

POSTCARD FROM THE USA PART THREE

The Blue Ridge Parkway runs from the southern Appalachian ridge from Shenandoah National Park to North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountain National Park and is some 469 miles in length. In the summer there is a riot of colour from the rhododendrons but in October we hoped to see the autumn or fall colours of the trees. We paid \$6 for a park pass and headed to the Visitors Centre. Unfortunately visibility was limited due to fog in the mountains. We watched a video at the centre which showed all the critters that live in the park. We headed back down into the Shenandoah Valley to Harrisonburg. The next day the mountains weren't quite so misty so we headed back up. The views were of endless mountain ranges and lovely autumn colours, although we were a few weeks early and the best colours were yet to come. As there is no accommodation in the Parkway, apart from camping, it is necessary to head back down to the valley at night.

By this time we were in Virginia and decided to have a look at one of the famous rock formations - Natural Bridge. This was formed when a limestone cave collapsed to expose a 215 foot high natural arch. A brief look from the car park revealed that it was a real tourist trap so we backtracked to a Safari Park just up the road. They had all sorts of animals from camels, gnus, African grazing beasts, buffalo, llama, alpacas, deer, antelopes, you name it. We bought a bucket of food and drove in. The word must have gone out among the animals that "Grubs up!" and the Buick was immediately mobbed and heads were thrust in windows looking for food. In about five minutes the windscreen was covered in camel snot and gnu drool was all down the side of the car. We were all in hysterics by now and trying to close the windows without pinning something by its neck. The park was spread over a large area and there were dozens of animals further on in near waterholes and in the more heavily tree-ed areas. They all looked in good nick, probably because of the lavish feasts the tourists were handing them. National Car Rental would have had a fit at the state their Buick Le Sabre was in!

The next morning we ate at the Pink Cadillac Diner which was festooned with old car and movie posters, as well as serving a great breakfast.

We crossed the James River through Lynchburg to Appomattox where Robert E Lee had surrendered to Ulysses S Grant on April 9, 1865. The village of Appomattox is preserved within a 1300-acre park and includes 27 restored buildings including the house of John McLean where the actual surrender had taken place - not at the courthouse. To the west of the village is the small town of Appomattox whose courthouse is often confused with the historic site. I bought a genuine Confederate 0.54 Sharps bullet. This hadn't hit anything or anybody as it had maintained its shape.

At the town we visited Fred's Car Museum which had 65 cars on display including some nice old Buicks. One huge car was a very rare 1939 12-cylinder Lincoln limousine, one of only four ever made.

Back up to the Parkway again and that night came down to a place called Fancy Gap. Daniel Boone was said to have crossed the mountains at this point. The town of Fancy Gap was just a few houses and one restaurant. Everyone was smoking so there was no need to ask for the "no-smoking section". The local food included chicken and dumplings, collard greens, pulled pork, cornbread or hushpuppies. Alan ordered hushpuppies with his dinner and Tony wondered if he would be given a shoe! Actually it was fried cornbread, given to the dogs at one time to quieten their hunger until the hunters returned with meat.

Back up to the Parkway and we came across a lost dog with a radio collar on. It drank my bottle of water and ate Marny's leftover sandwich. We put it in the car and drove a few kilometres down where we had seen some hunters. Apparently they use the dogs (hounds) to find bear and then track the bear using the radio signal on the dog's collar. Seemed to be a lot of time and effort put into blasting away at bears rather than get a proper job, considering they don't eat the bear meat. Who was I to call them rednecked knuckledraggers?

Into Kentucky now and caught up with another cousin of Marny's and his wife. Lovely big house near a lake with deer wandering through the garden. Bruce had been an ex-fighter pilot in Korea and Vietnam and was very interesting to listen to.

Next morning we drove into Frankfort and visited the capitol building which was superb. All Kentucky's favourite sons had their portraits in the gallery including of course Colonel Harland Sanders of KFC fame. Being the home of the bourbon distilleries, we naturally had to go over one. We chose the Buffalo Trace distillery where bourbon and vodka were both sold. The value of the storage barrels of bourbon was millions of dollars. Near the vats the fumes were so thick they almost choked you. Tasting was very pleasant including bourbon chocolates.



50,000 gallons of white lightning!

We were also taken to the local Toyota plant at Georgetown. This employs some 10,000 people with wonderful working conditions. Assembly plant staff are paid US\$25 per hour with great benefits like crèches, kids picked up from school, good medical benefits etc. With conditions like this, the unions don't get a look in. They manufacture the Camry, Avalon, Solara and hybrids here. Some of the convertibles were stunning. It was great to sit in them and poke all the buttons and pull all the levers.

The weather reports were now stating that Hurricane Wilma was about to hit the Florida coast. As this was our final destination it gave some consternation especially with the prospect of severe flooding.

Bruce had recommended we see the Oakridge Museum in Tennessee which had been part of the Manhattan project for the atomic bomb in the 1940s. Heavy water had been made here and this linked up with the main laboratory at Los Alamos in New Mexico. These were certainly interesting times for the people working on the project.

We drove through the last part of the Gt Smoky Mountains and crossed into Georgia. Stayed at a little town called Madison which General Sherman had spared in his march to the coast because he liked it, otherwise it would have been burnt to the ground like everything else.

Savannah was its usual "old south" with oak trees covered in Spanish Moss and lovely squares. Right on the Savannah River there are still old schooners along the waterfront and the old cotton warehouses have been turned into hotels, restaurants etc. One of the squares in Savannah was where Forrest Gump sat to wait for the bus in the movie.

There are small islands off the coast here and one of these housed Fort Pulaski, a Confederate fort built in 1829. This was beautifully built and situated with a moat around it with the odd gator spotted sunbaking. It was thought impregnable but however the Confederates hadn't counted on the use of rifled cannon fire which made dangerous inroads into the fort, especially near their munitions store and this led to their surrender after 24 hours.

Heading south again, we crossed the Altamaha River and drove across a causeway to Jekyll Island. This island had an interesting history being the site of the summer beach houses in the late 19th century of the super rich, the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Goulds, Cranes etc. Apparently the six richest men in the world and their families built a compound of houses here. Even by today's standards the houses are incredible with beautiful gardens though some are showing signs of weathering. The government reclaimed Jekyll Island and it is now open to the public.

Because we were close to the Okefenokee Swamp we decided to take a swamp boat ride here. The area of the swamp is 730 square miles (its actually a huge peat bog) and houses 49 different mammals, 234 birds species and 54 types of reptiles including thousands of alligators. In our hourly boat ride we saw two alligators, a few wading birds and nothing else. Don't know where the rest of the stuff had got to.



Okefenokee Swamp 'gator

We were now in Florida and our fears of fuel shortages because of the hurricane were shortlived. Had breakfast at an IHOP restaurant. I asked the waitress if this meant "I hate old people" but she said it was the International House of Pancakes". Mostly Americans aren't used to a leg pull.

A visit to the Daytona Racetrack was a must. We hopped aboard a trolley and had a tour of the track and pit area. The corners are banked at 31° and are difficult to even walk up. A car must be hitting 90 mph to maintain position on these corners! The Imax theatre had a 3D movie on NASCAR racing which was exciting, we had to keep ducking wheels as they came off and headed towards us.



Alan on the winner's podium

NASCAR racing is the biggest spectator sport in the USA. One team at Daytona had 300 staff and kept 50 engines in store at \$50,000 each.

Still heading south and we reached Titusville on the Florida coast where the launch area of Cape Canaveral could be seen. We took photos of the rockets which were displayed outside the complex. Time was running out now and though we would have liked to do the whole day tour, we weren't sure what lay ahead of us in the wake of Hurricane Wilma.



Space shuttle at Cape Canaveral

As we drove further south we started to see signs of storm damage with palm trees in shreds, some uprooted. Most roadside advertising signs were flattened and electricity seemed to be in short supply. Boca Raton looked like a ghost town and there was only one pizza shop open, doing a good trade. It turned out that Governor Jeb Bush had brought in 6,000 power workers to repair damage and they seemed to be taking up all motel accommodation where there was electricity on. As well as that there was initially a 7 p.m. curfew just after the hurricane but was now back to 9 p.m. Fort Lauderdale airport (which we had to fly out of in a few days) was on generator power only. Great!

However we pressed on south as the plan was to reach the southern most point of Florida - Key West. We found accommodation south of Miami at Homestead. There was an "Applebees" next door so what more could you want. The National Guard were lending assistance and helping with general security. We got talking to some blokes from the South Carolina National Guard at "Applebees". Some were ex-Iraqi soldiers and mentioned meeting up with Aussies in Iraq.

By the time we reached Key Largo the destruction was getting worse with small boats tossed inland and heaps of debris along the road. During the hurricane the over-the-ocean roadway had been closed to traffic. The longest stretch was

about seven miles before you reached Key West. The plan was to check out Ernest Hemingway's house which is a museum and a bunch of his six-toed cats still live there. However driving around Key West was very limited as there had been an ocean surge and most of the beach had been dumped on the roadway to a depth of about half metre, alternatively there was half a metre of water on other roads. Things certainly looked pretty devastated and people were swapping stories on what they had lost. We found a Cuban restaurant open, had a quick lunch and wound our way slowly through sea water out of town and back to Miami.

The next day we took our trusty Buick to the car wash and then drove north to Fort Lauderdale for our flight to Philadelphia and then onto London. The National Car Rental Company is certainly no-fuss. Just pull in at the airport reception centre, sign off, grab your luggage and go.

We were once again "selected" for security checks and had to remove shoes, belts, jackets etc and be given the once over with the machine thing. Still security is part of travelling nowadays and must be accepted.

Our seven weeks in the US had been wonderful and we had thoroughly enjoyed each state in this diverse land.

L Haime (WA Buicks)