

ATV riders mine excitement here

Thursday, February 01, 2007

By Brian David, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Riding ATVs tends to be an underground sport. Riders look for vacant land, fire up their machines and go, with scant attention to legalities and the permission of landowners.

But "underground" is just a figure of speech. Quad riders flock to woods, meadows, hilly terrain like old quarries and strip mines -- open-air sites.

Until now.

For \$25, riders can plunge into the dark, wet, muddy, mysterious and rather awe-inspiring netherworld of an abandoned limestone mine in northern Beaver County.

They can climb mud piles, careen around the massive stone pillars and splash axle-deep through the edge of an underground lake, while their whoops and roaring engines boom hollowly in the 14-acre expanse.

"It's like nothing you've ever seen before," said Bob Svihra, owner of Mines and Meadows ATV riding resort in Big Beaver. It's one of only a handful of all-terrain vehicle parks in Pennsylvania.

Mr. Svihra, of Chippewa, has been riding quads for years, as evidenced by the scars throughout the 150 acres he purchased in 1998 near the Route 60/Pennsylvania Turnpike interchange.

So when he sold 40 acres there for use as a warehousing building, his next venture was obvious. In September, he pooled that money and some borrowed funds to buy the 400-acre former Medusa estate, leased the right to use part of the former limestone mine, and set about building an ATV park.

The park has 22 miles of trails, some open and conducive to speed, others climbing, dipping and twisting through dense woods. "We're adding more trails weekly," Mr. Svihra said.

One interesting feature is the remains of an oval dirt racing track that allows quad riders to climb the banking as they roar around corners. Another is the vestiges of the Medusa mansion and a small lake in front of it -- though the featured attraction is, of course, the mine.

Ironically, one of Mr. Svihra's goals in building the park is to take the sport above ground, giving enthusiasts a legal, safe place to ride.

"Right now people are just riding helter-skelter," he said. And when trails erode and get too rutted, riders simply stop using them.

That, he said, creates problems.

But at Mines and Meadows -- one of only a handful of ATV parks in Pennsylvania -- the trails are designed to be safe and are maintained so they will stay safe. It's regulated by the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

For now, Mines and Meadows operates on a "bring-your-own-ATV" basis. For \$25, riders get a guided tour of the mine -- once around slowly, taking in the sights and stopping to talk, and once around as fast as the guide can go -- and unlimited access to the rest of the trails.



My trip to the mine started at a little trailer off Old Route 18, where Ron Little and John Takas have four ATVs warming up in the snow-covered parking lot. After some flat-land practice for the one beginner on the trip, our group headed into the hills.

Mr. Svihra lead the way through the trail network up to the old dirt track, and a quick lap there shows just how much fun an ATV on a banked track in the snow could be. Then it's a high-speed downhill run to the old mansion and lake, part of which had once been partitioned off as a swimming pool.

From there it takes just a few minutes to ride up a hollow to the mine entrance.

The entrance is set in a wall of cutaway rock, dripping with icicles. It's made of stacked railroad ties, and despite a modern steel door, looks like something straight out of an amusement-park mine ride. Except that it is -- you know -- real.

Headlights on, we squeezed through -- the entrance is barely wider than the ATVs -- to be greeted by a blast of warm air. The temperature inside is a constant 55 degrees, a change from the snow falling steadily outside.

Inside, it was a game of follow-the-leader; without a guide it would be easy to get lost. The floor is wet and muddy; the rock ceiling stretches endlessly, the walls and pillars loom at the edge of the headlight pools; it's a surreal scene.

Then Mr. Svihra goes up a mud hump and disappears. Dutifully following, I headed up, found my headlights aimed at the ceiling, and in front of me ... utter blackness. Does the trail go back down? Does it level out? Does it ... ACK! It goes back down.

Then with a splash our group hits the lake, headlights bouncing crazily off the water, our loud whoops mixing with the churning tires and rasping engines. Then there's a loop back to the entry.

"You get your feet wet?" Mr. Svihra asks. "I forgot to tell you to lift them up back there."

But what are wet feet? A small price to pay for the experience.

Mr. Svihra estimates he's sunk about \$1 million into Mines and Meadows, and "I'll have \$2 million wrapped up in that in no time."

For one thing, he wants to build an RV park, with sewer, water and electric hookups. He welcomes RVs now if people want to camp and ride, but offers no services.

He envisions people camping at Mines and Meadows for weekends riding ATVs and racing cars, motorcycles or go-karts at the nearby BeaveRun Raceway.

And it doesn't stop there. He'd like to restore the mansion's swimming pool and create a

waterfall at a terraced 40-foot-deep sandstone quarry on the property. He can also see building a lodge on-site, so riders have a place to eat, drink and visit, though he's not sure how to handle the mud the riders would all drag in.

One thing Mr. Svihra won't change much, though, is the mine. He said it seems to be a powerful draw just as it is: muddy, wet and dark.

"I had a guy call from California said he wanted to fly in with his son just to drive in the mine," he said. "There's something about it that just fascinates people."

(Brian David can be reached at bdavid@post-gazette.com or 724-375-6816.)

[Back](#)

Copyright © PG Publishing Co., Inc. All Rights Reserved.