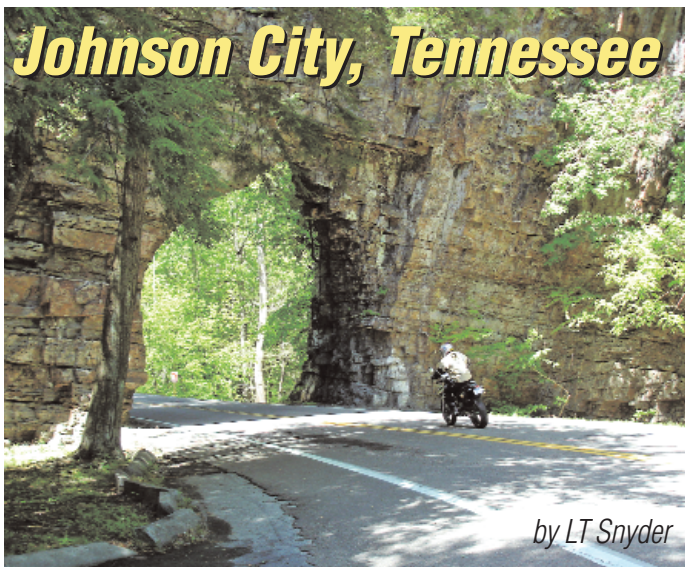


Great Destinations

Johnson City, Tennessee



by LT Snyder

The Natural Bridge was coined the 8th Wonder of the World by William Jennings Bryan.

OUR GREAT DESTINATION locations are usually based on a singular appealing attribute, such as stunning scenery, interesting attractions, epic roads or rare hospitality. It's a tough act to combine several of those features in one location. It's a tougher act for a location to have most of those attributes yet remain unspoiled by crowds. I was fortunate enough to enjoy one such destination.

We were invited by the PR group of Johnson City, Tennessee, to sample the local riding. While I've ridden through much of the Smokey and Appalachian Mountain ranges, I had not sampled the riding around Johnson City.

Located 110 miles Northeast of Knoxville, Tennessee, Johnson City sits at the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, and near the National Forests of Cherokee and Pisgah. Johnson City is one leg of the tri-cities of Johnson City, Bristol and Kingsport. It is also a mere 50 miles away from the Blue Ridge Parkway. Several years ago, Johnson City realized that it was uniquely situated to provide motorcycle riders with a great destination. They then assessed the potential economic impact of taking a pro-biker stance. In short order, the city unveiled their "Southern Dozen"—rides both short and long that begin in Johnson City. The city then set up a website with details of each, including downloadable maps that include turn-by-turn directions as well as route overlays.

Not to be confused with other popular destinations in Tennessee, such as Memphis or Nashville, Johnson City is far removed from those locales. In fact, Johnson City is closer to the Canadian border than it is to Memphis—a revelation that requires a map to understand the great length of Tennessee.

The Southern Dozen all have catchy names, like "The Snake Ride," "8th Wonder of the World" and "The Long Damn Ride." The shortest is a mere 39 miles, while the longest is 153. Those distances won't impress Iron Butters, but stringing together multiple rides each day will easily consume the daylight hours, and riding them all will take several days. If you have just a weekend, I recommend "Top of the Roan," "8th Wonder of the World,"

"The Long Damn Ride" and "Mountain Ribbons" for fantastic riding while still allowing enough extra time to enjoy some of the scenery and attractions.

Each ride offers different types of roads and overall experiences. I recommend that riders peruse the Southern Dozen website and study each ride. That will greatly assist trip planning so that time won't be wasted trying to collect maps and asking the locals about where to ride.

Many riders consider The Alps as their benchmark for great riding and stunning scenery, but it's also so famous that it's crowded with cars. In my estimation, a perfect location is one that offers good roads, great scenery and few automobiles. The Southern Dozen has these attributes. In fact, I rarely had to pass any cars during my weekday riding. In general, however, the roads near Johnson City aren't well-known as meccas of riding (except for perhaps The Snake, which has a reputation that rivals The Tail of the Dragon). This makes it a hidden treasure. If you want to ruin a good riding area, let it get popular.

While I didn't have time to sample all 12 of the Southern Dozen, I did ride almost half of them, and gathered enough experiences to definitely recommend the area. But first, let me discuss what Johnson City is and isn't. Johnson City is a great home base, particularly if you're looking for a place to organize a group gathering, and numerous regional/national clubs have used it as the site of their annual events. Johnson City has numerous hotels/motels that are affordably priced, there are many good restaurants, the roads in and out of Johnson City are easy to navigate and aren't crowded by most standards, and the people of Tennessee are friendly and pro-biker. There is also a small-town feel to the city,



thanks to a revitalized downtown section and a location that is unspoiled by the riding masses. In terms of the riding, it offers a range of experiences. Riding the Smokeys or Appalachians isn't a singular experience. The scenery and roads cover the gamut of possibilities, from dense woods to mountain scenery to river valleys. If you're looking for intense twisties in every direction, there are better places to ride in both mountain ranges. My trips to North Georgia provide me twisty-overload experiences that Johnson City can't offer. But the problem with isolated mountain twisties

is the lack of convenience—hotels are scarce, restaurants scarcer and fuel stop planning is essential. Those worries evaporate when you stage out of Johnson City. You can be in the midst of good riding within minutes of leaving the city, yet never feel like you're in the middle of nowhere. At a rest stop atop Roan Mountain (elevation 6300'), I could have sworn I was somewhere high in the Rockies, isolated from civilization. Achieving that feeling within a short ride from civilization is a difficult feat. In that respect, Johnson City provides a very pure experience—good roads, the feeling that you're getting away from it all, but the conveniences of civilization. And even if you don't appreciate the amenities that Johnson City affords, I bet your significant other will—especially if, like me, she's passed through the rustic "no-frills" camping phase and prefers modern amenities after a long day of riding.

You might find destinations that are better in certain respects, but in terms of variety of riding, amenities, hospitality and convenience—as a total package, I'd have to say that Johnson City certainly fills the bill as a Great Destination. But let us MCN readers keep it a secret, lest it get spoiled by too many riders!

Ride Johnson City—www.southerndozen.com