

# One Long Hot Summer

(The Summer of '07)

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# 1. One Long Hot Summer

## 1.1. Intro

Before the trip could be started, it had to be planned, neither of us are 100% sure when we actually decided to go, but it was somewhere around 2004. The original idea was to go coast to coast across the USA and our friends Mike and Moira were also interested and suggested using Route 66 as a means of going from East to West.

Somewhere along the way Jean and I decided that not only did we want to go East to West, but also complete the trip by coming back East again, so what had started as a 3 or 4 week trip was now going to be a 3 month one.

## 1.2. Planning, getting there

Saving money was a top priority, so we started throwing money into savings accounts and learning to be without it. We started to research into bike options, originally when it was a 3 or 4 week trip we had considered renting, but at \$100+ per day that would total more than the cost of a bike over 3 months.

The next option was to buy a bike, do the trip and then sell it at the end, but as we read into it the two biggest problems would be insurance and then the time to resell at the end. On top of that it would cost time for Mike and Moira to find and insure a bike which would eat into the 5 weeks that they had.

After more reading and searching the Internet, I came across a story written by someone who had flown their own bike to the US, the author had been gifted a 1<sup>st</sup> class ticket by a friend, Mike Belch. Being an unusual name I deduced it was the same Mike Belch who worked for the same company as myself, looking back it was probably the first occurrence of "fate" that would help shape the trip. Through him I was in contact with the trip author, who was able to feed me with lots of information on shipping bikes abroad, most useful was the pointer to Horizons Unlimited (<http://www.horizonsunlimited.com>).

The site was mine of information, we never realised so many people wanted to run away and take their bikes with them. Jean and I attended the UK rally, during the World Cup 2006 which shows how serious I was, the rally consisted of presentations and games designed to be educational, tyre change challenge. One presentation included cooking, and eating roadkill.

Obviously employers don't normally give 12 or more weeks holiday, so about 18 months before we were due to leave we approached our respective managers, Jean works for the NHS and we expected she would have a harder job than me getting unpaid leave (I work for an American company, Sun Microsystems), we were surprised by the actual difference. In Jean's case her manager was very receptive and the attitude was "Are you coming back?" to which the answer was "yes" and as that was the case it would be "no problem".

My manager was also receptive, especially after I explained it would be very similar to paternity leave, but I had to have an interview with his manager and also with HR before I got an email (which was well timed as it turned out) confirming that they would keep my job open until I returned. This took over 12 months to be finalised, by that time we had booked flights, I was going job or no job.

Arranging and booking flights was awkward, most flights can only be booked 12 months in advance and we needed to book as soon as possible to get the best price, but due to the 12 month booking spread we had to wait until there was around 9 months before leaving due to our return date, and then Flyglobespan started flights from Liverpool so that was a no brainer, especially as it was only £540 for the pair of us. This was a "no frills" flight and in hindsight it was as "no frill" as it could get. In Mike and Moira's case they needed to get an "open jaw" flight as they would be returning via a different airport (San Francisco).

Insurance, bike and travel were also fun, games and headaches. We had been using the same company for travel insurance for a few years, but when we tried to arrange for US cover not only did the rate quadruple, they also informed us that motorcycle "touring" was not covered. More net searches found WorldWideInsure who do the required cover, for only £248. That just left the bikes, after reading loads of information about American insurance we opted to pay extra to make sure we were covered for any 3<sup>rd</sup> party claims, that was another £550.

Every time we made a decision it seemed to sprout more options, so once we had decided to take out own bikes we had to work out how to get them to the US, by plane or ship? Shipping is far cheaper, about half the cost of air freight but also slower with 4-6 weeks shipping times. Searches also showed a RoRo from Liverpool to New York which until quite close to leaving we had decided to use, but wary of horror stories at Newark docks we finally decided to fly them over with James Cargo of Manchester who specialise in air freighting motorbikes.

One final item we had to sort out late on was a visa, although the flights as originally booked would be covered by the 90 day Visa Waiver Program, we spoke to the US customs service and they advised us to get a B2 Visa which required us to visit the embassy in London, in person. That was a good excuse for a 2 day holiday in London, visiting our cousin, a few beers and watching the guard being changed at the palace, brass bands and all, before an afternoons queuing with evidence of finances, job security and proof we would come home again.

Well worth it as we ended up with 10 year visas, probably helped by my employers finally send my Sabbatical approval letter the day before.

Everything covered ? Nope, accommodation for the first few nights in New York while we sorted out the bikes, luckily I have a cousin, the son of the one in London we stayed with, in New Jersey. A few emails and we had that sorted.

## 2. Leaving home

Most trips involve packing the bags and catching a flight or a ferry, this the first time I have had to pack the bike and make sure it catches a flight. We made the decision to have the bikes at the shippers a week before leaving which meant getting our kit ready extra early, you would think minimal packing for 3 months would be easy, but it took a few test packs to get it right. Just how far will 4 pairs of underwear last ? We were about to find out.

The packing of the bikes went smoothly, the crates were built around them and with plenty of space to spare we were able to send all our riding gear and clothes.

Finally, June 14<sup>th</sup> 2007, time to leave. I switched off my work mobile, put it in a drawer, we locked the front door, and walked down the street with just a small back pack each as hand luggage containing just a few travel essentials and wearing our riding gear of jeans, boots and jackets. Keeping to our low cost approach we took the bus to the airport (£2.20 each).

At the airport we were surprised to see no queue at the Flyglobespan desk, check-in was not yet open due to a 30 minute delay. Not a problem, we were in no hurry we had 3 months to kill. The 30 minutes became 60, became 90 became "Sorry, no plane, it has deviated to Manchester and has a technical problem, flight cancelled". A first for everything, we hadn't had a cancelled flight before. We were given an option of "go home and come back tomorrow" or have an hotel for the night. There was no way we were going home, not for another 3 months, so we opted for the hotel.

The airline offered an extra 24 hours in the US for the return, so we pushed and got 76 instead.

Other passengers were not as happy, they were going for a shorter time, long weekends, and would be losing days, missing weddings and losing hotel bookings.

We only had a couple of things to arrange, get the car hire changed (thanks ChrisD for many hours spent on the phone) and make sure the bike shippers knew we would be late. Much to my amusement the bikes had also been delayed 24 hours and had been transported to London to get a flight from there instead of from Manchester.

So, there we were, with no spare clothes, just our riding gear and a toothbrush each. The airline arranged to have us all taken to a nearby Holiday Inn Express, not that they bothered telling the hotel, but I think we had the picture by now of how little you get when you pay for a no frills flight. We realised there was no chance of any food, so we hopped on a bus and went to play at being tourists in Liverpool, rang a couple of friends and went out for a few beers. After the last few days being so hectic it was quite a nice relaxing interlude.

One of the things we had noticed while at the none existent check-in was how few people turned up, only around 20-25. All the passengers obviously got a little suspicious as to that being the real reason for the no show of the plane, this was further fuelled when we arrived at check-in the next morning for the 15:00 flight, I'd say there were approximately 90 people in total, poor for a combination of 2 flights. A further 2 hour delay was announced, for "crew training". There was more consternation when the plane had been on the tarmac for a while and took off, it transpired that was the crew training.

Finally, after a 28 hour delay, we took off, to a round of applause. How Flyglobespan air crew do their job, is beyond me.

Flyglobespan hadn't finished with its catalogue of problems yet, our pre-paid meals had not made it on board, so apart from what the steward could scrape together for us we had to starve and then to just incase we had not been delayed enough, the replacement plane was smaller and did not carry as much fuel, so needed to land in Maine to refuel.

So, tired, hungry scruffy and possibly a touch smelly we touched down at JFK 29 hours late, with no landing forms as the airline had not loaded those either much to the annoyance of the customs officers, who didn't bat an eyelid at our lack of luggage for a 3 month trip.

All that was left to do was negotiate the car hire, driving at night in the US while tired and navigate 50 miles to my cousins house where Mike, Moira and cold beer awaited.

### 3. Hitting the road

Fortunately we hadn't over planned what to do day by day, or even where to go at all. Before we went anywhere we needed to get the bikes, and they were back at JFK, with a different airline than we had the paper work for. It was a good job we had hired the car as we could see a lot of driving around happening. The AA cargo shed was the opposite side of the airport from the customs office, but handily next to the car hire return.

Normally the shipper would be given power of attorney over the bikes to handle all the paper work, but to avoid them getting buried in paper piles we had chosen to do it all our selves. After explaining what we needed to the American Airlines cargo employees we had to go and be nice to the custom officers. The customs building was very empty, which we assumed was because it was a Saturday which probably helped when our new best friend officer Jay Bartlet said he had never seen the custom declaration form we had before, "all the right answers, just not the correct form", he found the correct forms and helped us fill them out. Then just to add to the complications the computer system was down, so he had to go to a manual system to give us authorisation.

Back in the car, back, to the AA building, hand in the release forms, pay an extra \$25 to get the bikes out and then off to find a man who knows where they are. The fork lift truck driver asked us where our "flat back was" and was surprised when we said we were unpacking and riding away, apparently no one does that. He went off and produced the crates, which still looked nicely in one piece and then all the staff came out to watch us, even lending us some tools to open the crates.

Apart from needing to refit my mirrors and Mike's top box rack, we only had to find an air pump to re-inflate the tyres, the pressure was lowered before crating due to lower air pressure in the hold. That was once we tipped another \$20 to have the crates taken away, another use for a "flatback". Jean and Mike wobbled the bikes round to the car hire return in the hope there was an airline. Here we met our first language/accnt barrier, I just could not get the woman to understand I wanted to get some air into the bikes tyres, I was hot tired and frustrated, not the best way to be as you ride a bike with low tyre pressure round one of the few "circles" (roundabouts) in the US in search of an air line.

Time flew, we had been out all day, and it was the first of many bright sunny hot days, missed lunch and were finally kitted up and on the road. Just in time for rush hour, in a country where you can't "split lanes" (filter). It must have taken us nearly 2 hours to get back, chatting to some car drivers as they asked about the plates and wondering if we should follow the locals who were filtering, illegally, but getting into trouble so soon would have been bad. We got back just before a heavy thunderstorm, which is apparently normal in the summer here, and to top off the day cousin David was ready with the beer and a BBQ, he really takes after his dad.

We had intended going into New York but as Mike and Moira had gone in the previous day Jean and I could do that on the way back so we decided to hit the road properly the next day.

We were treated to a breakfast of "Dunkin' Donuts" before packing up and heading north, initially on the interstate to get past the city and into the hills. There was plenty of roadkill on the interstate, always followed by large tyre marks and often the remains of a blow out.

Our finger in the air route took us into the Catskill mountains, and as chance would have it, Woodstock, which none of us had realised was there nor had we known that the festival had taken place 40 miles away in Bethel as it had grown too large for the town. Despite that they definitely dine out on it, and have a very hippy appearance to most shops.

Despite a late start, many wrong turns and a stroll around Woodstock we still covered over 200 miles by the time we started looking for a motel, which was handily found next to a Wal Mart, and not a lot else. It was basic, 2 double beds, a shower/toilet and a TV, but for \$66 what do you expect? The others nearby were \$119 upwards. Like children we spent ages browsing around the Wal Mart at the sheer abundance of items on sale should we need them, car tyres, tents, knives, fishing rods, guns, lots of guns. Stocked up, with food not guns, we went back to our motel room for a picnic and channel surfing trashy TV.

Reverse jetlag was in force, waking early around 06:00-07:00 was about to become the norm followed by early mornings on the road. We continued on the none interstate roads in a sort of Canada direction as visiting Niagra was a must seeing as we were passing, sort of. On the way we paddled in Lake Geneva, one of the "finger" lakes in northern New York state, helped a biker start his bike in the weirdly named Batavia before passing through Buffalo, a city best avoided, and up to the border after a few more wrong turns because the Americans want you to see the waterfalls on their side and try and route you away from Canada.

We had a little trepidation about crossing into Canada in case there were any issues re-importing the bikes back to the US, but the border guard was extremely interested in the fact we had flown our own bikes over, got out of his booth to look at them and have a chat. He even apologised for stamping our passports, before mugging us for \$6 toll.

Niagra was as impressive as we had hoped, from the approach hearing the roar get louder to the soaking we got under the waterfall despite being dressed in silly yellow plastic bags. It truly is one of the wonders of the world. After recovering from paying a whole \$12 each to get in, we then got let off the car park fee by the attendant, something that happened a few times on the trip which we think had something to do with the English plates.

To get to Chicago and the start of Route 66 we could have either dropped back into the US and gone through Detroit, which we had been informed on a number of occasions was rough and best avoided, or stick to Canada and re-enter the US higher up at Port Huron. So, not having any Canadian dollars we did the obvious and stayed in Canada. This proved useful, despite nearly all cards failing in a petrol station, as we came across a bike shop that sold the correct

sized puncture repair kit, the sort that re-inflates the tyre, all others we had seen and were to see in the US where car sized. We had been forced to leave such things behind due to the aircraft hold being pressurised.

The roads to the border were most notable for their straightness and a store sign we past "Taxidermist Cheese Shop", seriously.

The border crossing back to the US could have not been more relaxed, Jean and I went first, showed our passports with the 10 year visa and then the guard just asked Mike and Moria if they were with us before waving them through. Our route took us into Flint which we wrongly assumed was a nicer town than Detroit, how wrong did we turn out to be, we thought we had entered through the rough end at first, but it just got worse. The rough end never seemed to finish, heading into what we assumed was the downtown area there was no let up in boarded up properties. Stopping for fuel and a discussion on what to do and where to go we could not help but notice the van of locals turn up who seemed more interested in the bikes than fuel. Decision made, we hit the interstate and headed out. We were informed later about all the recent murders, tourists included, in Flint.

As is normal at times like this, you see no motel signs for ages, until about 30 miles west when we came across Durand City and signs for a Comfort Inn, we gleefully pulled into the carpark only to see another sign "Opening Soon". There were two people working in the car park so I rode over and asked them if they knew anywhere else we could stay. Fate was playing a hand today, one of the men was the owner who was preparing for the "Grand Opening" tomorrow, on the spur of the moment he decided to open then and there especially for us. So, for less than \$70 we were to be the 1<sup>st</sup> and until the early hours the only guests in a brand new hotel. So new we beat the Gideon bibles, which arrived 20 minutes after I announced we have beaten them. Moira and I tested the pool and spa areas before all of us went out for the local \$1 beer night and cheap tex-mex at the local golf club.

The next day our host was still buzzing around, I don't think he had slept, checking and sorting things, he had a whole 8 or 9 rooms booked now. He was also over joyed when I fixed his drinks machine and fax machine before we left.

Getting to Chicago and the start of Route 66 should have been straight forward from here, even when taking into account we didn't have a decent map at this point. But after lunch in a small town diner, where we were the centre of attention with the waitress' grandmother who had moved over from Manchester 52 years earlier, I took a wrong turning and led us into Indiana where we got our first real taste of needing to know that American roads direct by North/South/East/West even when the road is not going that way coupled with no maps and (another) hot day we finally entered Chicago. Initially we looked for somewhere to stay, but all the reasonable rates where in unreasonable areas, so we decided to find the start and head out straight away.

The lack of maps was not just financial, we didn't have the space to spare and were hoping to get regional free ones as we followed the 66.

The road into Chicago up along the riverside is eye-catching with the sky scrapers one side, parks and sports stadiums with a crowd on the way to an international football match on the other. Which is why I was taking photographs on the back of the bike when the digi card went faulty, no problem I would just re-seat it like I normally do, except when I opened the back it shot out and straight into the traffic. Jean was surprised at how calm I was taking the loss of the pictures, until I explained I had uploaded them all the night before courtesy of the free Internet access the night before.

Finding the start of 66 was our next task, apparently they keep changing the one way system so directions are fluid. Never the less we were able to find it, ride under the "L", remembering all the films scenes we had seen there before taking over the pavement to get photographs of the bikes under a sign.

## 4. Route 66

We didn't bother following Route 66 (from here on in called just 66) properly out of Chicago, all information we read pointed to it being, rough, tortuous and no fun at all so it was a stop start blast down the interstate looking for a cheap motel that the Paint ball convention hadn't booked out, this we didn't find until Jolliet, on a classic US shopping plaza, with nothing reasonable open just some low class eating establishments. It was the first and will be the last Wendy's I eat at.

So, finally we got to see 66 properly, after visiting the local Route 66 museum, of which there are many along the way. Every town of reasonable and not so reasonable size would endeavour to have some feature that connected it to old 66, in an attempt to keep tourists coming through, some like Jolliet could even add extra claims like the prison gates that Elwood was picked up from in the film "The Blues Brothers" and the prison used for the series "Prison Break" (the same place). Some of the museums are in the form of rebuilt petrol stations, others are slightly off the route and will even open up specially for you, but generally after the first few it was hard to differentiate one from another. One that did stand out was the official one in Clinton, Oklahoma, it took you through the ages a decade at the time with music and items to suit the time.

The road itself, or what remains of it, mainly follows interstates which were built to replace it and at times we had no choice but to go on the interstate, in one case in California it was because a military base had been built over part of it. At other times it would branch off with multiple route choices dependant on the years it was routed that way, and there would of course be a museum or a feature like a "Giant man" holding an item like a space rocket. There are a lot of them around, all originally built with an axe, but adapted for location. We also noted a lot of them later when not on 66.

Apart from museums, the main attraction of doing 66 is to visit the various motels, diners and curiosities by the side of the road. After leaving Jolliet and heading south west we passed the bar that Al Capone was reputed to hang out at. We had a snack at the home of the "Corn dog", a hot dog on a stick, covered in corn bread and deep fried, and something called "frozen custard" which seemed more like ice cream. They name sections of road if it seems different or a curiosity, with so much straight road we were not surprised that there were a couple called "Bend of Death" the first we took at over 80 MPH and the second about 70 MPH, which granted was a very tight horseshoe bend around a rock in New Mexico. At one point the road was only 9 feet wide, due to construction costs, so that was just wide enough for one vehicle, now they have widened it by adding gravel at the sides. We went past blue whales, totem pole parks (made of concrete) and many other oddities one of which is the Cadillac Ranch in Texas where a lot of cars had been partially buried and then passers by are encouraged to leave their mark, which we did. Somewhere on the route was the worlds biggest McDonald's, which we avoided.

At the Mississippi, near St Louis, we came across the Chain of Rocks bridge that has a 22 degree bend in the middle which was to compromise between road and water traffic caused by the rock on the river bed. Although no longer used as a road bridge it seems to have other uses, while we were there a wedding was taking place so we could not walk across it. In an attempt to see it from north sides we went back to the interstate and round to the west side where in complete contrast to the east which was in Illinois the car park was manned with an entrance fee. The price put us off a bit, but the attendant slobbered out in a car and the wild, rough appearance of the car park put us off completely and we continued on to south St Louis, avoiding the centre as many people had advised us and written that it just wasn't worth it. If you ever see the film "Escape from New York", the Chain of Rocks bridge is used at the films climax.

After St Louis the route heads towards Tulsa, on the way we visited the Black Madonna shrine at Eureka, not an easy place to find as we were just learning to cope with the small sized state road numbering, but Missouri uses letters instead with no obvious reason of why one road was AA and the next RO. That, combined with the heat and dubious directions made a short detour annoying and unpleasant until we hit the beautiful country lanes that wound and twisted their way to the shrine. The shrine itself was a lifetime work of one man, he cleared the site, created the gardens and and built the shrines from local stone. A very peaceful site to relax for a while, and get the history of it from one of the brothers.

The days were getting hot and dry, with very little cloud in the sky. Occasionally a cloud would produce rain, and we would either ride through it because we could see the end of it and know that the heat would dry us off or a place to shelter would miraculously appear. One by product of the rain was accidents on the interstate, we would be happily drifting along the frontage road that ran along side the interstate, and out of the rain for some reason, when we would see a massive tailback as cars and trucks all slid into each other. It was as if they all forgot what brakes were for. By the time we got to Lebanon we were due a rest and booked in at the Munger Moss Motel for 2 nights as it was a bargain \$48 per room and we had been on the road travelling every day for the past week, covering over 1800 miles so far.

The Munger Moss is one many iconic Route 66 Motels, it has still retained one of the best full on neon signs and was a regular stopping point for people doing the route. Despite having some modern motels nearby it has managed to survive. Each room had a theme around 66 usually picking on a town or state and then having pictures depicting it. The rooms were also kept in a very 1950s/1960s style. But best of all it had a swimming pool. After a day sat in the saddle in the heat it was always a welcome site, I was also on a one man crusade to teach Americans how to "bomb" properly, they have so much freedom to run, dive and heavy pet in swimming pools but have no idea how to do a full on "bomb".

Along with every decent motel, there seems to be a diner, instead of what had become our nightly trip to a supermarket for snack materials we decided to try out the local diner, although we were warned not to have the chicken as they did not seem to be able to cook it decently. The diner had the requisite seats in booths and stools by bars, constant coffee top ups and even top ups on the milk shakes. The staff were friendly, chatty and interested in where we were from etc. The food was cheap, good and plentiful. As well as a long stream of locals visiting we also noticed the local law enforcement patronised it, which is always a good sign. We enjoyed our food so much, we even went back for breakfast

the next morning, the breakfasts were as good and plentiful as the meal, even the strangely named "biscuits and gravy" which despite its name is quite nice. The biscuit is a scone like cake, but lighter and savory, and the gravy was traditionally a white gravy flavoured with pepper or even with sausages.

The town of Lebanon sits between 3 junctions of the interstate, with the main street running between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. This contained all the major shops for the town and was typically un-pedestrianized with each large shop being accessible via a large carpark, needless to say we got our usual strange looks walking everywhere. Hidden away in the historic district was the original main street that had a more old world western style to it, but full of the lower end of the market shops. At least it had a pavement. While in town we found yet another route 66 museum, this time in the library, amongst the exhibits were some excellent books on route architecture which made a nice change.

Our next stop was in Kansas, only graced by a 13 mile stretch of 66 that cut through one corner. As an advert for Kansas it was a poor one, we passed through Galena which was a very run down ex-mining town, so run down buildings would occasionally sink into an old shaft. We stopped in Baxter Springs, which has the claim to fame of being Radiator Springs in the movie Cars, which is just all about it had going for it except for the last example of a rainbow bridge design, where we met a fleet of VW Beetles doing the route and Mike and Moira met "Crazy Legs", a man who could swivel his hip joints 180 degrees and also had a "Cars" character based on him. We did have a run in with the manager of the motel though, Jean and I had turned up about 3 hours ahead of Mike and Moira and booked the room. I distinctly remember saying it was for four people, but for some reason he failed to listen and just priced for the number of people he could see. So when the others turned up he thought they were bunking in, after a bit of an argument we agreed to an extra \$20, but I wasn't happy.

That night we got wet, very wet while walking back from the supermarket. In a matter of minutes the road and pavement area flooded, we were getting near some of the rain bands we had been watching on The Weather Channel, which as its name suggests is a channel devoted to the weather, extremely addictive.

The following morning we finished what remains of Kansas, a whole 2 miles, and I could not resist to a sudden stop, beckon the others over and say "I don't think we are in Kansas anymore".

En route to Tulsa we stopped off for breakfast at a well known 66 haunt, that 2 days later we saw under around 3 feet of water on our favourite television channel.

Tulsa may be 24 hours from a lot of places, but it is a thousand miles from any action.

It was a Wednesday, and downtown was dead. No where was open, no sign of any form of night life. The only signs of life were the down and outs trying to sell flick knives, a bit worrying at first as some one walks up, opens a flick knife and asks if you want to buy it. When we saw the hostel around the next corner that at least explained the people. Later we managed to find a local bar I had seen advertised called the Colony, I was hoping that with a name like that they would have some Union flags, I had been getting jealous of all the Americans who had flags flying. Unfortunately there were no flags, but there were 2 young owners, one was a very surf dude looking guy who was surprised when I correctly guessed he had a VW camper van. They kept a decent pint of Guinness and a happy bar. We even had a round bought for us because it was some ones birthday, the girls enjoyed their Starburst as they were not riding, Mike and I settled for a coke.

As we approached Oklahoma City our luck with the weather changed slightly, we had been monitoring the weather conditions around the city and knew it had rained for 21 days due to the strange weather systems circulating in the area. The 22<sup>nd</sup> was no different. The sky darkened, the droplets descended and a petrol station appeared just in time to shelter for waterproof fitting. Within minutes the roads were flooded as the rain bounced 3 or four feet in the air. The local drivers didn't seem to care and ploughed through the intersection. When it had gone off a bit we continued, bypassing the city as best we could and picked up 66 again, still in rain. The road, although straight, was undulating, so all the water gathered in the dips which was bad on its own, but made worse by the fact the soil was a deep red and that matched the colour of the road surface. Consequently it was impossible to see if a dip was flooded, and how deep it was. After 40 miles of this we hit the interstate and headed for Clinton.

For some reason Clinton was unaffected by the rains and floods, so we decided to stay 2 nights, of which the second was spent in the motel's "Luxury Suite" after an almighty cockup with bookings, over bookings, double bookings and any other type of booking failure. For the princely sum of \$70 we got two rooms and a jacuzzi.

Leaving Oklahoma the soil changed from red to a peach colour and cactus type plants started to appear, the land flattened out, the sky was the bluest yet and filled with little fluffy clouds as the horizon became 360 degrees and the view in the rear mirror was pretty much the same as that ahead. At the state line with Texas was a true ghost town, called Texola (fiendish naming scheme) all that was missing was the tumbleweed.

Texas is home to the (apparently) famous "Big Texan Steakhouse" at Amarillo where they have a 72oz steak challenge, if you can eat it and the :- fries, salad, prawn cocktail and baked potato in 1 hour then it is free. We declined the challenge and watched to rather large gentlemen fail while we ate our standard sized steaks. The steakhouse is onto a good thing, not only do they have their own motel rooms (with a texas shaped pool, where I won another bombing contest ) but they also supply free transport from all the Amarillo motels for customers. The quality of the rooms didn't match the quality of the steaks, its nice to see tourist traps are the same anywhere in the world. Although the adjacent "horse motel" was probably better.

## 5. Half way ?

We passed through Adrian, the 66 Midway point at 1139 miles. We had done over 2600.

Onward into New Mexico, where the land changed again, suddenly it was now more "cracked" with dried gullies, creek beds and craggy rock formations. The days were now constantly hot, peaking over 100 degrees and not dropping much below that. So, coming across the "Blue Hole" in Santa Rosa which is a natural bell shaped pool that is a constant 64 degrees, was a god send. We spent a good few hours swimming, diving and jumping in. The pool is 80 feet wide at the top, 130 feet at the bottom and is over 80 feet deep, which made jumping from the high rocks over hanging safe, and fun. Because the water was so clean and clear diving and swimming underwater with your eyes open was a great experience, that meant I could attack Jean from beneath. When we left there, we went to the Park Lake next door for more swimming. This turned out to be our shortest riding day, 60 miles. As an extra highlight we got to see some tumbleweed blow down the road and lightening storms in the distance.

Route 66 has many deviations as its course has been changed over the years, taking the loop up to Santa Fe was one of those. Knowing the day would be hot we left the motel by 07:00 and headed across the mesa and into the foothills of the Rockies. The road passes over "Starvation Hill" at Glenita, 7600 feet, named during the great migration due to the number of people who died trying to get to the west. Santa Fe is full of adobe buildings, and new structures are built in the same fashion. The town is full of rich and arty types, with shops to match. We were interested in their setup for the next days celebrations (4<sup>th</sup> July), the stalls were being set up and stocked, with no security of police presence to stop pilfering. We just could not imagine that in the UK. They also had gas appliances plumbed into a main via a rubber hose spread across the street, how Health and Safety would splutter back home.

That night we had another magnificent lightening storm while sampling beer and margaritas in the town square.

For a long time we had been wondering where we would be and what we would be doing on independence day, we had decided not to stop in Santa Fe but try for somewhere off the beaten track. Our early start was delayed by my bike suddenly needing an oil top up, Wal Mart to the rescue again, \$2.50 for a litre (back home that would be about \$12). We headed off to another old loop that took the long way around Albuquerque into a town called Los Lunas where we got caught up in the towns celebration traffic before getting into some real desert and raced a train. So childish riding along pretending we were on horses as we eased past it, whipping our steeds.

At 1<sup>st</sup> we were going to stop at Grants, but despite the heat we all agreed it just didn't feel right. If we had stopped we would have missed yet another storm at the Continental Divide, the wind whipped up dust devils every where and I could feel the sand and dust blast through my light clothing. We managed to get to trading post at the divide before the full storm hit, which took out the power so the doors would not open and all tills went down. As quickly as it came it left and we continued in the very slightly cooler air into Gallup.

At Gallup we hunted out the local festivities which were taking place in the nearby sports field with fireworks later. As we entered the arena area it dawned on us we were in Navajo region, or Navajo Nation where they have their own police force and council/government. All the stalls and bands were Navajo and there was even a meeting of tribes taking place with Native American dances, speeches and prayers. We decided to sample the stalls for our evening meal which consisted of "Fried Bread" and pickles, hot dogs, burritos and corn on the cob freshly baked, corn in the US is far superior to what we get in the UK being bigger more tender and tastier. We spent the evening wandering from stall to stall, listening to the tribal meet and the music before settling down to watch the fireworks. By the time the light had gone down the hills surrounding the natural bowl had filled up with cars and people had taken up their places. We settled down near some locals and resisted the temptation to sing "God save the Queen" after the US Anthem.

It was our first real contact with Native Americans and we were surprised over the fact they celebrated independence along with the people who had repeatedly forced them off their own lands over the years, our curiosity was peaked and we would learn much more later on.

In the morning over breakfast I collared one of the fathers of someone who was obviously in the Rodeo we had seen advertised and found out where it was and how to much to get in. Apparently it was \$20 each, when he saw the look on my face he gave me some directions of how we could possibly get in, for free.

We packed up and rode into the rodeo site at the Red Rocks State Park, it had a lot of rocks and they were all red. Following the directions from my friend at breakfast we wandered round the side and were not stopped until some children told me off for walking on the rocks, apparently it could get a relation thrown out of the contest. The rodeo turned out to be the National Junior Championships, we were able to watch goat roping, steer roping (single and team), time trial skills and bronco riding. Meanwhile the children were fascinated by us and we became more of an interest to them than the events taking place.

Around midday we decided we had enough free viewing, saddled up and moseyed out of town.

After a detour to see an old portion of road, so old it had no tarmac we came to the Painted Desert and Petrified Forest National Park. The beauty of this is beyond my writing skills. If you can picture strong colours standing next to each other with the blue of the sky merging with the white clouds and the red of the deserts and rocks, interspersed with green you are onto a start.

It was once again very hot and we continued to break our rule of "stop by 14:00" as we rode through the Petrified Forest, a land scattered with the remains of petrified trees that had been left behind as the soil around it was eroded. We did most of the 28 miles without our helmets until I realised Jean was starting to burn and get affected by the heat. The ride

through was made more exciting by a storm brewing up as 3 cloud formations joined together and added black to the colour scheme. As the wind picked up similar to the previous day Jean and I decided not to wait for Mike and Moira but to try to out run the storm, successfully. As we sped towards Holbrook and our WigWam Motel we could see some large dust devils whipping up but avoided the rain, unlike Mike and Moira who got caught in it.

As odd motels go the Wigwams are it, of the original 7 sites only 3 remain, 2 of which are on 66. In typical American mis-naming style the wigwams are in fact tipi (teepee) shaped, and made of concrete. They have 2 double beds, an en-suite bathroom and air-conditioned. The Holbrook site also had an amazing collection of old cars to accompany each wigwam and a museum of petrified forest samples.

Next on the list was Meteor Crater, in Arizona, a massive impact site in the middle of the desert. It was a short detour but on arrival we found out it was \$15 each which included access to the visitors centre, films of the crater and lots of other things we didn't want to see. Being the enterprising young people we are we headed off down a side road to look for a break in the fence, until we were stopped by the local "private" security guard sent out to show us the error of our ways in trying to avoid payment. He didn't seem to be amused when I told him "\$15 dollars is too much to look at a big hole in the ground", a phrase a number of other travellers we met agreed with. The sight of the small man with his big hat looking un-chuffed was worth the rough track riding that cracked Mike's' belly pan.

Today's rain caught us out, it came at 13:00, not 17:00. As we approached Flagstaff on one of those long straight roads with a hill in the distance, that hill housed Flagstaff and had a big black cloud sitting over it, surrounded by blue. Quite surreal. We rode through the storm, saw a fire by the side of the road caused by a lightning strike and played on the twisty road that dropped over a 1000 feet into Sedona and out of the rain, so out of the rain that they were under going a drought while Flagstaff was in monsoon season. On the ride back up what was the first real twisty road I had been able to ride the XJR properly on for a 3 weeks, I noticed black smoke coming from Mike's bike and he indicated it was running more like a 250 than a 900. After getting into the plugs later we realised it was running rich, as in a lack of air. Then we remembered we had been slowly climbing higher for the past week and were now over 7000 feet with thinner air. Mike had not noticed any performance difference because we had been running so slow until today.

That evening in Flagstaff was so different from the day, the sky was clear, the air was warm and being a Friday there was a film on in the town square, for free. I'll have to add up all the free entertainment at some point.

The next 2 days were spent staring into a big hole in the ground, a "really" big hole in the ground. The Grand Canyon was another little detour, around 100 miles from Williams, at the end of a long road with very little life. We managed to get to the rim before sunset where we sat and watched the sun wink out over the canyon with our feet dangling over the edge. No fences here in the land of claims.

Everything that has been said about watching the sun go down here is true, but it is one to experience rather than read about as the rocks change colour and at times appear to change shape, what was red becomes orange and purple fading to grey as night draws in.

We had a 30 mile ride back to our motel, as it was over \$50 a night cheaper than the ones in the Canyon Village. It was the first time I had ridden at night since arriving, and I was using a dark tint visor which made it interesting. The sky however was clear with no light pollution.

We had wanted to go down into the canyon, but after a late start and leisurely breakfast at a "Flintstones" theme diner while talking to locals, who rode in on their horses, we headed back into the National Park and found a ranger to talk to. He was pretty keen on pointing out that it was way too hot to go below the rim in the afternoon, so hot that it would be impossible to take on more water than was sweated off, even with a hose in your mouth. In the end we did a 6 mile walk around the limb over around 4 hours and then watched another sunset, which some Americans applauded !

## 6. Viva Las Vegas !

The , very lose, plan was to be in Las Vegas for the 11<sup>th</sup> July to meet up with a friend of Mike and Moira's who was there for his birthday. To get there meant more desert and heat, although we were getting good at stopping nearer the 14:00 rule so we took two days over it. On the road towards the Hoover Dam we had our first accident, Jean had noticed that one of the water bottles was hanging off Mikes bike and flopping towards the rear wheel, we signalled them to stop and we all pulled into the hard shoulder. Unfortunately it was a steep one and after Mike got off the bike fell over. Apart from fuel loss and a few more cracks in his fairing it was ok. Jean and I felt a bit embarrassed as we had been trying to stop an accident.

The Hoover Dam is impressive, especially when you think of when it was built, unfortunate that it drowned many Native American rock drawings.

Our motel had been booked by Moria's cousin Chris, all we had was the address on Las Vegas Blvd, South. We headed down from the dam, through the sprawl that is the outskirts of Las Vegas. It is hard to see where Vegas starts and the outlying towns stop as they all meld together. All houses were built as close as possible to the interstate, which seemed crazy given the amount of spare land. As we didn't know which way the numbers went on the strip we headed for the north end and worked our way back. Not the worlds best idea due to the temperature hitting 112F at that time and as it turned out our motel was at the other end, and the strip does not move very fast at all. How we longed to get to California so we could filter.

Pulling up outside the Tropicana, we declined any offers from the valets to park the bikes, dumped our luggage outside and then had a dilemma. We had no idea what to tip bell hops for taking the luggage to the room, Mike and I thought stuff it and decided we would take the hit. But while we parked the bikes the girls hadn't realised we had made that decision (as we had been tight fisted so far) and took them off the trolley. I managed to get enough information out of a bellhop as to what it would cost, which wasn't easy because if he suggested a figure it would be the same as asking for money and he could be fired, and decided it would come to \$15 dollars. This turned out to be a bargain when we saw how far from the front the room was.

We had settled for separate rooms again as a bit of a splash out, and what rooms, big, with views of the airport, and only \$50 per room. Considering it was right on the strip, next to the Luxor and MGM Grand, with pool (with card table). This was a bargain. We were in the capital of mammon, could we survive with our wallets intact ?

Vegas is somewhere with no comparison, it has to be the most over the top glitz with no substance anywhere. The strip is like a continuous vaudeville show with some casinos vying to see who can have the most over the top display, while others just like to be over the top in design. You can walk from New York to Paris, take in Venice and have a visit to Egypt before dropping into medieval England. As the night draws in, everywhere lights up and shouts at you that you are in the home of excess. The strip fills up as the air cools and people come out of the air-conditioned gaming rooms and the "click click" men come out trying to deliver a girl to your room in 20 minutes. These men , and women, stand on the pavement flicking their client cards repeatedly to attract your attention.

It was a very tiring day, we must have walked well over 5 miles as we drifted in and out of the casinos and the strip before watching a volcano erupt and turning in for the night.

Following some more scrutinising of various card games, totally failing to really understand most of them despite them being variations on poker I was ready to have a gamble, my \$10 stake had been burning a hole in my pocket. I dabbled with the idea of "craps", but that was probably the most confusing one of them all, and settled on good old leave it to chance roulette. My tiddy stake went on black, and won ! I felt the adrenalin rise and put \$10 across 8 numbers and watched my profit disappear. Going all in I put the \$10 down on red, came up trumps again and walked away a winner. As we walked away I commented to Jean that the board showing the recent numbers that had come up on the table was not showing zero as having made an appearance for a while, and then it fell in.

My little dabble showed me how easy it would be to get carried away on the tables, because my 1<sup>st</sup> go resulted in a win I could very easily have got caught up in the excitement and carried on, and a part of me wanted to especially as I had broke my one go, win or lose rule. If I had allowed myself to continue and lost my initial stake, would I have then wanted to try and win it back ? I'll never know as I doubt I will ever play in a casino again.

Jean and I felt that one night in Vegas was probably enough, and we were more than ready to hit the road once again after two.

We had a long day ahead of us, we had our next pre-arranged rendezvous to get to, this time Lake Havasu, the home of London Bridge over in California. This entailed heading back past the Hoover Dam, into Kingman and picking up 66 again towards Needles and the Mojave Desert. After an early start we had knocked off over 120 miles by the time we arrived at a place called Cool Springs and met the Route 66 artist Robert Waldmire for the second time, Robert spends his life travelling up and down 66 in his VW camper van and creating some very fine detail route maps. We chatted for about an hour and moved on towards Oatman. The road went up and over a pass, we looked down across the arid landscape and dropped into Oatman.

Oatman is about as genuine a wild west town as you will find anywhere, they usually have gunfights in the street twice a day except when the gunfighters are on holiday as they were when we rolled in. The shop fronts are all done up like an old frontier town and wild "Burros" roam the main street. We dropped into the local saloon and drank our fill of ice tea and root beer in the air-conditioned luxury. On leaving at around 14:00 (as previously mentioned many times, the time we agreed we should stop for the day) I noted the temperature was 104 degrees, as we all felt relaxed and comfortable,

we continued.

And then the heat hit us, like a wave, as if someone had turned on a blow dryer and pointed it straight at us. The road itself was fantastic, with great views over a rocky landscape and an undulating surface as we lost a small amount of height. Despite the heat, I had to laugh at what turned out to be one of my all time favourite road signs "Hills hide views", I knew that they meant the undulating road and rocky bends gave reduced visibility, but it seemed to state the obvious.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours with no diners to quench our thirst we dropped onto the interstate and crossed into California where we headed straight for Needles and a welcome Mexican Diner. After food and plenty of fluid the other 3 fell asleep on the pavement. In hindsight I should have arranged for Moira's cousin Chris to come and at least pick the girls up but we were all being a touch stubborn (nothing to do the 120+ heat of course) and wanted to ride the last 60 miles to the lake. So, stocked up with 2 gallons of water we headed off into the desert again. It was cooler now, around 115, but that did not stop Jean falling asleep on the back of the bike so that I had to hold her with my clutch hand and just ride in one gear keeping the bike upright on corners. She would wake as I stopped to slosh water over myself and then fall asleep again.

The static mobile home was a great sight to see, on the edge of the lake. It was around 18:30 and still 110 degrees, with beer in hand I stripped off and went straight in.

The next few days were surreal, Chris had a speed boat and we spent hours on the lake, watching the the people with "real" money play in their boats. These were big, really big boats. Some had more HP than most cars and could do the lake end to end in less than 30 minutes, I was never sure if they could manage it one fuel load though.

The lake temperature is high, it feels like getting into a bath. Locating a quiet spot and going for a swim was high on our priorities, jumping from the boat into the clear water, with beer staggered between dips, was all we wanted or needed to do. On reflection I think we were all happy to just leave the bikes alone for a few days and splash around. Moira even overcame her aversion to putting her head under water and joined in the jumping and diving.

Later Chris took us out to see the bridge and show us the "channel" where everyone hangs out. Both sides are lined with beached boats and the occupants having spilled out to stand in the water while drinking beer, as I said, surreal. It would have been rude not to join in. Later that evening we ate in a small hick town style bar, with the locals doing karaoke and doling out mounds of cheap food and beer, 16oz steaks of course.

The bridge is the original London Bridge, bought by millionaire Robert McCulloch, founder of Lake Havasu City, in the 60s and transported to the desert where it was rebuilt and the channel dug to create the island (formally a peninsula). There was a failed attempt at some "Olde England" type shops and bars, probably because every one sat in the water drinking beer and eating from their BBQs.

The next day was Jean's birthday, as a breakfast treat we went out to a bar on the island and had a margarita each. The day flew by between beer and swimming. I also attempted to find some Union flags for the bikes, partially successful except they were a bit on the large size at 5 feet. I had hoped that London Bridge of all places would have been the place to them but it wasn't to be.

The last leg to LA was upon us, once more we headed into the Mojave with more long straight roads and heat. This was our one "Ewen McGregor" moment, we threw a lot of our gear in Chris' red truck to make room for water, we had learnt our desert lesson. We passed the location for the film Bagdad Cafe and met some Danes who wondered if we could understand the locals as we spoke the same language, he was happy to find out we had the same problem. We managed to find the worst motel we had encountered on 66, but as usual hot and tired we just took it and slept.

Leaving Victorville the next day I managed to pass Joshua trees without noticing them, the Joshua Street sign should have been a clue. The road dropped down out of the mountains, and we could see the famous LA smog in the hills.

Everywhere became more built up, and more "samey" with each town melting into the next the only way you knew you had crossed from one to the other was because the shops repeated them selves :- McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, Panda Express.

Sunset Boulevard leads to Santa Monica pier, eventually, after the excitement of seeing the "Hollywood" sign the Boulevard dragged on a bit and was very stop start until the end of the road, not the official end as that is an unmarked junction on Olympic and Lincoln, but the widely accepted end with a plaque commemorating Will Rogers. Considering it was the end of 66 and a lot of people must come this way there was very little in the way of 66 merchandise. But what I did find was a shop selling small England and Union Flags, finally after nearly 5000 miles I could proudly fly them from the bikes. After a paddle in the Pacific, and time to ponder on the fact we had just brought our own bikes all this way it was back into the traffic and south to find Chris' house as he had volunteered to put up with us for a few more days. Chris and his family live south of LA in Mission Viejo, so this meant about another 75 miles through LA at the busiest time of the day. Ah, at last, California where we could not only filter through the traffic but also use the car pool lanes, bliss.

Halfway , in theory, and 4808 miles done.

## 7. The West Coast

The next few days were spent doing very little, the idea was to wash, clean, rest, relax and prepare for the next leg, which was getting to San Francisco and a recrossing of the continent. But for Mike and Moira it was to be for a flight home. Mike and I managed to get our acts together to wash and service the bikes. A foray into Wal Mart found a gem of a cleaner "Holy Cow", and the ease with which it cleaned the grime off caused us to do similar exclamations. Despite the heat, dust and miles very little was needed over and above the oil change, the RF900 needing new front pads and a some fresh tweaks to the fairing repairs.

I was glad of a few days off the bike, I wasn't saddle sore but I had a zit the size of a golf ball just where I put pressure on the seat.

We did the obligatory proper beach visit to swim in the Pacific which was pleasantly warm. The sand was as clean and pure feeling as you would expect an LA beach to be. While swimming I saw some Californian Brown Pelicans for the first time. They skim just above the waves in line, about 3 to 5 of them, dipping suddenly to dive and scoop when they spy a school of fish, a fine and graceful sight.

One evening Chris took us out to a local bike meeting in the hills, a local bar doing cheap food. A lot of locals were there on their hogs, none appeared interested in our turning up on a bike unsold in the US with English plates, in fact more notice was taken of the plates on the East coast than the West. Maybe it just wasn't loud enough for them.

After so many weeks together as a group, we decided to split up and make our own way to San Francisco before taking charge of Mike's bike and guiding it home.

We had a great time at Chris', he and Sue are fantastic and friendly hosts and will undoubtedly meet up again.

Overall Jean and I didn't really like LA, it was just too busy, there was perhaps too much money, too up its own backside and the smog was visibly spoiling the hills, another town we are unlikely to hurry back to. We hit the interstate and got past Santa Barbara as fast as we could heading for no where in particular apart from Highway One, also known as PCH1 which runs from Alaska, down the entire West Coast and forms part of the Trans Continental Highway which finishes at the tip of South America. While having lunch at the obligatory Subway I investigated the map and remembered a conversation back in Santa Rosa (New Mexico) about roads around Ojea. Always one for going for an explore, we headed out back into the mountains. The road raised and twisted as hoped with a brilliant piece of tarmac, before we knew it we were back above 5000 feet again and on a high plateau waving to workers in the field as the brown and yellow landscape passed by. The heat also rose, while it had been pleasantly cool but sticky on the coast and we had got used to it, the height gain sent us back to hot and dry. We arrived back at the coast after 150 miles and about 70 miles further north from lunch time and stopped for the night at a little seaside town that caught my eye as we passed it.

The Motel we stopped at had its own beach access, which made up for the \$95 it cost. I rushed into the sea and froze, such a short distance and so much temperature change. The town, Pismo Beach, had a proper wooden pier with people fishing off it. You could stand on the pier watching surfers, seals and pelicans while looking at the expanse of sand around the bay with cliffs rising. Also out towards the horizon was a bank of fog, hanging there, waiting for its time to roll in.

The next morning it had rolled in. I actually felt cold.

The coast up to San Francisco is wild, rocky and at times stunningly beautiful. At one point we stopped to see a load of Elephant Seals on the beach, they look cute but when they shift their weight to move you would not want to be underneath them.

Before we reached San Francisco we headed over the mountains into the San Jose valley in search of a cheap motel our budget could afford for the next couple of nights. The mountains proved again that not all US roads are straight. We also passed a lot of bikes hanging out at a "Alice's cafe" which we later discovered was one of the main biker hang outs, manufacturers take new bikes there to gauge reaction, sometimes I wish I would stop more.

Our final leg into SF was across the Skyline Ridge before dropping back on the PCH1, shrouded in thick fog, Jean was worried we would not be able to see the bridge but as I hoped the cloud lifted and dispersed as it entered the bay. I had ridden a bike across the bridge seven years earlier, a Harley Fatboy I hired for 24 hours while on business, riding my own was immeasurably better. I could feel Jean's delight as she rode a bike over the bridge, a bike she had ridden over 80% of the way across America..

We spent the day with me being tour guide due to this being my fourth visit. After showing her the seals at pier 39 (really cute) we queued for a tram and managed to get on the side for a "hanging off" trip. Having Jean with me rather than business colleagues meant being more adventurous over meals, Jean wanted a proper Chinese meal and wandered down the back streets of China Town until she saw a restaurant full of Chinese. We didn't really care what the food was so just went for the cheap set meal, \$8.50 each was a bargain for 5 courses.

That night we met up with Mike and Moira to collect the bike and swap final day stories. It turned out we had been about 10 minutes apart around the Elephant Seal beach and had spoken to the same American couple who were surprised to find 2 English couples on their own bikes so close to each other. Mike said a fond farewell to his bike and I rode out into the night, and stopped as Jean went the wrong way down the street.

Now we had two motorbikes we could start planning camping gear.

We had arranged to stay with some couch surfers for a couple of days while we did some more site seeing and buying/organising camping gear. We had come across Couch Surfing a year earlier ( <http://www.couchsurfing.com> ) which is aimed at making beds available to travellers around the world. Amongst its aims is to enable educational exchanges, spread tolerance and facilitate cultural understandings, we had hosted a few couples our selves but this was our first as guests. Our intention was to use Couch Surfing mixed in with camping for the trip back therefore enabling us see America from different points of view.

Our hosts, John and Karen , were extremely friendly and helpful, we had approached them as their profile showed they liked motorbikes and generally getting out. They lived in Oakland, near Berkeley on the East side of the bay. John pointed us at where best to get camping gear, gave us a door key and went to work. We then went on a shopping spree and spent \$700 in a matter of hours. If it would not fit on the bikes, we could not buy it. Fortunately Jean is very good at packing and had some clear ideas of what we needed and how to do it. After selecting our tent, bedding and camp equipment we had to pack the bikes outside the shops, to the amusement of staff. Job done we headed back to show our hosts our ingenuity.

The extra sight seeing we wanted to do was Alcatraz, we had been extremely lucky and managed to get a couple of tickets at short notice, normally you need to book weeks in advance.

The famous prison has had a varied existence, from Native American land, to Federal land, being occupied by Native Americans in the 1960s and now a museum. Not only does the museum deal with its period as a prison, allowing you to walk around and feel part of the experience, but it also has a presentation on the occupation in 1969 as the Native Americans tried to take back what was theirs but was being denied by the courts. The land was recognised as Native American and under an agreement any federal land that ceased to be used would be returned, however the government refused to relinquish it and it was handed over to the National Parks. It was our first real taste of how the Native Americans were treated.

Leaving John and Karen's was like setting off on a brand new adventure, they had furnished us with a lot of information about camping in National Parks and where to go. We had been considering not going to Yosemite but John insisted we had to go. It was a long hot ride as we cut across the Sacramento Valley, stopped for lunch, mainly iced tea, in an old gold mining town we headed up into the park region and yet more proper twisty roads.

We managed to get a pitch in the first site we came across in the park, like two children we set about setting up camp. The whole area is wooded, with tall fir trees of various species, but all big and mainly sequoias with a pale/white look to them.

National Park camp sites are basic, no showers and not all have flushing toilets due to the impact of transporting water. Each pitch has a bear box to store all foods and scented items, Jean was not really happy about bears which meant night time toilet trips had to be done in pairs. The campsites have fire pits, despite the drought and fires, and you just collect firewood from the surrounding areas for cooking or purely burning.

Once it was dark, and the fire had dwindled, all that was left to do was sleep. There were other people around, some in tents others in big camper vans but we really did feel like we were in the wilderness.

We had only booked in for one night, but decided to stay another while we looked around. Leaving the site on one bike, the XJR, we were behind 2 cars in the one-way system, when the front one realised he had turned the wrong way and reversed forcing the car in front of us to do the same, unfortunately the driver did not look and was incapable of hearing a horn, 2 people shouting, his reverse sensors or Jean banging on his window.

Because of the slope on the road I was not able to back pedal, so had been forced to let the bike dip to the right and drop. Jean jumped off and banged on the passenger window. The air was blue, I was not a happy bunny. The Park Ranger called the police and we had to go through all the document exchanges and checks. I wasn't too happy that the car driver was not the owner, but the police officer was sure it was fine. I took the bike for a ride and could feel the forks were bent. I gave the driver more hell before he went on his way, and then put the bike on its main stand, gripped the forks with my knees and twisted the bars. Sorted.

By the time we had managed to leave a message for our insurers most of the morning had gone he we headed out into the park. The road climbs up through trees and open glades with views out over the park and "half dome" before reaching its peak at 10,000, where I am happy to report the XJR still didn't notice the thinner air. We spent some time walking up a rocky out crop, but we could feel the difference in the altitude and tired quickly.

We met a German couple on a BMW who leave their bike with a friend in San Francisco and come back every year for 2 or 3 weeks to do bits of California. Not a bad idea, not sure how customs will view the bike being there for so long though.

That night we had our first attempt at cooking on the open fire, just burgers and corn on the cob, but you have to start somewhere.

Our next main target was one that our San Francisco hosts had told us to go to, a National Park on the side of an active volcano. En route we followed the old gold mining route (aptly called the 49), bypassed Lake Tahoe as it was a weekend and everyone else seemed to be going there, and I nearly trashed Mike's bike while pulling over into what looked like a

hard shoulder but turned out to be dust. Jean was impressed with my control which was needed to avoid a big ditch while not being able to brake as the front would have just whipped away.

The next day, much to my joy, Jean agreed to ride the RF900 so I could ride my XJR1300 back across the continent. Once she had got used to the change in riding position, which was more akin to her Ducati, I was much happier bimbaling along on my own steed. Being evil I took us on a detour of some twisty bits of road called the "gold road".

Eventually we got to Lassen Volcanic Park, the peak rises above the trees and you start to sense you are entering another land, at least Mike's bike did as we went over the magic 4000 feet and it gradually lost power again. Added to that the road had just been resurfaced and it was like riding on marbles, with sheer drops a few feet away.

The park road winds over the volcano, with crystal clear lakes, fields of brightly coloured flowers, purple and yellow, that appear related to lupins and stunning views across the skyline. Lassen is an active volcano, it last erupted in 1915 and was the last major eruption in the area prior to Mt St Helens. Because of this they are able to predict the regeneration/regrowth of Mt St Helens from the condition of Lassen.

We set up camp at the Summit Lake site, 6700 feet. It was the National Park standard we now expected, lousy but no shower. We had perfected the washing in a tent with "wet wipes" by now, but at this site we had the added advantage of the lake. As it had been (yet another) hot day we felt it would have been rude not to go for a swim. We were collecting new experiences by the shed load. The water was cool, shallow (no more than 7 feet deep) and welcoming with a muddy bottom and lilies growing out from it. Full tree trunks floated at various points and people were clambering up them and falling off, us included.

That evening we were invited to sit around a fire with some other campers, a group of Americans and Ecuadorans. The Ecuadorans were English teachers and the Americans lived in Mission Viejo, the same block as Chris. Life is full of strange occurrences. It was really good to mix with "real" Americans and get their insights and experiences, it was something that didn't seem to happen while staying in motels.

For the first time we put our longjohns on that night, the height meant the temperature would drop to something we were more used to for once.

Feeling adventurous and suffering from lack of exercise we went for a hike the next day. Once we were past the main tourist spot of Bumpass' Hell, active fumaroles that stank of rotten eggs due to the sulphur and surface crust so thin there was a boardwalk, the countryside opened up. We walked through barren rocky areas, occasional small woods and over scores of flowers on the mountain side, all the while being able to see a vista eastwards with other peaks exposed.

In all we walked around 6 or 7 miles, but at this altitude it felt more like 14. We were shattered and after another relaxing swim we were in bed and asleep by 21:30. But not before we extended our open fire cooking repertoire and had eaten the blueberry cobbler another camper gave us because they felt we would not have much food being on the bikes.

Camping means early starts, we usually awoke around 07:00 and were breakfasted, packed and ready to roll for around 09:00 before the heat kicked in. The next stretch would take us back to the valley floor, more heat, through Redding in search of tyres. I had become increasingly concerned to the wear rate on the XJR and was watching the tread on the rear disappear rapidly. Redding was a washout, all we got was hot. We wasted about an hour finding the tyre shop which was closed so headed out west back towards the Pacific hoping we would find somewhere on Highway One. The 299 between Redding and Eureka was a beauty. Mile after mile of climbing bend with decent tarmac, hardly a car in site and when there was one an overtaking lane appeared. The only downside was no petrol stations, about 140 miles between them. When we did find one I got talking to a Native American who directed us to the Harley dealer in Eureka, where we met him again about an hour later.

It was no surprise that we would have to wait for tyres, just a surprise that an HD dealer was happy to work on the bikes. As we had to wait until the next afternoon for any tyres to arrive we fitted rears to both even though the RF900 could have done a few thousand more.

Eureka is not an eventful exiting place, it has a decent boardwalk and old Victorian buildings but no shops or attractions to speak of. What it did have was a thriving drink and drugs community, a town that had fallen on hard times.

While eating in a local Italian that evening, we were in a cheap motel because the nearby campsite was very unwelcoming, we met Paul an ex enforcement officer from a high security prison, who now worked with juveniles. We spent a long time talking about English history and made arrangements to meet the following evening in Crescent City if we got that far.

The Harley dealer was true to his word and the tyres arrived at 15:30 as he had said. Both bikes were done quickly and efficiently, we apologised for our bikes getting him dirty. No overalls and gloves here. Apparently he was happy to work on a bike that was used properly.

We hit the road, and headed north on the 101, through redwoods bigger than any tree we had ever seen, and far older. It was like a scene from Star Wars, the 3<sup>rd</sup> one which was billed as the 6<sup>th</sup>. There was a good reason for this, we were just down the road from the site used. It was getting late when we rolled into Crescent, found the Curly Tree Motel and booked in. It was our second night running in a motel, but as it was unique in having all wooden parts, and there were a lot of them, built from the one tree it was worth doing. As soon as you entered the smell of wood hit you. Beautiful.

We rang Paul, and he came over in his truck to show us around, did I ever mention I have a big red truck envy? His

truck was big, and red. We went out for some food and he insisted on us having fish and chips, and then paying for it. We had spent the evening with another fascinating, friendly, intelligent American.

California is big, very big. From the heavily populated major cities, to the empty parks and mountains. From the cool coastal areas to the hot valley floors. From the arid deserts to the green and bountiful mountains. It felt like we had been there forever, but nearly 3 weeks in one state was a long time. We followed the 101 up the coast, which by now was rocky and rough with arches of rock sticking out into the Pacific, and into Oregon.

Oregon, the state with no sales tax, pump attendants at every gas station and police with speed traps as you cross the state line. As we crossed the line I was doing about 80 MPH, overtaking as we rode over the brow of a hill and I saw the patrol car, the officer and the speed gun. I pulled in as indicated, and Jean parked well away. While I waited for the officer I was wondering what it would cost me for my little indiscretion, also I was fully aware he was armed and I didn't want to do anything to upset him. I think that my response to his opening question "Sir, do you have any reason for travelling so fast today?" of "Sorry officer, not really, I was just enjoying the fantastic view and great road" threw him.

I reckon that as soon as he saw the English plates he must have decided not to fine me, so I took my lecture on speeding and then we had a chat about England and Liverpool. Jean wandered over and he warned her that he was recording the conversation, and sheepishly looked at me as he realised he had forgotten to give me the same warning.

We have spoken to a few police and ex police while travelling, and they all seem to have a greater knowledge of the world than what we normally expect Americans to have. Steve, the officer, expressed a desire to come and visit Liverpool, as he now had my address I said he was welcome to stay at ours.

As part of the process my details had been entered into the state computer system, I'd be watching my throttle wrist for a few days.

Although we had journeyed east to get to Yosemite before turning towards the Pacific again, we felt this course change was a pivotal one, we had to push east at some point, and south. So it was back into the mountains and off to Crater Lake. Crater Lake is another result of volcanic activity, the magma chamber that supplied a ring of volcanos had collapsed and left a huge bowl that, because it had no gaps, has filled with rain water and snow melt. Over 6000 feet above sea level and nearly 2000 feet deep. The approach is over a pumice desert, the result of a pyroclastic blast, flat and barren with just a few signs of life.

Once you breach the rim, you are rewarded with a view of the clearest deepest blue water in the world. We hiked down and swam in it, I can only best describe the feel of the water as fresh. I would have loved to have some snorkelling equipment for a better look into the depths.

We were camping just outside the national park, as the only ones in the park were "zero" facility ones, at a place called Diamond Lake, it had showers. Luxury! While watching the sunset over the lake and mountains we joined in with a bunch of "summer" students who were doing some star spotting. The sky was clear, no light pollution, the Milky Way was visible. Our education was continuing.

When we were having the bike tyres changed back in Eureka, we had been talking to some of the local bikers who asked us the usual question of "Are you going to Sturgis?", which is probably the largest bike rally/meet in the world, and for the first time someone could give us the dates. So, while sat at Diamond Lake we decided it would be the only chance we had of visiting this event and that it would at least make us turn East, otherwise we would probably have ended up in Alaska.

## 8. Heading East

A bit of route plotting and we worked out with a couple of long days riding we could not only spend a few days in Sturgis, but also visit Yellowstone on the way. Our main problem was we had yet another desert between ourselves and the next major city, Boise (Idaho). The most direct route would send us into over 200 miles of sparsely inhabited desert, the only town on the road called Burns. So we opted for the longer route which afforded more chances of fuel, water and food stops.

Once we left the town of Bend the route, 270 miles of it, although dry, was scenic and the road excellent. Once more we found ourselves in what looked like "Spaghetti Western" country. As we approached Idaho it got hotter and dryer, at one point we stopped for a break and my bike side stand sunk around 3 inches into the tarmac.

We cooled off at a small store, buying our last tax free iced tea and talking to the locals. There was a truck parked up, belonging to one of them, with guns and a rifle on the seat. On top of the truck were five dogs, the guns were safe.

As we dropped out of the desert and towards the state line a police car travelling in the opposite direction, did a U turn and started to follow the cars behind us, then Jean, and lastly me. It was obviously checking registrations and I was acutely aware that I would be on his system as having been warned a few days earlier. I'm sure I wasn't being paranoid that he appeared to stay behind me much much longer than Jean before overtaking and following another car.

It was quite possibly the longest day we had endured, in time and distance, up since 07:00, on the road by 09:00 and over 450 miles in intense heat it was late when we got to Boise. Too late to try and find a campsite, so we hunted out some motels and went for the cheapest, which was full. Next door was a far better quality one and after a bit of smiling, and looking tired we managed to grab a rate including breakfast that worked out cheaper than the cheap one. And it had a pool.

One reason we had chosen to stop in a large City was because I was worried about the brake wear on the rear of RF900. A look through the local yellow pages got the addresses and we spent the next morning hunting out the spares. Although Mike's bike had been sold in the USA, it was so long ago, 1994, no one stocked the parts. But we got to chat to some nice salesmen, one of which was English (southern) and he even recognised one of the club stickers on Mike's bike.

Our original plan had been to go over the Sawtooth mountains, but all news reports were of closed roads due to forest fires, so we headed off down the Snake River Valley. In the distance we caught the occasional glimpse of fires in the mountain. The valley floor was wide, surrounded by mountains. The vastness of what we were travelling through hit me here as when I say valley floor, we were 4500 feet above sea level with mountains taller than Snowdon all around us. Eventually we came across the Craters of the Moon National Park, and realised we were surrounded by dormant and extinct volcanos.

The park was pure black. Full of pumice and ash. It felt alien. We could have camped, but not only were there no facilities, there was no soil or anything that looked remotely like it. Added to that, a strong but hot wind was building up.

The road continued past the worlds first nuclear reactor, built in quite possibly the remotest area we had come across. We didn't feel the urge to go to near to it. It wasn't much later before we saw burnt grass at the sides of the road, this got wider and then eventually we could see the scrub land was burning and being whipped up by the now very strong wind. We only had one option and that was to ride through, after a bit of experimentation running at around 80 MPH with the wind side on seemed the best option. Getting out of the smoke was a relief.

One feature of this road had been all the other bikes we passed, or passed us. Nearly every one a Harley, while at a petrol station we chatted to some of them and they confirmed everyone was heading to Sturgis and we would see many more over the next few days.

Sure enough as we headed in to Yellowstone we were definitely on route 1 to Sturgis.

After so many dry days we started to get rain, always a good excuse to stop at a cafe, chat, learn how to cook Buffalo properly.

I am still not sure what I expected of Yellowstone, it was somewhere I had wanted to visit since a child. It was certainly beautiful and scenic, despite a lot of trees lost to fire. We visited Old Faithful, during a lightning storm and watched various other smaller geysers do their stuff and visited bubbling mud holes, it didn't smell as bad as Lassen. Riding around the park we saw herds of Elk and Buffalo. The Buffalo would wander across the road and traffic would stop, causing heart in mouth moments. We sat on the bike while a Buffalo walked right past us, looking into its eyes it appeared sleepy. We had buffalo burgers for tea that night, cooked on an open fire again.

We attended a Ranger Campfire talk and found out more about the animals and how close they have come to extinction, partly the fault of earlier Rangers. We gave them a hard time over the fact we only had one bear box to share between about ten campers, unlike all the other parks we had been to that had one per tent site.

Overall I think Yellowstone disappointed me, Old Faithful was impressive, but too clinical. There were just too many tourists and I feel it was more spoilt than any of the other parks we had been to, including the Grand Canyon.

The more we met other bikers going to Sturgis, the more we realised accommodation would be a problem, it was general knowledge that you can camp in gardens, at a price, but we felt it would be a better idea to pre-arrange

something. Being cheeky I rang our CouchSurfing hosts in San Francisco and asked them to try and find us a host. Being in the mountains our phone would not work, so we continued with our plan safe in the knowledge that fate would play a hand and John would get the message I had left and find us somewhere.

Leaving the park, we finally got to see a bear, after swearing at the idiots who stopped in the middle of the road to look. The bear, a black one, was across the river and just visible. But it was a sighting and that is what mattered. Jean was well chuffed.

We continued to pass through movie sets, Cody, as featured in Every Which Way But Lose, crossed the Big Horn mountains which were one of those scenic surprises that hit us. They were red, sheer and just awesome, levelling out into something that resembled an Alpine pass full of lush green fields that just needed cowbells to finish the illusion. We had chosen that route as it was the lowest marked pass, just over 9000 feet, rising from 4000, to make it easier on the RF900.

While I hooned off into the distance, swinging my bike around bends at decent speeds Jean was struggling to get over 40 mph from the RF900, at 7000 revs. Apparently she had real worries it would not make it over and was getting ready to drop to first gear when the road finally peaked and turned down towards the edge of Wyoming and into South Dakota. From this height it was like looking at a plain, and I suppose in relation it is. We stopped and gazed over the vista, the world just went on for ever in brown swaths and green blotches. That will be the High Plains then.

Overnight we managed to make contact with John in San Francisco, after I had managed to understand the many different complex methods of dialing from American pay phones, and get details of our next host. He had come up with someone in Rapid City, about 25 miles east of Sturgis called Erik. His house was full, but he was more than happy to let us camp in his garden.

We kept off the interstate for as long and as much as possible heading towards Sturgis and at times found ourselves in the middle of nowhere, best described as Wild West country, with no other vehicles in site, however once we had crossed the interstate at the last exit before "Devils Tower" bikes were appearing from everywhere. Devils Tower is another one of the many film set moments we were having. It is the mound featured in Close Encounters of The 3<sup>rd</sup> Kind that the alien craft lands on, and was obviously a ride out and meet point for bikers that week. We were able to ride up pretty close, but decided not to walk up higher as we would have probably collapsed in the heat.

One thing we noticed was that no one "waved" to each other anymore, you would be riding permanently one handed if you did.

We carried on through small towns, whose main streets had become bike parks, with signs asking they be removed by 20:00, and live bands playing ad hoc gigs. Amongst them was Aladdin with the usual proud population boast, in this case 15, but the one diner and bar had attracted hundreds. As one Harley owner parked his bike on the sloping hard shoulder and moved away, it slid forward, falling and smashing his brake lever and fluid reservoir. The look of horror on his face, and others around him actually wanted to make me laugh. I stifled it and helped him right the beast.

We knew when we had crossed the line into South Dakota, no one was wearing helmets anymore. But everyone was wearing sunglasses. South Dakota is one of the few remaining states where no helmets are required, but for some obscure reason eye protection must be worn. Strange place the US.

We entered Sturgis and found ourselves in the biggest bike jam we have ever seen, no filtering here, it was shoulder to shoulder bike traffic. We just went with the flow, I don't think we really had a choice, down the main street looking at all the bike related stalls and bars. Eventually we managed to break off and make our way out of town again preferring to return once we had sorted out our bed for the night.

How I find places sometimes amazes me, we had some very sketchy directions of where to go when we got to Rapid City, we spent sometime on completely the wrong road before asking for some half decent directions to the post office, from where I knew I could orientate myself. Eventually we arrived at Erik's, and took over his garden.

Erik had two other couch surfers staying. Antinea (Tinou), a French exchange student who had spent a year in New York and was now travelling for a few months before returning home and Gai, an Australian who was on a long term visit studying the Native Americans in the area. Tinou gave me a chance to practice my stale French.

After a night on some very comfy grass in the garden, we bundled Tinou on the back of the bikes and took her touring the area with us. We went into Sturgis, bought the T-shirt, and mooched about soaking up the atmosphere. Then rode around the hills, playing with the Harley riders. Sturgis is really just like any other motorbike rally, except it has a town at the centre, like the Rossendale Valley show – only bigger. People ride in, park up, walk around, buy mementos, drink and fall asleep. There are custom bike shows and, somewhere, drag races. There are at least 3 large campsite and band venues with some major acts headlining, all the ones we wanted to see were either sold out or way beyond our budget.

One day we went walking up Harney Peak, the highest point between the Rockies and the Pyrenees at 7000 feet. Through hot fir topped trails until on the panicle there was an observation platform with 360 degree views of the area, the Rockies to the west and the High Plains to the east. A four hour walk at altitude, but getting used to it.

The area is known as the Black Hills and is the home to Mt Rushmore and the famous presidential faces carved in it. Unfortunately it is also disputed Native American land, seized from the Lakota tribe by the American government, nothing to do with gold of course, who then committed the atrocity of carving into sacred land. In 1980 the Supreme

Court ruled in favour of the Native Americans that it was illegally taken and awarded \$106 million compensation, the Lakota tribe have refused it as they want the land returning and the money remains untouched, more than \$750 million and growing. Knowing this took the shine off what should have been a more enjoyable experience. We also passed, but refused to pay entry to, the Crazy Horse monument, it is advertised as a Native American response to Mt Rushmore, but is white owned and profiteered by.

These few days we amongst the most relaxed of the entire trip, Erik was happy to just let people come and go as they saw fit, no door key needed as the door was never locked. Friends, relations would drop in, even when he was out, and chat to whoever was there. Despite how run down the area appeared, there was no feeling that any trouble existed and we felt very safe, Erik even left his work laptop in full view all night on the kitchen table with the windows open. If you could cook, you cooked and every one ate. if you bought beer we all sat on the steps and drank beer.

I helped Erik work on his motorbike, stripping spares from a donor bike while dodging the hornets nest in one exhaust, Erik was impressed when he found out later I am petrified of wasps. Generally we just took life very easy.

Leaving was hard, I really felt I could stay longer as I was enjoying the company. But if I had I am not sure I would ever have got away. We headed out into the Badlands, yes there really is a place called this. It is actually a National Park, leading into a reservation area. The soil here is clay rich and the land features sharply eroded, buttes, pinnacles and spires blended with the largest protected mixed grass prairie in the US. It is a strange and eerie landscape with peaks pointing into the blue sky. Erik and the others were camping that night in the area and as we went past the cutoff to the plateau they would use we eyed up the track and decided it was too much for the bikes and carried on.

Passing near the Pine Creek reservation we came to the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre, the site of the last armed conflict between the Sioux and the US Army. Its not often a tale, and a site can sadden me, but when you hear the story behind the events that led to the deaths of over 300 men, women and children it stirs feelings of disgust. We also noted that 25 7<sup>th</sup> Army troopers also died as a result of "friendly fire", some things don't change.

We had been trying to find some bike parts for a while, chain and sprockets for mine which I should have changed before leaving and rear brake pads for the RF900. We had exhausted all the dealers in Rapid and Sturgis, they just didn't seem interested in helping other than saying no to the parts, despite the fact I had a full list of all the bikes that used the same parts as the XJR in the US. However the first dealer we encountered in Nebraska was very helpful, although they could not source the parts for at least a week they at least suggested we went to Denver as that was the location main parts depots for the west. He also topped up all our chain oil stocks for us, while a friend of his drooled over the XJR1300 and showed off his old Kawasaki.

Getting the list of bike part numbers was painful, the XJR1300 had never been sold in America but I had been confident that didn't matter because most of the parts had been used on other bikes that had. If I had not had help via the internet from our friend Neil, bike fanatic and guru, who cross referenced all the part numbers supplied by Tony, who services the bikes back home, we would have been stuck.

We camped again, the seventh night running, it just felt natural now. It was our first State Park, so our National Park pass was no good. But facilities were excellent and worth every cent, they even supplied firewood. All around the land was yellow, but here was an Oasis. That night, after another open fire meal, we lay on our backs watching the Perseid meteor shower unencumbered by light pollution.

Nebraska is big. And empty. And using our routes, not many gas stations, especially on a Sunday. It helps liven a long hot sticky, flat landscape day. On a road that felt like it was going from nowhere to nowhere we had to use a credit card in a petrol pump for the one and only time on the entire trip. I really do not like using cards in pumps, especially when the site looks so run down, bits hanging off the pumps and hand written instruction of which pump to try in which order. Also that pump 4 would not show the correct total price based on price displayed.

While passing through another one of those nowhere places that exist all over the states we came across Car Henge. An accurate re-creation of Stone Henge, including a heal stone, in a field. It was well produce and impressive, one of our favourite side shows that we came across.

Our westward heading was temporarily halted as we headed back to the Rockies in the general direction of Denver. Not that we made it there, after a detour back into the mountains, and more struggling for the RF900, we dropped down into Boulder via the aptly named Canyon Road and failing to find a campsite flopped into the first motel we saw.

## 9. Bike repairs

Boulder, where the plain ends and the Rockies start. Literally. I spent a lot of time staring across the flatness of the town looking at the very sudden slabs of rock that went up, and up.

There were a few bike dealers in town so after checking out we went to see what we could sort out, if possible. We decided to visit "Mike's Bikes", as his listing in the yellow pages seemed to cover most makes. The owner himself dealt with us, and once I gave him a cross reference of the parts I needed he got to work sourcing them. It would take three days as each sprocket and chain were coming from different states, so we decided to do the front tyres as well to save stopping somewhere else, it had been another 2500 miles since the rear ones had been done and I was getting a strange wear pattern on the front that I was worried may be caused by some fork damage as a result of the Yosemite accident. Mike checked the forks and was amused to tell me the wear would even out if I rode on the other side of the road.

So, now we had the bikes booked in for some mini-servicing, and no where to stay. By now we had discovered that US libraries had free or cheap net access and we sent out some Couch Surfing requests then hunted for a local hostel.

Boulder is a student town, so the hostel was in the middle of the university campus. We even got a private room. Walking through the streets reminded me of the film *Animal House*, with all the student frat houses, they really do have all those Greek letters over the doors.

Our Couch Surf came up trumps and for the next few days we would be staying with Ben, Heather and their mad dog Bella a short walk from the centre of Boulder. Ben and Heather are into travelling a lot themselves and want to use Couch Surfing as a way of repaying the hospitality and kindness others have shown them, but concentrating on international visitors like ourselves. Being in Boulder they get a lot of requests because people want to come and "play" in the mountains. In the summer it is a walkers/runners/climbers/mountain bikers paradise, and in winter all the obvious leisure past times are available. They had recently returned from 12 months travelling and were getting back into normal life while deciding where and when to go next.

Once more we were surprised by the lack of crime, one of the impressions we get of the USA in the UK is all the crime and violence, but here we were in the centre of a large town, in a house where the doors were left unlocked all day. We just can't imagine the same happening back home.

We borrowed some push bikes and rode around, partly to get exercise and partly to see as much as possible. For a town at the base of the Rockies it is very flat, with cycle ways every where. A very green and hippy town with health food and organic food shops. We even went to a Nepalese Tea house and visited a herbal infusion factory.

With its position at the base of the Rockies, and the aptly named "Flat Irons" Boulder sits in a prime weather monitoring position and houses the National Centre for Atmospheric Research which took up a whole afternoon for us with its free entry and museum. After learning about the weather systems we got back just in time, before a mass of dark clouds converged and blotted out the sky. For around 30 minutes the rain bounced more than three feet off the ground and then as suddenly as it started, it stopped, the skies cleared and the temperature began to rise again. But the air felt so fresh.

I took the opportunity to catch up with a work colleague, I had spent some time nearby with work in 2005, so went out for a meal and a few beers, Boulder was the only place on the trip I got really drunk, I blame other people and the fact there are three micro breweries in town. Although we got the bikes back the next day, I was in no state to ride anywhere.

Riding away from a bike service you can tell quickly when a good job has been done, everything just feels right. And on this occasion with the miles still to do, it felt better than usual.

The night before leaving we got to help Ben fit the mobile home section to the back of his truck, why does everyone have a red truck? It was the sort that you see being crashed and pushed off in film chases, we were both impressed by how quick and easy it was to fit, how much room and that Ben intended staying in it for ski weekends.

Somehow we had passed five nights in Boulder, it is a toss up between here and San Francisco if we had to live and work somewhere in the US.

## 10. Heading East – Properly this time

We had both wanted to go to Breckenridge to see what it looks like in the summer after skiing there in 2005, but the prospect of trying to get the RF900 to go over 11500 feet stopped us and we headed south. As we turned east towards Kansas and finally placed the Rockies behind us it was like leaving an old friend, they seemed to have been part of our lives for a long time. We could have dallied longer, as it had been recommended to go to the Sand Dunes National Park but for probably the only time on the trip we decided not to go where recommended.

Although still intensely hot, the route was surprisingly green as we headed back out across the plains following the Arkansas river towards Dodge City, if you have ever flown across the US and looked down you will have seen circular fields, we were now riding past them, and the massive watering hoses that gave them the shape. The last time we had gone through Kansas it had disappointed us, the states emblem is a sunflower and all we had seen was ore mounds. Now we got to see fields of sunflowers, until we got nearer Dodge City when the grass became browner and the space was given over to immense cattle feeding stations.

We had to go to Dodge, not just because the road was the best looking one, but just because so much history seems to have happened there. Typically of America they had knocked down the original buildings and then created the Boot Hill museum, so like good little tourists we signed up for the evening Chuck Wagon meal and gunfight. With entry and meal included it was a bargain. Having the obligatory beer in the saloon we chatted to a couple of New Zealanders, who it turned out we had pitched our tent next to their Winnebago. Jean was like the cat that got the cream when we were invited in later, it might have been old and small, but she had wanted to nose around one for ages. We must have been looking thin, not only had a very large American fed us the previous morning, but our new friends fed us in the morning as well.

One of the things we had both wanted to see was a tornado, from a safe distance. Instead we saw what happens when one has hit a town. Greensburg, Kansas, had been hit with no warning three months earlier. As we drove into town there was a definite line where normality ended. A mile and a half wide swath was cut through the town, it was flat. One of the few buildings that had partially withstood the force was the bank, the ground floor at least. It was like a scythe had been swung through. All the grass had gone, and the leaves removed from trees. The stumps were just starting to sprout new buds. We felt uneasy, a bit like ghouls. We moved on, back into the real world.

Despite weather reports that Oklahoma was still flooding and the possibility of rain ahead we continued camping, and for once got to feed someone with less than us. On a really empty State Park, with cold showers, we met a student who had bought a Ducati Monster in San Francisco and was riding back to Atlanta. He even crossed Death Valley, where the heat cracked his battery and dripped acid in places it would do no good.

Getting across the Mid-West without using straight roads involved heavy planning, and when we did find some decent bends it was a shock, I think we had done about 2000 miles since we last saw some and we both nearly got it all wrong.

We rolled into Lebanon for the second time, just as a major rain storm was clearing, and checked into the Munger Moss before going and stuffing our faces in the nearby diner. We met the obligatory Route 66ers, from Huddersfield and moved on.

When we passed through Missouri many weeks ago, I had looked at the hills and the roads and really wanted to see them. So we headed off into the Ozarks and down Arkansas way, we even managed to end up in a maze of twisty tracks, all alike.

Passing Branson, the home of the worlds largest ball of twine (unless you are near Darwin Minnesota), we came across some road works, we waited patiently for about 20 minutes in the heat for traffic to come through so we could go. Nothing. Eventually I walked down to the man with the stop sign to find out what was happening. Apparently it would be another 30 minutes at least as they close the entire road, tarmac both sides, throw some stones on and then re-open. Looking at the map we could see why all the locals stayed put, a detour would take much longer than that. But the side roads were good, so following my nose I got us to Eureka Springs. The Americans have a fascination with calling places Eureka, just because someone found something there, in this case some springs.

In the heart of Blue Grass country we came across the Bikers Rest Motel. A motel run by bikers, for bikers. Signs proudly display it is for bikers only, there is a special covered area for bikes and little "feet" to put the side stand on so it does not sink into the hot tar.

Each room was themed, we had "Rebel without a cause" (Jean wanted "The Great Escape" to match her sweatshirt) and there were rags to clean the bikes. To top it off, there was even a bar in the massive garden with a sound system for evening drinks. All for \$50 per night, if we lived in the area we would spend a lot of time here.

We spent a couple of days there. Finding free evening entertainment in a bar in the very touristy but hippy looking Eureka Springs (think Matlock Bath), where locals jammed for tips while you ate. I had never really listened to Blue Grass before but it was quite catchy and relaxing. We also entertained ourselves by renting a canoe for the day and taking a trip on the river. Floating down down the hot, steep sided gorge with not another sole in site it was hard not to keep humming "Dueling Banjos" and saying "Squeal like a pig boy". Jean hasn't seen Deliverance so thought I was going mad.

The Ozarks, are green. Despite the drought, even though it was raining about 200 miles away, it was about 6 weeks since any had fallen here. From our room we could look at a vista of yellow, green and blue.

Before we moved off in the direction of Nashville we started asking people why Arkansas was pronounced Arkansaw. It wasn't until much later in North Carolina we had an answer.

Although Memphis was within reach, whenever we asked people if it was worth going there they would normally ask us if we were Elvis fans. As we aren't, we were always told to not bother going. So we didn't. Our route at least took us through the hometown of Sheryl Crow, its small.

Nashville, why had no one told me it was the music capital? It has all types of music, and I don't mean just because there is Country "and" Western. The city is wall to wall full of music venues. We spent one evening just walking up and down the two main drags listening to what was on offer and then going in. Free entry, if you liked it you tipped. The bands usually played in the window so you could see them as well. We settled on Brandon Giles at Layla's, he was a piano playing Rock and Roller in the style of Jerry Lee Lewis with an awesome backing band. He played standing on his head, hanging from the rafters and sometimes on his stool. If you are ever passing Layla's, call in he is there most Friday and Saturdays when not doing sessions for major artists recording nearby.

We were staying with some more Couch Surfers, Jim and Betty, on the outskirts of Nashville. Jim is a lecturer in Economics and they were both at the other end of the age and financial spectrum from our previous hosts. The house was in a more up market area than we were accustomed to, but they didn't lock the front door either. They persuaded us to stay an extra night so they could take us along to see a Beatles tribute band.

It had to happen, we had come all this way and finally Liverpool caught up with us. The concert was in the grounds of an historical colonial mansion that was once a plantation and is now a museum. The crowd was really up for it and the band were good, sitting on the slope of a tree lined pasture in the heat of the evening as the sun went down, drinking wine and having a picnic seemed the correct thing to do. I was however aware of the lightness that Americans still give to drinking and driving, especially as Jim was really doing just that on the way to the venue.

It was noticeable with a lot of couples we met that weekend that the male was usually 10 years older or 10 years younger than the female, who was usually dressed kill. With our shortage of clothes we must have stood out, not something that bothers me but Jean did feel uncomfortable.

As well as being known for the Grand Ole Opry and music, Nashville has another of those oddities that pops up in America. An exact replica of the Pantheon, built for the Tennessee Centennial and International Exhibition in 1897 and is the only remaining structure. Very impressive, very grand. A museum inside also includes a gold plated statue of Athena that reaches from the basement to the roof.

We moved on, I had a new target in sight, a stretch of road famed for its bends. On the way we had to lose another hour, quite sad as it made us realise we were heading back home. That night while on a food run I was riding down a dry hot road when the view ahead went hazy. I stopped and could see that a few yards in front of me there was a clear rain line. I was momentarily mesmerized by it. Dry, then wet. As I was in T-shirt and shorts and it was moving my way, I turned and raced it away.

The campsites were now notably emptier as, despite it still being August, the schools had started to go back and we would get yellow buses twice a day again.

Deals Gap, US129, better known to bikers as The Tail of The Dragon, has 318 bends in 11 miles and was our road out of Tennessee into North Carolina. With an eye out for police we approached along the picturesque Calderwood Lake I passed the 40 MPH sign that marks the start and opened the throttle, then shut it immediately as I saw the police car. Once passed the road rises into the forest and the fun begins. There is no rest from one bend to the next, right rising hair pin is followed by a tight left adverse camber and so it continued, I was never higher than 3<sup>rd</sup> gear using the torque of the XJR1300 to pull me around the bends. The road was a joy, I laughed most of the way along due to the sheer insanity of it. One hell of a way to enter the Appalachians and the Great Smoky Mountains which borders the road. After a rest at the top and a talk with the locals for the best roads we detoured to the Cherola Skyway which due to its wider girth and sweeping bends was probably a better road as it rode high above the valleys, but no where near as funny.

We had been planning to do some white water rafting since Boulder, and had decided this was the place to do it. Changing plans at the last minute we went to a different centre than intended and met Lee, or Lee Bob as he preferred to be known. He organized us with tagging onto a group booked in the next day and then we got talking about bikes and travelling. Lee also likes to get around the world on a bike and like ourselves had used Horizons Unlimited for research, and also knew Grant who runs the site. Small world. Lee directed us to his preferred camp ground, showed us some more good roads and christened us Jean Bob and Bruce Bob.

The campsite, after riding some single track roads, was very geared to bikes, in the shadow of the Smoky Mountains with a stream running through it and plentiful camping areas for tent and bike, it was quiet, almost idyllic. They had a large lounge/canteen and for a small fee would cook your evening meal and breakfast. In the evening they even put on films, bike orientated. What we did find strange was that despite all being there due to bikes and the roads, no one mixed beyond their little group. If an American turned up at a UK bike rally on a US registered bike I'd be asking questions.

For the first time our tent was wet in the morning and a mist hung over the hills. Much more moisture here.

We were due in Charlotte that day to stay with a work colleague of mine, so when we arrived at the Rafting Centre we were fully packed and ready to roll. Lee Bob had found two more people wanting to raft so he took us out ahead of the original group. As we paddled down stream Lee Bob hummed "Duelling Banjos" and we discovered we were only one

valley over from the river Deliverance was filmed in, at last real "red neck" country.

Lee Bob, who was the manager, refused to take any money for the rafting, he saw it as buying himself some "karma".

The route to Charlotte took in the famous Blue Ridge Parkway, partially above the clouds and partially below. Being tired and with many miles to go I am not sure we appreciated it enough.

Since we had entered the Appalachian region we had noticed that although still warm, it was close and muggy. Since our arrival in the USA we had got used to near unlimited visibility, but now the horizon was perpetually hazy and shrouded in mist. The heaviness of the air was stifling.

We amused ourselves for the day by visiting the local NASCAR race track and taking in the tour by bus. In typical American fashion this was big, 165,000 people big. No seat has an obstructed view of the oval track. The infield area alone could support 20,000 people in trailers for a race meeting. The tour bus also does a circuit of the track and stops on the raised banking to let you feel the gradient. Our driver was explaining to every one about the special 112 Octane rated petrol used and that it cost \$6 a gallon, the Americans were aghast, we laughed and told them how cheap that was.

That evening, while going out for some local pizza with our hosts, Jason and Jessica, we were treated to another excellent lightening show. It really does hit the ground and spread out. Even better on the bike in the dark.

Labor Day weekend was approaching, which means everyone takes the Friday off and has a long weekend. Jason suggested we go to their cabin in the mountains with them, or more accurately their 4 year old son did. The boys, Callen and Kyle are the two cutest and politest children we have ever come across, they always referred to us as Mr Bruce and Miss Jean and never needed to hear the 3 count go beyond 2 when playing up. A credit to their parents.

The cabin, its built of wood, but when you think of a cabin you don't think of a two story building, with exposed west facing basement as a cabin. It is bigger than our house, and views of the Misty Mountains to die for off the back Verandah. We drank, watched another storm and talked while Jason did DIY and cooked a BBQ. I was impressed with Jason skiing in a light jacket and a pair of jeans when I first met him, he impresses me even more now.

August finally ended, it felt as if it had lasted forever and would never end. Not in a bad way, but in a August "is" Summer way. Was it coincidence that the first day of September brought us cold thick fog on the Parkway ?

The downside of Labor Day weekend is finding a campsite with available space, after riding some more of the Blue Ridge Parkway which was not a patch on the earlier section we had done after rafting, all the best ones on our route were taken. But the State Park rangers helped us find a space in a run down ex KOA site, Kampgrounds Of America are a large chain we had used occasionally because they had decent facilities and cabins. Wood was harder to burn.

Since leaving Kansas and Missouri the increase in greenery was notable, we had been used to dry, rocky plains and mountains with spread out trees and forests for a long time, but now there was a deeper fuller green. The trees were closer together and when viewed from above it was more like a carpet than a patchwork quilt. More to Jean's liking than mine.

Our next stop was Williamsburg, it had always been in our plans to go there as an old friend, Barbara, had emigrated to America ten years earlier. I have known Barbara since I was about 12 and had spent many hours helping Barbara with the business plan for her restaurant and had heard a lot about the area. Unfortunately the venture had failed. But she had stayed in the area with her children and new husband. The prospect of one of her famous Sunday lunches made us salivate.

The ride down through Virginia relaxed, and all roads were tree lined. As usual I was pig headed and refused to ring for directions, but once we found a local map we found our way to their house. It had been so many years since we last met, and I knew Barbara had been through a lot, I actually let a tear or two slip.

## 11. Learning curve

The area surrounding Williamsburg has a raft of history, and has a major claim to fame. Although many attempts had been made to colonise America the nearby Jamestown was the first permanent colony in the USA. Where others failed, they continued to eke out a living and trying to find a way of making money for the colony sponsor. The money maker was of course tobacco and the sponsor was the Virginia Company. Further down the road at Yorktown, only 20 miles away was the site of the last battle of the war of independence in 1781, following the surrender of Cornwallis to Washington the British lost heart and independence was finally granted a year later. We let the Park Ranger tell us the tale of the battle, which he did moving around the major sites and reading communications from both sides as the siege progressed. And it was won by the French.

With the following day being a public holiday, Barbara and her husband Hal had the day off and took us out. But not before we shot the shed with paint balls while eating breakfast. Maybe we are becoming red necks? We crossed the river near the first landing point of the colony and spent the afternoon on the beach hunting for sharks teeth, Barbara was an expert at finding them. The river was shallow, and we could go out a long way and stand by while fish leaped out of the water around us.

That evening we went to a pool party and BBQ at a neighbours, Labor Day would appear to be the official end of summer. After this all public pools will be closed, campsites will shut their pools as well and people will cover their garden pools. The food at the party was the excess you would expect in America, large steaks, chops, cakes, pies and kebabs. Lots. We were glad we had at least gone out and bought some beer.

The centre of Williamsburg has been turned into a living museum with shops of the colonial era and people dressed in costume. There was an abundance of British Union flags everywhere, but they all looked wrong. Then we realised it was pre 1801 and did not include the cross of St Patrick.

Because Barbara worked in the kitchens, using her culinary skills and knowledge to demonstrate cooking methods of the time, we were able to blag our way in. All the food is prepared and cooked, then left on show with no one being allowed to eat it. We also took part in making real chocolate from beans, hard work but an amazingly strong taste.

Hal was an ex biker, and didn't like the way we had not washed the bikes since LA. We had wanted to leave them until we reached New York, but if someone wants to wash my bike with some heavy duty cleaner, no problem for me.

While we were there the children were all due back to school, this involved getting yellow buses. We have all seen them in films and you get the impression that it is highly organised and punctual. Quite the opposite appears to be true, children have to be waiting at the corner of a road from around 06:30 and may have to wait for over 30 minutes before the bus arrives. Not so bad for the older ones, but when some are as young as Michael, Hal's youngest, it can cause problems with parents work times. Having nothing better to do we were quite happy to hang around the corner with him and talk to the neighbours. Remarkably the neighbours even left us to watch over their children as well. When the children do get on the bus the driver will not move until they all sit down. There seems to always be one who walks up and down for an age before deciding where to sit.

Between eating, catching up, touring the area with Barbara sons riding pillion we got to speak to our parents for the first time in nearly three months. My mum was in hospital when we rang, and Jean's mum was visiting. It was strange to suddenly be talking to all of them after so long.

Our stop overs were getting longer, but five nights is our limit for staying in one spot, so we moved on. We hadn't quite made it back to the Atlantic yet.

Anyone who knows Jean, will also know she has a thing about bridges, long ones, high ones or architecturally beautiful ones. Therefore crossing the Chesapeake bay bridge/tunnel was unavoidable, bridge and tunnel in one. We will let the Danes argue with the Americans whose bridge is longer. At 23 miles long, with a cafe and shops midway it was an immense feat of engineering. On our left was the bay, on our right the Atlantic, so near yet so far.

We needed to get back to camping, so chose a State Park on a spit of land at the edge of a nature reserve. After swallowing the \$30 camping fee, pitching on the sand we crossed the dune and stood close up to the Atlantic. Then charged in. We had crossed the continent.

The beach here had a steep slope, so the waves were large. I couldn't help but laugh as Jean was turned head over heels in the surf and washed up onto the beach. We both spent the next few days picking sand out of places we didn't know we had. It was a long stretch of beach and we walked along it in the evening, watching crabs run away from the waves and bury themselves before birds caught them. It was a full moon, but we still managed to lose where our section of the campsite was.

Lying in the tent that night the waves made a soothing noise that should have led to a fast deep sleep, which it did for Jean but for me the noise made me want to get up and have a wee.

Our plan had been to stay for a few days before drifting on to New York and catching our flight, but we had been talking to the site groundsman and the Atlantic storm we knew that was brewing up and due to move in over the next 3 days had speeded up and was expected the next night. We could see bands of cloud moving in, and they looked very much as if they were on the end of a swirling, twisting wind. We looked at the small stretch of beach and dune between us and the ocean we packed up, looked at the map and decided Washington would be a good place to spend a weekend.

As it wasn't far we went for a bumble up the coast, Ocean City, Delaware, looked like it would be worth a pass through. How wrong could we be. What should have been a beautiful ride up on a road with an ocean view was obscured by buildings all the way. We cut our route short and headed inland where a local policeman on his patrol bike pulled alongside to have a chat before waving us on our way. Its always a strange moment when the police do that, your first thoughts are about trying to figure out what you have done wrong, then relief as you realise he is just interested in the bikes and the trip, they were always polite and we were always glad to oblige with conversation.

Delaware is flat, but obviously fertile, the roads were lined with small farm shops selling their wares, aided by the lack of sales tax. As soon as we re-entered Maryland they disappeared.

I'll not mention the cost of the campsite we found, but I had to swallow and accept it because it had excellent facilities and it was just one of those hot sticky days were faffing around to save a few dollars was not worth it.

Once we had settled in I set about trying to trace why one of the indicators on the RF900 had failed, how I hate fully faired bikes, I was sure it was a bad earth but to get at the cables to check and test with the other indicator I had to remove loads of panelling. Then I kept dropping screws and the small twigs all looked exactly like the screws. Jean stayed out of my way. I never fixed the problem because it was obviously in the indicator stalk, Jean would just have to remember to give hand signals. I did manage to find all the screws over the next two days, but the panels did not fit properly anymore.

That night we noticed how close the tent pitches were to the interstate, especially at around 22:30 when the local fast bike boys must use it as a race track, followed minutes later by police sirens.

Central Washington D.C. Is very impressive, we were both struck by how French it looked, and during the day found out it was indeed designed by a Frenchman. We spent the entire day in the central area seeing all the obvious stuff and amazed at how low aircraft flew over the area.

Even though Washington was not on our agenda, I was made up to visit the Smithsonian Air and Space museum. It is just wall to wall history, real space craft, real aircraft and even a real Skylab. Some of the Apollo mission information slotted in nicely with the visit to the Stafford museum many weeks earlier. Jean went all girly when she found out the "red shoes" from the Wizard of Oz were also there. The building is immense, well worth seeing and to top it all is free.

Something that struck us as significant, was how close you could get up to the Whitehouse, and that people were allowed to protest right outside the gates. The only police presence was just one patrol car. In this aspect we had to agree Americans were freer than we were.

At the end of a tiring day, we had time for a swim and then settled down to watch the free film in the campsites outdoor theatre, just the two of us and the projectionist.

After another night of disturbed sleep, even with ear plugs, we decided we had to move on again to find some where more countrified and not revisit Washington.

We had considered heading up to Maine, but we had to get the bikes to the shippers in 4 days so we headed in the direction of the Catskills. Our route took us through Baltimore and then out into the countryside. It was so green we could have been back home, apart from all the Amish communities we passed through.

After a decent nights sleep at a remote state park, back in bear country but only disturbed by wolves howling, we took longer than usual to pack, partly because the tent was damp and partly because I think we both felt deep down it was probably the last night we would be camping. If I had realised it would also be the last open fire cooking I would have made sure I had done steaks.

We made sure we passed through Bethel which was the true site of the Woodstock festival. It is now an Arts centre and organised festival site, no mention of Woodstock at all.

Keeping to the back roads as much as possible to try and keep the wilderness feel, we passed into the Catskill park and immediately got lost. The map we had and the road numbers no longer matched. Neither did any of the towns signposted, so we just went with the flow up and over the mountains until we found a town and road we did recognise. Even riding through small towns and villages we didn't see anyone, we had the area to ourselves and it was all green and fresh smelling.

As we passed the Ashokan Reservoir two small deer wandered in front of me and I stopped to take some photographs. Jean must have been daydreaming, I think the deer heard her first as they scattered, I could hear the squeal of tyres, and see her in my mirrors as she braked, skidded and swerved. Somehow she missed me, ok so I had stopped in the middle of the road, and pulled alongside with a sheepish smile. That could have been embarrassing after all these miles.

The only campsite near Woodstock was a KOA, about 2 miles down the road, we pulled in just as the rain started so booked into a cabin, or Kamping Kabin as they prefer to call them. Loads of space to unpack all the camping gear and dry it out.

As we booked in and gave our address the receptionist was smiling in a smiling to herself kind of way. "Do you know where St Helens is?" I asked, "No, not really" she replied "but he does" she pointed to a man who had just pulled up in a car and walked in. As coincidences go, it was a very weird one compounded by the fact he lives in Connecticut and

chose that moment to visit his friends. Martin had moved away from St Helens 15 years previously, he used to live in the road behind our house, and had found America "very different".

## 12. Heading back

It was as if the weather knew we had nearly finished the trip, the rain we were now getting was more like we would get back home, no longer the quick bursts that pass over followed by more heat and drying off. Just low cloud, drizzle and mist. We spent our time between showers throwing things away that we no longer needed, many months ago we had intended disposing of the all the camping equipment but as it had fared so well we would see if we could send it back with the bikes.

The site had free Internet access so we were able to arrange a motel near to my cousin David's and complete the circle and continue trying to find some couch surfers in New York to stay with, we had been trying since Williamsburg.

When the rain had gone off we went for a ride. Autumn was coming and the green was starting to turn to that golden brown that is associated with the "fall" and New England, if only we could have stayed a few more weeks to head a bit further north and experience it.

Walking through Woodstock a stranger approached us and asked out of the blue if we were English, we were not near the bikes. It transpired he had seen us pass through the previous day and recognised our riding gear. Ed was a member of the local bike group called "OshKosh" and invited us out to eat with them at a local Grill House that night.

Most of the members rode old British bikes, BSA being the most popular, and a selection of 1970s Japanese. We had a great evening swapping tales and garnering more information on how to buy bikes in the US and organising insurance. So much information, so late, but lots of new friends for another trip.

The green of the Catskills stretches right up to New York, so we kept off the interstate until it was time to skirt around. Driving through our final Parkway we were treated to our final pull over by the law, this time to allow a film crew to do some shooting for an advert.

Back at David's, Nicola still had not had the new baby, and looked ready to pop.

After an evening throwing out more things and filling the motel bins we had a very subdued morning before making the ride to the shipping company, armed with some very basic directions we rolled into Newark City, not the most salubrious of places. The shippers was down a quiet street with nice girls standing on the corner. Inside everyone seemed to speak Polish so it was good that I had a reference number to show them. We were directed to park the bikes between rows of crates and then hand in all the bike documents, keys and custom forms. If it wasn't for the array of expensive cars and bikes in another section we would have been worried we would never see the bikes again.

Once Jean had explained the alarm on the RF900 to one of the none English speaking people we left, then returned to pick up the receipts for the bike and ask directions to a bus station, they looked at us aghast and insisted on calling a taxi to get us to the train station. Apparently it isn't a safe area that we just left the bikes in. Even the taxi driver was secure behind a thick perspex and metal screen with a small slot for passing money through.

We both felt that now we no longer had the bikes, the trip was over. 13,753 miles.

Looking at our running budget totals we had managed to get across America and back on less than \$120 a day, we had saved so much money camping we had surplus cash. There was no point in taking it home so New York would be a new holiday, a city trip, bugger the budget and stay centrally.

As usual we landed on our feet, \$160 per night for a room, including breakfast, that was one street from the Empire State building, on the 15th floor.

New York, 2 days is about enough, we took the free ferry to Staten Island which takes you past the Statue of Liberty, the trips to Ellis Island had immense queues and I just don't do queuing. We went up the Empire State, without queuing by going before most people get up and wandered around Central Park which is an oasis of peace in the hubbub of the city. One of my favourite moments was wandering through Greenwich Village and settling down in a bar full of locals.

Before leaving to get, our by now much delayed, flight home we left American territory and entered the United Nations building to see the seats of world power. For all their ideals I didn't feel totally convinced that the five permanent members really believed in the aims of international peace and security, especially when one or more of them decides to invade a country.

We had time for one last fluke/coincidence. While diving into Grand Central Station for a "comfort break", Jean met a friend from university in the toilet queue. The more you travel, the smaller the world becomes.

Before leaving for America we had taken the precaution of getting ten year Visas, as we were now in our 94<sup>th</sup> day due to further flight delays that had proved a correct decision. Apart from a further 3.5 hour delay, and once more our pre-purchased meals not being on board it was an uneventful flight home.

More than 3 months after we had left with just a few clothes in a bag each, we returned home in exactly the same manner. With the same amount of clothes we walked back up the road, in the rain, into the house just in time for the kitchen roof to start leaking.

### **13. Epilogue**

Six weeks after we got home, the bikes turned up. They had come via London instead of Liverpool and that meant paying more to get them delivered home. Our polish shippers had looked after them well enough, maybe too well. My XJR1300 had been strapped down to hard in the container and the side stand had bent.

Others have travelled further, for longer and through more countries. But America is really many countries, nationalities and cultures all glued together under the banner "United". Despite the commonality of the language, at times even when the same words were used, they had a different meaning.

We managed to see a lot more of the real America than most, and would urge more people to get out there and do the same. We have definitely changed our opinions on Americans, but not their politics. Politicians are not representative of Americans.

After a trip like this, I don't think you can ever settle back into normal life again, there are just too many memories and still to many things to do and places to go. I have been asked many times since, "What was the worst part about the trip?" and each time I give the same answer, "Coming home".