinner and a nip of the spirits...distilled kind. Everybody else had already left to return home. This time the menu didn't have any strange food choices. All normal 'merican food. Burgers, pizza, tacos, etc.





Monday morning, we got a call from Dave suggesting that we meet for breakfast. The Corbeilles and Roberts had already departed. Had a long, relaxing breakfast and decided to caravan back to Huntsville along the same route that we came in on. Then we had the usual discussion about who would lead. Dave suggested that I lead, and he could use the dash camera to record our car. I replied that I'm a natural born follower which is why I was an enlisted sailor. And that he was obviously a leader since he was a Naval officer.

We had a great ride back down the road to Robbinsville. Not much traffic, so "Hot Shoe" Schroetter opened the throttle a bit. We couldn't have asked for a better day to travel. A beautiful blue sky and 72F temperature. It was a "roll the window down" type of day. Interesting in that once we got out of the Appalachians and down into the Ocoee River basin in Tennessee, the temperature dropped to 64 degrees.

The miles per hour is calculated using GPS signals so it's not accurate. Also, the camera has a wide-angle lens, so the straights are actually shorter, the curves sharper, and the cars are closer together than what you see. Enjoy the ride!

Much thanks to Dave for putting on this tour. All who attended had a great weekend of driving and fellowship.