

## Benge's Revenge - a Tour Guide

Benge's Revenge begins innocently from the parking lot of J.I. Burton High School in Norton, Virginia, when a City police cruiser escorts the riders over the railroad viaduct to the stop light for a left turn onto U.S. Business 23, a two-lane road to the town of Appalachia. In just over two miles riders will pass on the right the County Cabin II, which is the oldest mountain music/cultural venue currently operating along the Crooked Road, Virginia's Heritage Music Trail. A bit later they will pass a rarity, a working drive-in theater, The Central Drive-in. Riders who fish, may wish to stop and try their hands at fly fishing the Powell River which meanders to the left of the road.

At ten miles riders will enter Appalachia, where the Coal Heritage Trail turns off to the left. Riders stay on Business 23 through Appalachia and head for Big Stone Gap, the home of John Fox Junior's *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, now an outdoor drama, and the setting of Adriana Trigiani's novel, *Big Stone Gap*.

Business 23 is a three-lane road for the two mile stretch between Appalachia and Big Stone. About half way between the two towns, riders will pass on the left Roaring Fork, a birding trail which leads to .

In Big Stone Gap, at about 13 miles into the ride, riders turn right on Second Avenue, where the first water stop is located. Riders follow Second Avenue for just over a mile, turn left, crossing a bridge and then a right turn onto U.S. Alternate Route 58. Riders follow this highway for a mile and a half into Lee County. Soon after it becomes a four-lane highway, they turn right on Route 621, a winding back road they follow for over 13 miles. Route 621 initially goes past corn and tobacco fields and pumpkin patches and then skirts the Jefferson National Forest on the right for much of the ride to U.S. Route 421, a two-lane highway between Pennington Gap, VA and Harlan, KY. Riders turn right on 421 for their second water stop at Stone Face Rock which is about 31 miles into the ride.

Riders stay on 421 for about a mile and a half before they right turn on Route 606, a part of the Coal Heritage Trail and also a Virginia Byway. The Jefferson National Forest is on the right of Route 606. About six and half miles along this road, riders pass Robbins Chapel and then five miles later, Rawhide before they make a sweeping left and then a hard right in the community of Kooke. Three miles later they leave Lee County and reenter Wise County at the Holden Mine. Route 606 becomes 68. In the next six miles riders will skirt the Exeter and Imboden communities before they rejoin Business Route 23 at the stop light outside of Appalachia where they turn right.

Riders again follow Business Route 23 from Appalachia to Big Stone Gap, where, after a water stop at Stacey's Used Autos, they turn left at the light at the intersection of Business 23 and State Route 610 (Wood Ave.), which they follow through the Southern section of Big Stone. It is known locally as the Southern, not because it is in the southern part of the town (It is not.), but because the Southern Railroad depot was located in this section of town.

Riders continue on 610, pass under the four lane highway, and enter Powell Valley at over 60 miles into the ride. Riders may wish to take a few moments to enjoy the five mile ride through the rolling expanse of Powell Valley past the Lonesome Pine County Club. Two miles past the county club riders they take a hard right followed by swing back to the left as they begin the two mile ascent of Stone Mountain, a prelude of Benges's true revenge. At the end of this climb riders intersect with U.S. 23 and Alternate 58, a four-lane road, at a stop sign. They turn right and should enjoy the next two miles down hill on the four lane.

Riders exit the four-lane at the first Norton exit, mile marker 41.8. At the bottom of the exit ramp, they turn right on Route 619 for the final two miles where Benges renders his dreaded revenge. Beware, Route 619 is narrow and with an ample supply of pot holes. At about a half mile into the climb riders will have their final water break. At this point the climb intensifies and the road makes a hard right and then a hard left at Benges's Rock. The climb continues through several switchbacks with the most severe being about a half mile from the finish. This final climb is over 1000 feet in less than two miles.

Once riders cross the finish line at the entrance to Flag Rock, they should pause a few minutes to congratulate yourself before they hop back on their bikes to coast down the mountain to the last water stop for lunch, courtesy of the Tavern on Main in Wise, VA.