



The North Carolina/Tennessee border provides the backdrop for one of the best rotary events anywhere.

TAMING THE DRAGON

The Deals Gap Rotary Rally

By Chris Crane | Photos by Bobby Williams, Darryl Cannon, and Jeremy Stone

The serene image of a steeply winding road, bordering the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in western North Carolina, is suddenly pierced by an instantly recognizable roar. The distinct sound of rotary engines echoes through this formerly peaceful haven, announcing the launch of the third annual Deals Gap Rotary Rally.

If you've ever had the opportunity to drive a rotary-powered car on a mountain road, then you know that they were built with curves in mind. There is no better place to experience that innovative design than at the world renowned Tail of the Dragon, tucked away in this scenic mountain wilderness. The Dragon, as it is affectionately known, is another name for an eleven mile stretch of US Highway 129 that spans the North Carolina—Tennessee border and comes to an end at Chillowhee Lake. This area is called Deals Gap, and it has become a mecca for motorcyclists and sports car lovers. With 318 curves in eleven miles, the road seems like it was cut specifically with

enthusiasts in mind.

The rotary's chance to slay the Dragon occurred this year on April 21st. For the third year in a row, RX-7s, RX-8s, and other descendants of the rotary heritage (including an RX-2, RX-3, and even a REPU Truck) arrived in Deals Gap for a weekend unlike any other.

The weather was gorgeous as Saturday morning dawned. The day kicked off with everyone making the trip from the picturesque Fontana Village, where most of the rotorheads stayed, to the top of the Fontana Dam for a car show and lunch. As the rotaries began arriving, the cars were lined up according to generation, creating a walkable timeline of rotary history.

The Dragon can be just as dangerous as it is fun, with accidents occurring on an almost daily basis, so before settling down to a barbeque lunch, the group received some words of wisdom from a Blount County deputy and a few Deals Gap locals. Rob Seneker, a fellow FD owner who has lived near Deals Gap for longer than some of the attendees have

been alive, and Darryl Cannon, owner and operator of Killboy Photography, offered the crowd some tips on how to keep from getting burned by the Dragon.

After lunch, everyone eagerly warmed up their cars in anticipation of making the first pass through the Dragon in an all-rotary caravan. The sweet, nose-tingling smell of rotary exhaust filled the air as the cars slowly pulled out, once again in generation-specific groups, and the drive was underway! The rotaries got plenty of interested looks from other drivers, and some people were even nice enough to pull over and let the cars pass by as a group. After the first pass, the rotaries were divided into mini-caravans, with group leaders elected based on their experience and driving pace. Of course, the Dragon is a public road, so there were several car clubs and what seemed like thousands of motorcycles sharing the day with the rotaries.

After several passes through the Dragon, the drivers headed back to Fontana Village to get

ready for the evening banquet. While gathering around the buffet, everyone anxiously awaited the raffle for the door prizes that the DGRR's generous sponsors had supplied. Everything from keychains to big brake kits and billet rotor oil caps were distributed to the lucky drivers whose names were drawn.

Before the raffle got started, though, the group paused to listen as some of the event's coordinators and sponsors spoke to the crowd about the special meaning attached to this year's DGRR. The event was dedicated to Mark White, a rotary enthusiast from New Orleans who had recently passed away after a long struggle with a degenerative neurological disease called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. White was a true rotorhead, having been known to drive his FD with a cane when he began losing the use of his legs. He had been an integral part in the conception of the DGRR, having brainstormed with organizer Phillip Sohn during the early stages of the event's design.

A very special thanks is due to Phillip Sohn, Mark White, and the Mazda Rotary Car Club of Alabama, without whose support, planning, and determination, this event would not have been possible. Thanks also to all of the sponsors: RE-Speed, Rotary Resurrection, BNR Supercars, Trussville Mazda, Malloy Mazda, FDNewbie Imports, www.GotPlacement.com, Speed for Sale, RX-7 Store, Atkins Rotary, and Shine Auto Project whose belief and trust in this great idea is much appreciated by all.

This year's Deals Gap Rotary Rally was nearly triple the size of the first rally—truly an event not to be missed. But if you did miss it, then you are in luck, because planning and registration for DGRR 2008 is already underway! Log on to www.DealsGapRotaryRally.com to see pictures and videos from this year's event and find out for yourself just what an addiction the DGRR can be. ☺

