

SMASHING PUMPKINS



Highland Park Resort,
Cedartown, Georgia

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DIRT RIDER

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The next time you're feeling crappy, go take a listen to Harry Chapin's timeless classic, "Cat's in the Cradle." The song is about a boy who wants to hang out with his dad, but his dad is too busy and continues to tell him, "we will someday." Then the dad retires and wants to hang out with his, now grown-up, kid. Yup, you guessed it, the tables have turned and now the kid is too busy, but "We'll get together soon. You know we'll have a good time, soon." Everyone can relate to the simple concept of this song, but broadly speaking it's a solid metaphor for how to live your life. Make smart decisions. Make time for the good stuff. This is really just a one-shot deal. So, get off your hump and start going for it.

I recently had the opportunity to live by those words when my buddies invited me to ride some KTMs in the mountains of northern Georgia at a place called Highland Park Resort. It's the closest thing I've seen to an off-road motorcycle enthusiast's nirvana. In fact, they should consider changing the name to "The Closest

Thing You've Seen to an Off-Road Motorcycle Enthusiast's Nirvana." Dang, I just checked and unfortunately somebody is currently squatting on that domain name. Seriously though, the Park sits on 1000 acres of land that contains two MXGP tracks, one PeeWee track and seemingly endless miles of wooded, mountainous riding trails. It's beautiful, it's vast and did I mention there's an onsite KTM dealership? Can I get an "Amen!"?

As good as this place sounded, I still almost balked on the deal. There was a lot of junk going on at work. Leaving my wife alone to herd our two boys was a tall order. Timing wasn't really convenient for randomly broken bones. And the list went on. But then it dawned on me. Work will always be there. I'll trade my wife a couple of days in return. And let's face facts, with modern medicine being what it is today, bones heal relatively fast. And if I snapped my femur like an old dry twig, I could probably still type on a computer. It was officially on—let's go smash some pumpkins.



Are We Lost And Is That Banjo Music?

Highland Park is located in Polk County, Georgia. It's a little over an hour north-west of Atlanta, on the outskirts of Cedartown. It's not difficult to find, but it's not exactly sitting next door to an Applebee's or anything. Here's a tip—use the driving instructions listed on the resort's website and turn off your GPS. There's a bunch of gravel roads in the hills and your GPS doesn't discriminate between someone driving Big Foot or a Toyota Yaris. And if you do get off the beaten path, no worries. It's not like the dudes from the movie *Deliverance* are going to jump out from behind a tree, so just relax and enjoy the scenery. You might even run into an abandoned still. Bootlegging moonshiners ran rampant in this part of the state years ago. As a matter of fact, the crew at Highland Park has uncovered a dozen or more stills on their property alone. Some of the stills are

illustrated on the park's trail map, so add that to your list of trail riding "to do's."

The Eagle Has Landed

We rolled into camp at about 8:30 Thursday evening. The park has five cabins for rent and as luck would have it, we were given the Mike LaRocco Suite—cabin number 5. Glenn, Highland Park's Operations Manager, greeted us at our cabin with a roaring campfire and his trusty hound dog, Sam, at his side. Glenn's a good dude who's been at the park since its inception in 2006. Glenn's voice is husky enough to pull a dogsled, but he's a soft touch. When no one was looking, I caught him petting the shop cats. Glenn gave us the lowdown on the facility, and then led us a few paces to a modern-yet-rustic-looking lodge that was, in fact, KTM World. There we were greeted by Paul Wright, owner and founder of Highland Park and KTM World. Paul was relaxed and soft-spoken and effortlessly talked at length about bikes, racing, motors, suspension and not only what it takes

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to get a grand idea like this off the ground, but also how to make it fly. The secret is passion and hard work (there's a cot in Paul's office).

KTM World consists of a showroom with bushels of new KTMs, clothing, accessories and acres of KTM parts—a core component of their business model. The service department houses rental bikes, racks to perform maintenance work and a supremely sophisticated suspension dyno setup. There were enough cool things going on in this shop for a whole series of articles, but for now just know, if you have suspension needs, give these guys a call. A very interesting twist to this dealership is that if you are unsure of which KTM model you want to buy, you can test ride them on the track and trails so that you can buy with confidence. And if you know



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what you want, including suspension work and engine mods, you can specify those in advance and Paul's crew will do the work, test everything out and have a personally tuned bike waiting for you. It's like having a factory crew and a testing facility at your disposal. Check and Mate!

The Menu, Please

Despite a late night of bench racing, telling lies and indulging in adult beverages around the campfire, we eagerly awoke to get down to business. Glenn was already waiting on us outside the shop and seemed relieved to find that Sam, the hound dog, had bunked with us. Apparently Sam has a penchant for beer farts and Pringles. On a side note, after revealing a peculiar grooming habit, Sam was officially renamed "Lucky." But I digress.

"What do you guys want to ride?" Glenn asked. The menu items included an '09 200 XC, a 250 XC, a 250 XCF-W, a 400 XC-W and, for dessert, a new 2010 KTM 250 XC with all the trimmings including KTM World's full-on works suspension kit. Everything looked tasty, so we decided to go family-style and took one of each. The bikes rent for about a hundred bucks a day which includes gas. There's no riding fee if you rent a bike, however, if you bring your own vehicle there is a \$20 track and trail fee. Game on.

Who's The Boss?

All geared up, we were ready to go. I felt like a pro. I had on a spanking new set of matching gear. I was riding a bike that I didn't own—one that someone else had prepped for me. And just as I was about to roll away, Glenn tapped my helmet and yelled over the sound of the engine, "Just have fun out there, OK?" Isn't that what all the factory mechanics say to their

pros on the starting line? Unfortunately, feeling like a pro lasted all of about 30 seconds. At the very first turn, before even reaching the trailhead, I grabbed a handful of gas, anxious to see what that 250 smoker could do. Apparently new knobbies and red Georgia clay work pretty well together. Instead of roosting my brother behind me, the bike hooked up and literally jumped out of my hands like a bronco on crystal meth. My ego was badly bruised, but the broad brush strokes of my limits were becoming more well-defined. It was all too obvious who would be wearing the pants in this relationship. "OK, you're the boss," I muttered to the bike as I picked it up and remounted.

Decisions, Decisions...

The Perimeter Loop Trail pretty much does what its name suggests. It circles the property and all trails feed from the loop and dump back onto the loop. Difficulty of the trails is denoted by the number of



diamonds associated, one through six. Even though the Perimeter Loop is only one-diamond, it contains jumps, ruts and elevation changes that make it the perfect warm-up before turning down any one of the 30 or so more technical trails. The park's primary concern is safety and everything is pretty well marked. Every inch of trail is one way only. This eliminates head-on collisions which is a good thing, but also commits you to a trail. So if you get part way in and realize you've run out of talent, you don't have a lot of options. It just forces you to know your limits and that, at the end of the day, promotes safety.

We mainly stuck with the three- and four-diamond trails. These were tight, steep,

rutted singletrack. While we didn't have to ford any streams or seat-bounce over any felled trees, these trails were plenty technical and the undulating topography quickly made jelly of our legs and backs. We took a gander at one of the six-diamond trails and it was 100 percent off-camber and covered with leaves. We decided to save that trail for the next trip and pointed our pumpkins to the freshly groomed MXGP track.

The track was roughly 2.5 miles long with wide sweeping turns and numerous rounded tabletop jumps that catered to riders of every experience level. You didn't need Ricky Carmichael's skills to have fun on it. Some sections were vast enough to afford even inexperienced

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riders the ability to hold the bike wide open and keep clicking until you ran out of gears. Paul has big plans for the track and he's definitely got the space to host races.

Different Strokes For Different Folks

One of the best parts of the trip was the opportunity to ride five different bikes, one right after the other. The same trail felt completely different depending on the type



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of bike. Admittedly, I'm not going to win any GNCCs anytime soon, but I struggled on the trails with the 250 XC. I couldn't cut the wheelspin or keep the front end down. And on uphill ratty stuff, forget about it. One second it would be bogging but a simple flick of the clutch would put it back on the pipe and stretching my arms out. That thing wanted to take me and my 150 pounds to the moon. The 200 XC was a bit tamer, although I still managed to loop that thing out more times than I care to remember. The problem was clearly me and not the bike. The vast majority of my seat time has been on two-strokes on MX tracks and I just had no feel for the single track steep stuff. Which brings me to the

four-strokes. Boy howdy! Pick a gear, any gear and you can ride up, over and through anything. The 250 XCF-W was by far my favorite bike in the woods. And when it came time to ride the new two-and-a-half mile MXGP track I really enjoyed the 400 XC-W. If it weren't for my own inability to scrub doubles, I could easily blame it on the weight of that bike. While my favorites were clear to me, not everyone shared my sentiments. Half the group liked the two-strokes hands down. And I do have to admit the 250 XC with KTM World's suspension kit was very plush. It felt completely different than the stock bikes. That bike soaked up the gnarliest of tree roots and rocks and felt like riding on Velcro tires on the MXGP track. That really was the beauty of the trip—getting together with friends, riding all types of different terrain, swapping bikes and then reliving (and sometimes stretching) the stories around

the campfire. And then waking up and doing it all over again.

Happy Trails To You...

In the end, we technically didn't smash any pumpkins, unless you count a cracked rear fender (sorry, guys). Two days of riding went by like a blur. We could have easily spent another few days exploring the remaining trails and working on lap times on the track. Highland Park Resort is definitely one of my new favorite moto-destinations. It's got a cool vibe, serene yet intense. It can accommodate riders of all experience levels, yet challenge the most skilled. Paul runs a tip-top operation with a knowledgeable staff that will treat you like family. Do yourself a favor—get your crew together and plan a trip to Highland Park, pronto. All you need to know is available at www.highlandparkresort.com and www.ktmworld.com.