

Good Luck America!

written by Marcus | 6 November, 2016



***"I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend."* – Thomas Jefferson, April 22, 1800**

A few weeks ago we were sat in the back of Newton Bicycle Store in Kansas watching the film 'Inspire to Ride' which follows cyclists during the inaugural TransAm Bike Race. There's a scene where a bleary eyed Mike Hall is sat outside the very same shop that we were in having taken just over 9 days to cover a distance that we'd been working on for 6 weeks. He went on to win the 4253 mile race in an astonishing 17 days 16 hrs and 17 mins. We went on to finish the same route in 78 days, possibly with some hours and minutes to add too.



James and Heather at Newton Bike Shop, Kansas

It's a great film that for us served as a high speed review of of the roads that we'd already ridden and a fast forward preview of what was still to come. In a way it's a shame that the TransAm racers don't get to see more of the amazing places that they're passing through as it really is an extraordinary route. Even at the relatively sedate pace we're travelling at it feels like we could be spending more time exploring.



Bicycle Route 76 – The Transamerica Trail

From the endless sandy beaches of the Oregon coast, over the lava fields of the Cascade mountains. Open desserts, vast wilderness forests, prairies. Rising up to the mountains of the Continental Divide, and criss-crossing it nine times. Volcanic Yellowstone Park with its azure lakes, boiling mud and geysers. The massive Rocky Mountains then onto the painfully flat and breezy Kansas plains. Then painfully steep and frequent hills of the Ozarks before crossing the Mississippi and hitting the Eastern States. Autumn taking hold to decorate the Appalachians just in time for us to enjoy a colourful final run to the Atlantic. The TransAm trail can't fail to impress every inch of the way.



Yellowstone Park, Wyoming



The highest pass on the route, Hoosier Pass, Colorado



Long straight roads.



Twisty roads too

But in that clip with Mike Hall it's not the scenery that he talks about, it's the hospitality and help from the people he's met that he's enjoying most. For us too we've been amazed by the kindness and friendliness that small town America has to offer. The TransAm bypasses the big cities and instead we've been visiting tiny towns and self-sufficient communities often miles from the next place. There's an old-fashioned feel to these towns where everyone knows one another and a stranger is seen as someone who needs help and should be welcomed. And welcome we were. City parks on the route (usually) let us camp for free, chucking in a complimentary tent wash when the automatic sprinklers come on too. I've lost count of how many church floors we've slept on and how many different denominations of Pastor and Priest we've made friends with. A bus, several fire stations, an off-grid cabin in the woods, an old caravan, a horse-box, plenty of warmshowers hosts all provided a bed for the night. A ranger lent us warm sleeping

bags on a particularly cold night in the Rockies while a former state senator rescued us from the side of a road and gave us a new rear derailleur to replace our broken one. America is a great place to travel through on a bicycle because you get to see the side of the country that is rarely captured by hollywood.



Pastor George. Palmyra , VA



Jeb, Riverside, WY



Officer Dave. Tappahannock, VA



First Baptist Church, Sebree, KY



Horse box near Lancaster, KY

But although the old saying goes “Never talk about religion or politics over dinner”, when writing about America it’s hard to avoid either. Having spent three months cycling across from Washington State to Washington DC so much has changed in terms of our surroundings the people and the cultures but two common themes tying it all together have been the big white churches we’ve been staying in and talk of who will next take the keys to the big White House.



Trump Towers or Clinton's Castle?

No doubt everyone is tired of hearing about the imminent election but I thought I'd chuck in my two penneth worth based

on what we've seen and before the votes are counted. So as not to confuse i'd better explain that this post is being written after we've finished the TransAm but I will go back and fill in the gaps between Montana and Virginia with some more details. I just haven't got round to writing them down yet due to all the pedalling we've been doing.

Since we crossed from Vancouver Island we've been counting the road side signs for each of the presidential candidates. The final scores were as follows:

1. Trump 345
2. Clinton 76
3. Johnson 6





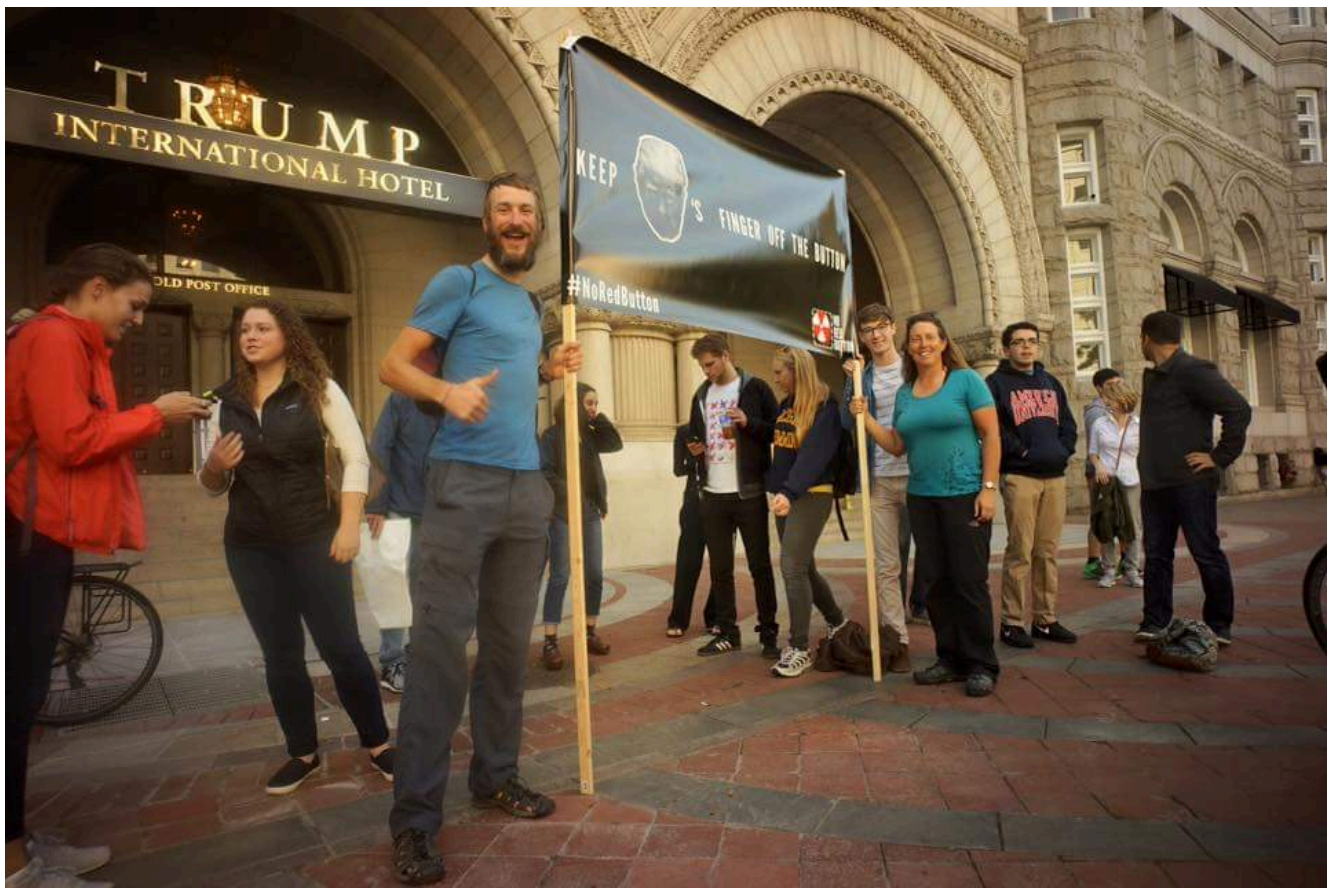




Whether this reflects the final result remains to be seen but it does show that Trump supporters are shouting loudest along the route we followed, (or like road signs more). Almost every conversation we had eventually turned to the election so we heard plenty of opinions and predictions and like the stats for the road signs the Trump supporters were the most enthusiastic. "Build the Wall!", "He'll shake things up!", "Let him rebuild the country!". contrastingly Clinton supporters would generally hold their heads in their hands and admit that they had to vote for her as she wasn't Trump. Plenty of Trump huggers but not many true Clinton lovers it seems. However for most people the fact that these were the best two candidates that America could offer was the biggest sore point. There was a feeling that they deserved better and for that we offered our deepest sympathies.

As Brits, finishing the TransAm in Yorktown, Virginia has a certain sense of irony as this is the place where the British

surrendered at the end of American Revolutionary War. From Yorktown we rode up to Washington DC where we saw the original copies of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Looking at these documents and then watching the news it's hard to imagine that a country built on such fine principles that were hard-fought for could possibly be passed in to the hands of someone with apparently no principles whatsoever. Surely we've met enough reasonable people who will stop that happening?



“Keep Trump’s finger off the red button” rally in DC

I truly hope that things work out for the best after next week’s election as this has been a country that we’ve enjoyed visiting a great deal, on the most part due to the amazing people we’ve met and they deserve a bright future. For our American friends who are following our progress, get voting, tick the right box and good luck! For everyone else, if you can liberate three months from your busy lives and have a bicycle and a tent I can thoroughly recommend taking on the TransAm. Do it soon though.



(Oh and if anyone is keen to see the US at speed, the Transam race 2017 is now taking entries...)

Vesuvius VA – Boston MA

written by Marcus | 6 November, 2016



"The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice."

Mark Twain

I don't remember being that keen on history when I was at school. Perhaps I was put off by being made to learn date charts by Mr Simons at junior school. I suppose dusty text books aren't the best way to captivate a distracted schoolboy. One thing this journey has taught me is that there's no substitute for standing on the soil where great events took place to fire up your imagination and your curiosity. Over the course of the TransAm we've traced the routes of the Nez Perce Tribe, of the Lewis and Clark expedition and of the early settlers as they moved west. Riding those same trails and reading about their stories along the way has allowed me to fill in some large gaps in my knowledge of American history.

Closing in on the final leg of the TransAm also brings us into the territory where the first chapters of this country's short history were played out as we ride through the battlefields of the American Civil War and the War of Independence. It's also a trip back in time for Kirsty who lived in Virginia from 1982 – 1986 while her father was seconded to work at the MOD in Washington. This is the first time she's stepped foot in this state for 30 years!



Virginia is the state for lovers

21st October 2016 – 1st November 2016

The TransAm Trail is now old enough to have its own history and one key player in that story is June Curry. Her house sits at the top of a long hill in Afton. During the inaugural Bikecentennial ride in 1976, June and her father encountered many tired and hungry cyclists hauling themselves up past her front door and needing sustenance. She decided to help them out by offering them home-baked cookies which earned her the

nickname "The Cookie Lady". As the years moved on and the route became more and more popular, she set aside an entire house that she owned nearby as a residence for weary cyclists. It has now become something of a museum having been filled with memorabilia and messages from the estimated 14,000+ cyclists that have visited.



Inside 'The Cookie Lady's House'



Water from both ends of the TransAm route



Our contribution to the collection

Sadly June passed away in 2012, but her legacy lives on through the facilities offered by the house and also by the June Curry Trail Angel Award. Presented each year by the Adventure Cycling Association, this is given to people who have gone above and beyond to look after TransAm cyclists.



Tribute to June Curry and her father

We pay our respects and leave a small memento of our own after a night in the fabled "Cookie House". It would be easy to lose our own kit in amongst all the other items decorating each room. As we're heading east the challenging hill that westward bounders had to tackle provides a speedy start to our day. We drop down onto a quiet road through orchards and vineyards. Huge houses peer out from the end of long drives, all of them have a grand facade with rows of classical-style columns framing the entrance. Grandest of them all is Monticello, the former home of third president of the USA Thomas Jefferson, where we are shown a video about some of the good things he did with a slight nod towards the not so good things too.



Monticello

We had thought that we'd left Jim somewhere behind us but he makes a late night appearance at the church we end up staying at in Palmyra. He tells us about his epic 150km day of getting lost but still managing to ride all the way from Vesuvius to make it here in one day. It turns out Jim isn't shy of a challenge so we won't be surprised if he now beats us to the finish line.

It feels a bit disorientating to be riding through more and more densely populated areas after so long in some of the more remote regions of this country. Towns are bigger and busier and the roads are filling up with impatient drivers. Grinning, orange pumpkins are perched on almost every doorstep and those who don't have one yet queue up to pick their own at enterprising farms.





A night at Mineral Fire Station

Riding through the Richmond battlefield area the road is flanked by cannons hinting at the carnage that took place here 150 years ago. With confederate flags flapping over the scene

we can almost hear the cries of “The Yankees are coming!”.

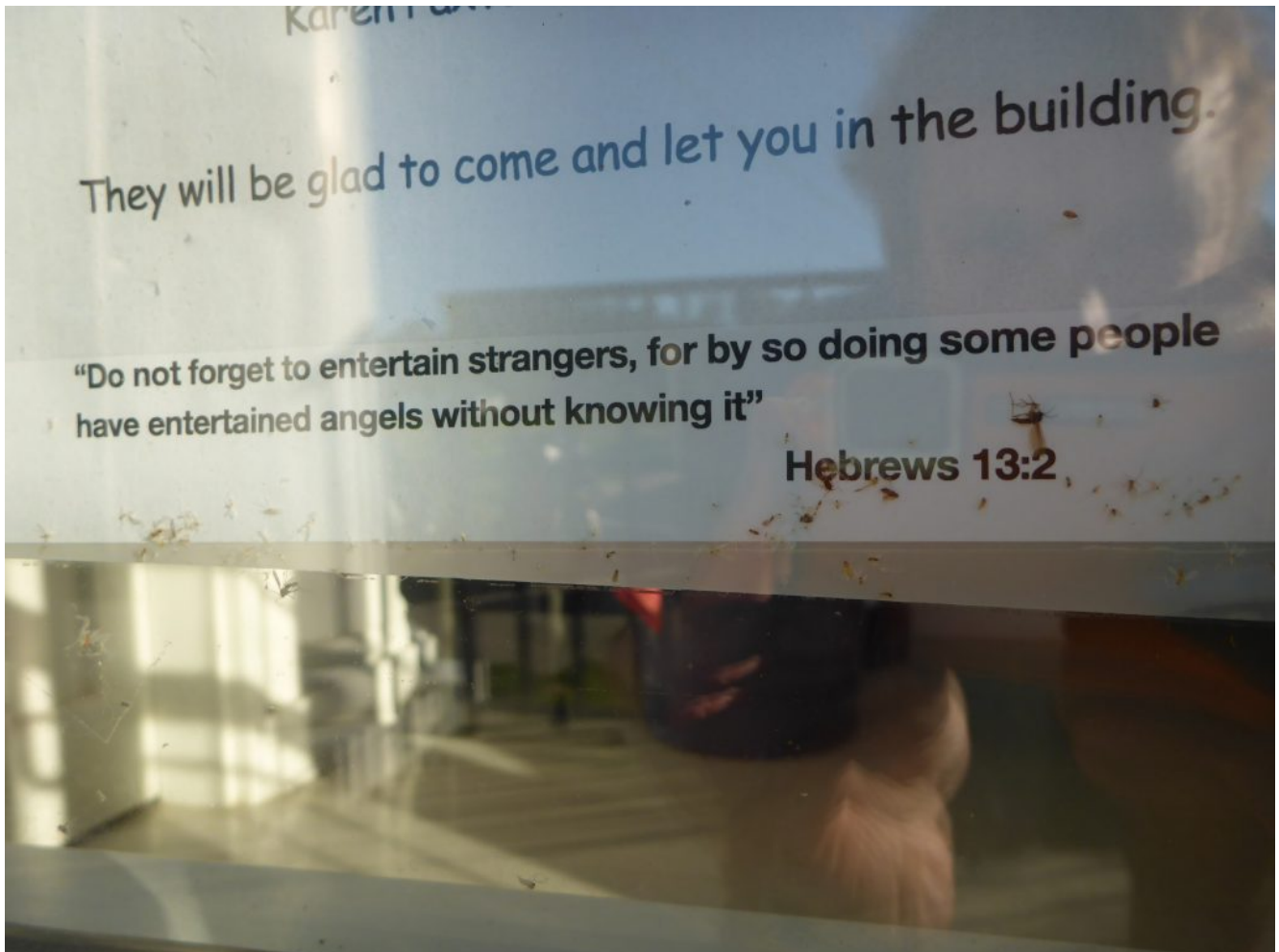


Richmond Battlefield



Malvern Hill

After a night in Glendale Methodist Church eating pie and chatting to Jim (we caught him up again) we venture out for a momentous day on the road. This would be our final leg of the TransAm. The Capital Trail leads us through more battlefields on a purpose built route just for cyclists and walkers. It takes us past colonial houses and plantations and on to Jamestown then Williamsburg. We're reaching further back into history now visiting the sites of the earliest English settlements and also the battlefields of the War of Independence. These historical towns have been recreated as living history theme parks to give visitors a rather sanitised experience of life back in the 1600s for the early settlers.



Quote posted in the window of Willis Methodist Church



On to the Capital Trail

While posing for a photo with a chap in a tricorne hat we're approached by Greg. On discovering that we're English he asks if we know someone called Sarah Outen. We know her by

reputation and in fact we'd just bought tickets to hear her speak next February. Sarah managed to circumnavigate the world purely by human power, using rowing boats and kayaks for the wet bits and a bike when on land. It was a monumental adventure and puts our own efforts into a gentle perspective. It turns out that Greg hosted Sarah when she was riding across the States so we promise to pass on his best wishes when we meet her [she was really pleased to hear of our happy encounter and we can recommend her book if you need some inspiring reading material].



Williamsburg resident

There's now just 20km of the TransAm left to ride, and with a helpful tail breeze we make rapid progress towards the finish line. The York River sits on our left and is broadening out as it makes its approach to the Atlantic Ocean. We get our heads down and work at pushing the pedals round. We speed through the outskirts of Yorktown with its white, wooden houses and

tree-lined avenues. The salty smell of the sea is in the air. I reach for the gears as our route turns onto the inevitable final climb of the TransAm. This is the culmination of 78 days on the road, with 6804km passing beneath our wheels since leaving the Pacific Ocean at Astoria. We've crossed 10 different States each with jaw-dropping landscape, challenging us with high passes, windy plains and incredible national parks. But most memorable of all are the dozens of communities filled with some of the kindest and most generous people the world has to offer. These beautiful characters have made our coast to coast ride a truly humbling experience with unexpected surprises every step of the way.

We try to take in each moment as we roll up to the Yorktown Monument, the official finish line of the TransAmerica Trail. The bike gets parked and we enjoy a big hug. This is the end of another eventful chapter in the story of our own life history.



Yorktown Monument



A well earned rest

Shortly afterwards, Jim arrives and enjoys his own finish line celebration, then we all head down to find a cold beer by the seafront. This is our first view of the Atlantic for over 2

years and it feels great to take a dip in the chilly water. The Grace Episcopal Church provides our accomodation for the night in a house overlooking the bay. Ironically Yorktown is significant in US history that it saw the defeat of the British towards the end of the War of Independence. We get our own back by enjoying a piece of British tradition with fish and chips for dinner.



Back in the Atlantic!



Sunrise Over the York River Estuary

This may be the end of the TransAm but it's not the end of the road for us just yet. Jim joins us for the first day of our ride north up to Washington where we'll be meeting an old friend. It's strange not to be following the Route 76 cycle route signs and we now appear to be more of a curiosity as we ride through towns that aren't used to seeing touring cyclists. An uneventful day is brightened considerably when we arrive in Tappahanook. While weighing up our camping options we meet Mimi who invites us to her coffee shop Java Jacks. The coffee is excellent, as are the local oysters and while we sip and scoff she calls the local fire station to ask if we can camp there. She explains that she takes any opportunity to help strangers after the local priest donated a kidney to her husband, saving his life.



Kirsty with Mimi and Jim

Before she can finish the call Officer Dave steps in having seen our bikes parked outside. He immediately takes control of the situation and escorts us to the fire station where he sets us up in their brand new bunk room, issues us a mountain of ration packs and drags poor fireman Lee over to sleep in the building with us to make sure we stay safe. It seems Dave can't do enough to help us, but when the conversation moves to guns and politics we feel less comfortable. He's amazed when we tell him British police officers don't carry guns "I would never work there!" he tells us with his hand casually resting on the handle of his pistol. After a speech extolling the virtues of Donald Trump he leaves us to it as we look at each other in bewilderment.



Officer Dave



A new recruit at Tappahannock Fire Dept.
The road continues north through Gloucester and Dumfries.
Officer Dave's self heating rations keep us well fed although
there's no way we could carry the entire box that he was

trying to give us. We stop briefly at Mount Vernon to see George Washington's house, but Kirsty is more interested in a house a short distance further on. The suburb is Alexandria is full of familiar sights for her. "I used to swim there!", "There's my old school!", "A friend used to live there!".



figuring out the self-heating ration packs
We stop at the end of a driveway in front of a smart detached house on Whittington Boulevard. Two rocking chairs sit on the veranda with a well kept garden surrounded it. "This is my old

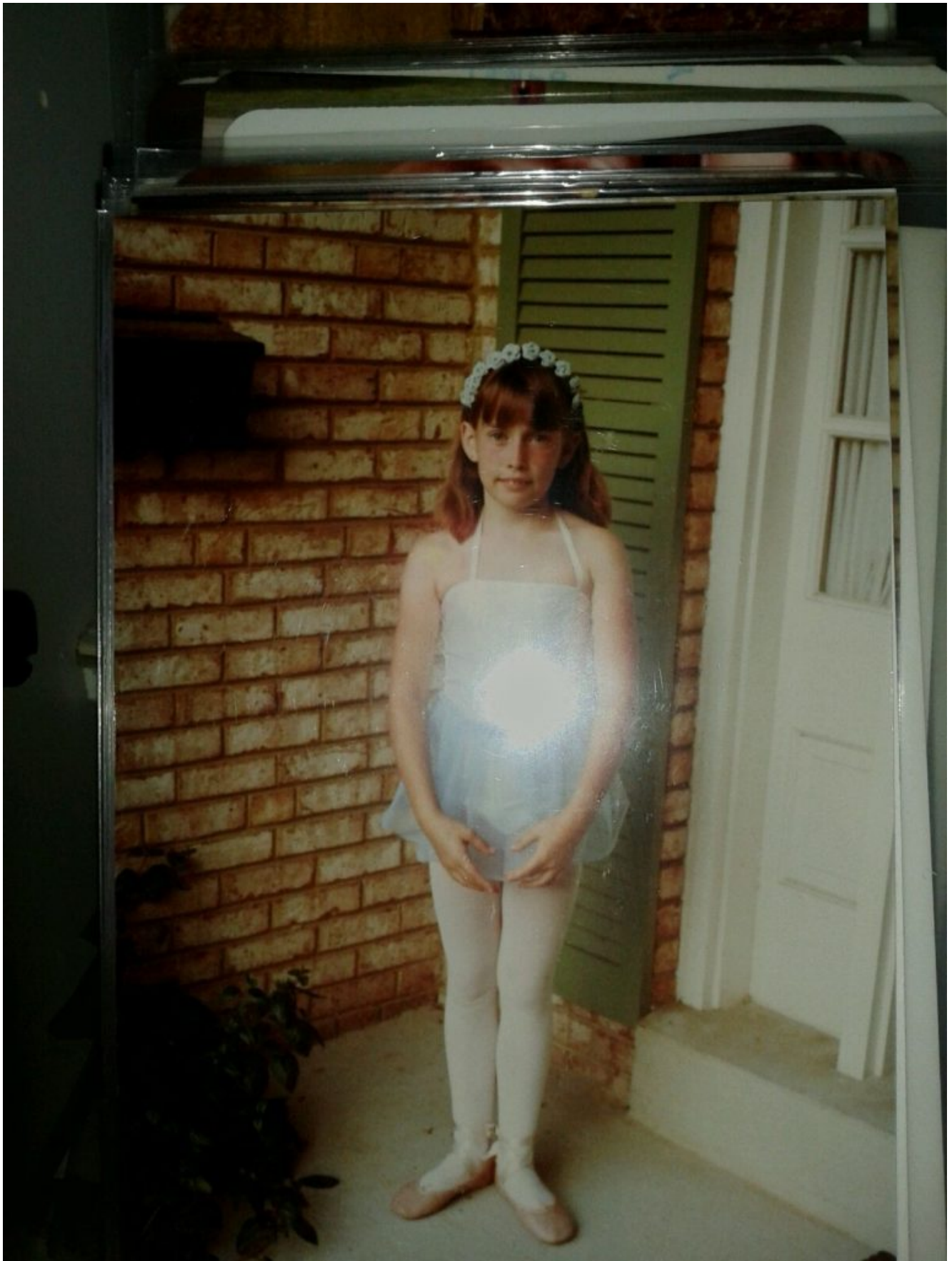
house! ". Sadly the current occupants aren't home so we don't get to look inside, but standing on the porch brings back lots of memories for Kirsty. She snaps away with the camera to show her mum and sister.



Kirsty's Old House



Kirsty on the porch in 2016



Kirsty on the porch in 1983

The last stretch into Washington DC is increasingly busy. Capitals are always such a contrast compared to most of the rest of the country and DC is no different. We follow the

Potomac River on a cycle path into the heart of the city. The needle-like Washington Monument juts out of the ground in front of us and we swing round onto Pennsylvania Avenue to take a look at one of the most famous addresses in the world. Armed police are everywhere and don't look too pleased to see our huge bike with overloaded bags approaching the gates of the White House. We pause briefly for a photo and then keep on moving before any of them get too anxious.



Washington Monument



They don't like tandems outside the White House
When we last saw Chris it was on a sunny afternoon in Dushanbe, Tajikistan the previous summer. He was wearing a sun-bleached t-shirt and shorts and pushing his travel-weary bike out into the city to continue his ride to Europe. The man who walks into the coffee shop on that dreary afternoon in Washington looks completely different. A smart suit and shiny shoes compliment his tidy haircut and clean shaven chin. It's always odd to meet people in a completely different context, but as soon as his grin spreads across his face we recognise him as the fellow cycle tourist we'd shared a few days with the year before.



Chris has swapped pedal power for horse power

Chris takes us back to his home nestled in the woods in Bethesda where his landlord Ralph and fellow lodger Mike meet us. This will be the first time we've had more than a single day off the bike for over three months, and Chris and Mike make sure we get the best out of our visit to the capital. In amongst the museum visits we're invited to join in a demonstration at the Trump hotel, sing karaoke with some of Chris's Korean friends and I meet up for a run with the White House Hash House Harriers. One of the highlights is a behind the scenes visit to Washington Cathedral that culminates in a very rare performance of Toccata by the organist. "I don't normally play this but it's a special treat because it's halloween" he tells us.



Touching a piece of the moon in The Smithsonian Museum (again)



Capitol Building



Inside the Capitol Building

IN THIS TEMPLE
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE
FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION
THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN
IS ENSHRINED FOREVER



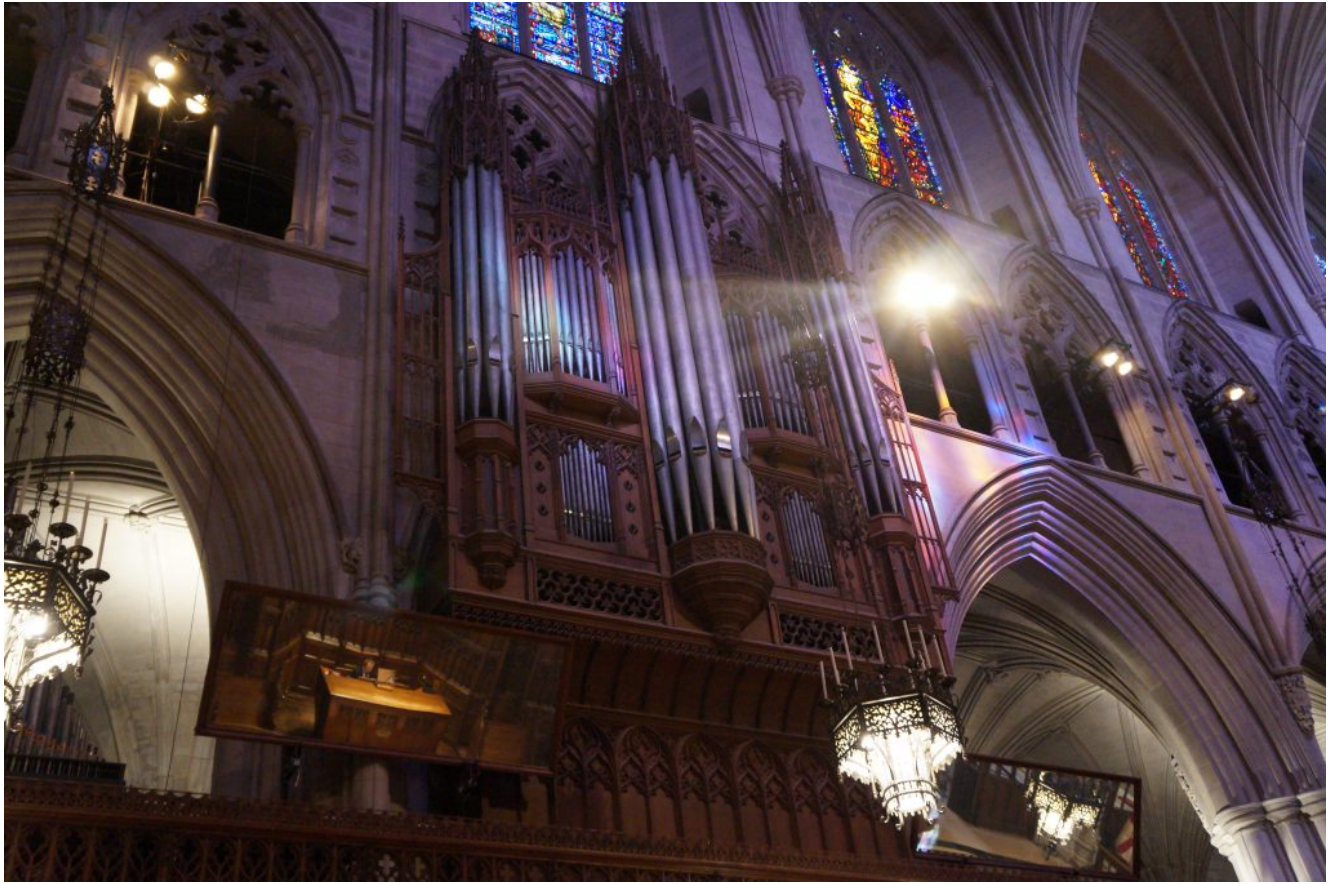
Lincoln Memorial



Washington Cathedral



View from the roof of the cathedral



The mighty pipe organ



Our faithful guide: Mike



Running underground with the White House Hash House Harriers
By very good fortune we receive a message from another cyclist that we met in Dushanbe, Amer who happens to be visiting Washington at the same time as us, so we meet him for dinner one day. Although our time together in Tajikistan only numbered a few days we still feel a great connection through our shared experience in that extraordinary country. That seems to be how life works as a cycle tourist, interactions with other travellers are often fleeting but always leave a lasting bond. [Amer later made a video about his round the world trip that you can watch [here](#).]

It's all too soon before we have to leave. With a last hug we leave Chris by the roadside and wonder where and when we'll meet again. We can see that the spark of wanderlust still shines in his eyes so it seems unlikely that he'll be stuck here for much longer [he now lives in South Korea giving us a

fine excuse to head east again one day].

After some persuasion we convince the train guard to load our bike though he's very unhappy about it: "That ain't no normal bike, it's too big brother!". He's not impressed by the huge tear in the back of my trousers either: "You need to get yourself some new pants!". Eight hours later we're sleepily turfed out onto the platform in Boston.

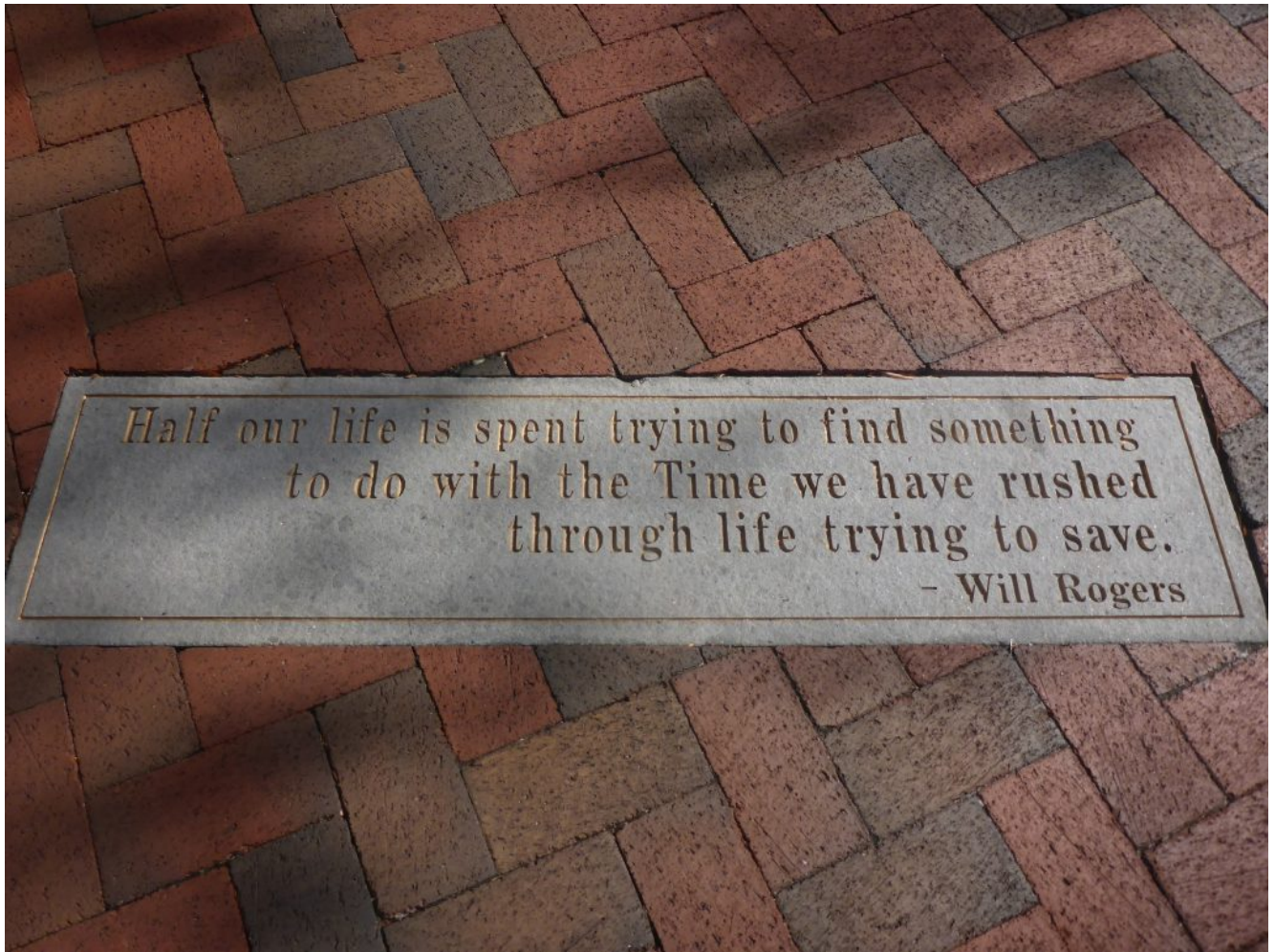


Hello Boston

How to summarise our time in the States? I've already written something in this blog post and looking back at it from 2020 all of the sentiment holds true. It's a country that has changed direction in the meantime, but I'm certain that at ground level it remains much the same, making it one of the finest places for anyone to spend time riding a bicycle.



All wrapped up and ready for departure
Boston feels hectic, frigid yet familiar given it's our second visit, but we're not stopping for long. There's enough time to buy some new trousers before heading to the airport for our flight back to European soil. Ultimately we're aiming for Lisbon, but we're being dropped off on the Azores for a few days of recuperation first. As the wheels of the plane leave the runway Kirsty looks down at her watch and realises we had exactly 1 hour left on our three month visas. I think we can safely say we got good value out of them.



Wise words from Will