

Sunday Drives: Georgia

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13/06/2021 Former Porsche works driver and hero of Daytona, Hurley Haywood, heads high into the Blue Ridge Mountains for the latest instalment of the Sunday Drives series.

Where

Georgia, US

Length

80 kilometres or two hours

Type

Challenging hairpins and elevation changes amid stunning forest scenery.

Hurley Haywood has a racing resumé like few others past or present. Not only has he won the 24 Hours of Daytona a record-equalling five times, but he has also taken top honours at Le Mans on no fewer than three occasions. Haywood is most closely associated with Brumos Racing and its instantly familiar white, red and blue 911 RSR cars, but he was also a works driver for Porsche in the 936, 935 and 956. Haywood's last outing at his home race of Daytona was in 2012 when, collaborating Marc Lieb among others, he finished third aboard a 911 GT3 at the age of 63.

Today, Haywood lives not far from his beloved Daytona, and was torn between his home state and two others when asked to pick his Sunday Drive. "I really wanted to talk about driving in three different states," he says. "I live in Florida and there are some great roads here. I love driving on Sundays from my home in St Augustine down to Daytona on the US 1, through the swamps and the everglades. I went to school in Vermont and they have great driving roads there too, especially up near the Stowe mountain ski resort. But if I have to choose just one, let's concentrate on Georgia!"

A lot of elevation changes and switchbacks

Haywood's chosen drive is the Suches Loop, a heavily wooded alpine road that circumnavigates Blood Mountain on the southern tip of the famous Blue Ridge mountain range. "It starts relatively close to Atlanta, where Porsche's US headquarter is based, and is about 80 kilometres long," Haywood says. "With a lot of elevation changes and so many switchbacks, it's one of the most challenging roads I've ever been on."

Accessing the Suches Loop, known locally as the Georgia Dragon, is easiest from the town of Dahlonega, from where you head due north on Route 60 towards the small community of Suches itself, before peeling right onto Highway 180, the Wolfpen Gap Road. This narrow and tricky road is comprised of three spectacular mountain passes, Neel's Gap, Hester Gap and Stonepile Gap, and offers stunning views over the Chattahoochee National Forest. When the 180 joins Highway 19, roughly at one o'clock on this clockwise circuit, you hang a right onto the faster, two-lane road that winds south again to Dahlonega.

Spectacular in every season

"I first drove this route on a Porsche event with journalists maybe 10 or 15 years ago," says Haywood, "and I've done it within the last year and very little has changed. The nice thing about the east coast is there are so many seasonal changes, however, and it's always beautiful. Winter isn't so great of course, but Spring, Summer and Fall are all spectacular."

Haywood recommends taking the Suches Loop at your own pace, and keeping one eye out for the law. “There are lots of blind corners, so it’s a place where if you’re not paying attention you can get into serious trouble. You do not want to go off the road here, so I would allow a couple of hours to really enjoy the route and not just go as fast as you possibly can. Sometimes there are state patrols out there that you don’t want to run into. But the police know this is a place people come to enjoy driving and are actually quite lenient!”

Relative absence of traffic

Another advantage of the Suches Loop is a relative absence of traffic. Although it can build in the spring or autumn when the trees are at their most spectacular, it is quiet for most of the year. “Because the road itself is so challenging, you don’t tend to get SUVs and station wagons on it,” Haywood says. “Instead you get enthusiastic drivers, so even if you are caught behind a group of cars, they’re usually going quite briskly too.”

As to Haywood’s preferred car for the drive, there was only ever going to be one possibility: “I’ve driven this route in a lot different cars, from 911 Turbos and Caymans to the Taycan. I’m a 911 kind of guy of course, and they’re such great handling cars, but so are all of Porsche’s cars today. The 718 is a great car to drive on those roads and even the Taycan, which is a relatively big car, is a lot of fun when you have all of that torque available all the time. The Suches Loop is a good road for any Porsche, but my preferred car would still be a 911.”

Getting lost in the act of driving

For Haywood, part of the pull of the Suches Loop is the stunning scenery, but equally it is an opportunity for him to get lost in the act of driving. “It’s such a wonderful area to appreciate your car,” he says. “When I’m driving these sorts of roads I like to turn off the radio and get into a rhythm, hearing the gears shifting, and the sound of the engine. If you’re riding the Suches Loop as a passenger you can get almost sea-sick because there are so many switchbacks, so you need to be a bit sensitive to your passengers, but it is so beautiful to drive through that kind of environment alone, totally focussed and really exploring the capabilities of your car.”

Sunday Drives

With travel restrictions limiting the opportunities for road-trips, Porsche Newsroom’s new Sunday Drives series sets out to quench readers’ thirst for adventure by discovering the world’s most beautiful driving roads through the eyes of Porsche people around the globe.

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