

# Marion KY – Vesuvius VA

written by Marcus | 20 October, 2016



“How good one feels when one is full – how satisfied with ourselves and with the world! People have tried to tell me that a clear conscience leaves you very happy and contented but a full stomach does the business quite as well and is cheaper and more easily obtained.”

*Jerome K. Jerome – Three Men in a Boat (1889)*

I have a well travelled friend who is a self-confessed Kentucky Fried Chicken addict. Wherever in the world he visits he will seek out the ubiquitous grinning image of the bogus colonel and dine out on a bargain bucket. Even in Reykjavik where his favourite delicacy was reassuringly expensive he still insisted on walking past the local seafood restaurants to tuck into something that he could have bought just 1.5

miles from his own house. I have to admire his dedication but for me one of the great pleasures of travelling is trying all the weird and wonderful local food that I might not have experienced before. Why have generic fast food when you could be tucking into a battered tarantula or some boiled offal?

There's only one part of the world where Kentucky Fried Chicken might be acceptable and we had just started riding through it.

### **7th October 2016 – 20th October 2016**

We leave Charlie at the Marion Methodist Reform Church for what will probably be our last goodbye as he now veers north towards Pennsylvania. We're asked to take a polaroid photo for the guestbook which is a great idea as we can put a few of the faces against names we've been reading in guestbooks up to this point. The church has been hosting cyclists from when the very first riders took on the TransAmerica Trail so their records go back 40 years.





Kentucky Plate



## Roadside Flora

One of the main industries on this side of Kentucky is tobacco and there's an unmistakable smell when we pass big wooden barns with hundreds of leaves hanging up to dry inside. The barns are decorated with colourful geometric patterns that they call barn quilts. Each one is unique, like a signature for that particular farm.



Drying Tobacco





Barn Quilt



Barn Quilt 2



### Barn Quilt 3

Neat little baptist churches appear by the roadside with surprising frequency making us wonder how there can be enough of a congregation to fill them all? As we've seen all along the TransAm, these tiny communities are all keen to encourage cyclists to stop and support their towns, so a lot of the churches have opened their doors for travellers to spend the night. However Sebree First Baptist Church has taken their hospitality to a whole new level.





## Sebree First Baptist Church

When we arrive at their Cyclists' Hostel we're met by Tony who gives us the guided tour. "Here's the games room, there's a laundry over there, you can use the kitchen and this is a room

full of spare parts if you need to fix your bike". It's an amazing facility that has been set up specifically for touring cyclists. When we ask if we can make a donation Tony holds up his hands and says "There's no need, we are doing this as a service to the people and to serve God".



### Sebree Cyclist Hostel with Chris and Amina

When I walk into the Sebree post office the lady behind the counter asks "Are you Marcus? We have something for you!". With impeccable timing our repaired front wheel arrived that morning now sporting a brand new hub thanks to a generous warranty from Son and the speedy services of Peter White Cycles. The trusty stand-in wheel we had been using for the last week gets added to the spare parts cupboard back in the hostel and we roll away with dynamo power restored.





Following Route 76

The brutal hills of the Ozarks are now far behind us, but Kentucky still has its fair share of climbing as we find ourselves in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains. It's

very much an agricultural landscape, with enormous tracked machinery working the vast fields. We stop at dusty 'Old Time' stores where we have to ask the friendly proprietors to repeat themselves several times until we can understand them. The Kentucky accent is a strong one.



### Kentucky Style

There's been an increase in the number of Confederate flags fluttering from garden flagpoles with Vote Trump signs perched alongside. For breakfast we can now get the staple of biscuits and gravy, a type of savoury scone with white sauce. While staying at one church we read an article about the appearance of a burning cross outside a black family's home. This is very much a 'southern' state.





IVIS Church



### Biscuits and Gravy for Breakfast

Hauling up one hill we're glad to find a reason for a rest at the top. The little cupcake stall draws us in like a siren. Mary has only been open a week and has a huge variety of



coloured cakes on offer. We're invited to try one. She tells us that she found baking was a great distraction and helped give her focus after a nasty accident. She's now taken the bold step of venturing out with this new business. We tell her it's a great spot as she should find a steady trade from passing hungry cyclists like us. We buy another couple and continue on.



### Mary's Cupcake Shop

Through Madrid then on to Ohio county where we change time zones and lose an hour. We see distinctive horse drawn carriages and bushy beards in Amish communities like a step back in time. In amongst the Baptist churches a huge Catholic monastery looks incongruous, even more so with the whisky distillery just down the road.



An Amish Couple





## Makers Mark Distillery

Then we arrive in Springfield, which could be the home of the Simpsons if it weren't for the fact that 31 other states also have a Springfield. By now we have a routine and head straight for the Baptist church, this one a huge and grand building in the middle of town. Inside Jamie and Tommy greet us enthusiastically and are keen to help when we ask if we can spend the night there. Their first idea is to let us use a nearby safehouse but rule that out as it is full of rehabilitating drug addicts. Not so safe for us. Instead they decide to book us into a hotel and pick up the tab. This is far more than we expected and we feel embarrassed that they've even suggested it, but they won't accept our refusal. Before leaving us they offer some prayers for our safe onward journey and present a small pocket bible. "Jesus sent you to us and in that book you'll find true beauty, better than anything else we've seen" Jamie tells us. We feel forever indebted to these amazing people but restore a small portion of our karma by releasing a trapped raccoon from a bin later that evening before heading out for some fast food. Some burgers from Wendy's are just what we needed.



Members of The Springfield Baptist Church





## Trash Panda Raccoon Rescue

As we ride east we seem to climb into autumn. The rolling countryside is preparing itself for its most impressive annual display. Leaves are beginning to curl and move into shades of yellow and red. Our quiet roads wind through tunnels of trees alongside crystal clear creeks before taking us up and onto ridges with panoramic views of the valleys on either side. The temperature is a perfect 25 degrees but we're losing light fast now with sunset closing in by 6pm.



Kentucky Countryside





## A Curious Groundhog

As we descend one of these ridges, the sun is already setting on our backs. We begin to eye up potential camp spots but then we spot a small inviting sign that reads "Bicycle Campers Welcome". Rick and Donna have opened up a field for passing cyclists to use complete with al-fresco shower and a cool box full of useful supplies. I hike up to their house to say thanks and ask for water and end up with an invitation for us to stay in their horse box instead. It's one of more unusual accommodation options but offers a very cosy night's sleep. The neighbouring Texas longhorn cattle greet us in the morning as the sun rises over the hills. Rick tells me to watch out for the vultures that have been known to take newborn calves.





Shower with a view



Home for the night





Rick and Donna



### A Nosy Neighbour

We ride into the Daniel Boone National Forest where the autumn colours have been turned up a level or two. The houses in this region are little more than permanent mobile homes and the level of poverty is very clear. Beaten up trucks with bad drivers make our roads more treacherous than we've been used to for a while. Old sofas litter front lawns surrounded by ever more elaborate halloween displays.





Kentucky Trailer Park



Autumn Is On Its Way





## Halloween Is On Its Way

We stop in Buckhorn to send a post card from the tiny post office but this request is met with a puzzled look by the girl behind the counter. "We don't send many postcards from here". She makes a phone call to find out what she should do but the person on the other end of the line isn't sure either. We ask her to put a stamp on and hope for the best.



### Local Store in Kentucky

We've now left the tobacco plantations of the west side of the state and are moving into the coal mining regions of the east. It seems that Kentucky's industries are a few decades out of date. It's no wonder that the number of roadside Trump signs has increased several times here after he promised that he'll restart the coal industry. We stop to chat to some loggers who fell trees for \$7/hour. They warn us that this area is very depressed and full of crime. "Be sure to lock up your bike!".





Kentucky Loggers





Can you dig it?

The Appalachian mountains have now begun in earnest, so each day we find ourselves tackling several steep hills before plunging down cambered descents alongside deep gorges. We have our last chance for some fast food before leaving Kentucky so tuck into milkshakes at a Dairy Queen before we cross into our final TransAm state of Virginia.



Pause to Admire the View





His and Hers Outhouses



The only sign of Colonel Sanders that we saw in all of Kentucky

All this time we've been looking out for Oli the walking Slovenian that Jeanmarie had told us about back in Kansas. We



keep thinking we must have passed him by now, but then find his name in the guestbook of the next store. When we arrive at Elk Garden Methodist Church we spy a bright yellow pushchair parked up outside and inside we find Oli. With him are several other cyclists, Fred, Jackie and Nancy who are riding to the Ohio river.



### Elk Garden Methodist Church Hostel

Oli is as pleased to see us as we are to see him. "I've heard about you crazy Brits on a tandem!" he shouts. We quiz him about why he's walking so fast. "I had planned to take a year to walk the TransAm but when I arrived they only gave me a visa for 6 months". All his plans went out the window and he was suddenly on a mission and had to clock up 20-30 miles a day. His pushchair had gained a bit of attention particularly when we was doing a late stint on main roads. "People kept pulling over to ask what I thought I was doing pushing a baby on a hard shoulder at night". He now has a big sign that says



'No child on board'.



Oli the Walking Slovenian

We've got used to not having most of the things that we missed

from the UK but we'll always have a hankering for Marmite. It's with great delight then that we find a jar in one of the cupboards in the morning to add the taste of home to our breakfast. Our housemates are less convinced. Oli sets off early with aching legs to try and get another good day's miles in. It takes us an hour and half to catch him up as he's faster than us up the hills but we make better progress going back down again. He sings cheerfully to himself and waves when we eventually pass him. Clearly a man enjoying what life has given him.

[After finishing the TransAm Oli became a national hero in Slovenia. He then took on an even bigger adventure walking the length of the Americas. He's currently back in Slovenia but will pick up the trail again once it's safe to return.]







## A Curious Groundhog



### Following a Creek in Virginia

The Appalachians are best known for the world's longest 'hiking only' footpath: the 2200 mile Appalachian Trail. A rite of passage for any keen hiker, around 850 people walk its entire length each year. Some even turn around and walk back again. This is the third of the Triple Crown of Hiking trails that we've encountered after the Pacific Crest Trail and Continental Divide Trail.





### Crossing the AT

We cross the AT at Trout Dale and spend the night in a cabin chatting to some hikers. Like cycle tourists, long distance hikers have a particular vocabulary and enjoy chatting about their kit. One thing that differs though is that through-hikers like to give each other trail names. Caleb has been christened "Jetpack" on account of the excessive amount of fuel for his stove that he likes to carry. His adventure sounds wonderful with stories of days in remote forests, wildlife encounters and new friendships forged in the tiny huts that are provided along the route. Another journey to add to the ever increasing 'must-do' list.



Caleb AKA Jetpack

We drop down from the ridge and into a wide valley that marks the divide between the 'new' Appalachian range and the 'old' Appalachian range. A strong tail wind and a respite from the



steep hills helps us make good progress. Up ahead we spot another cyclist who turns out to be Jim, a friend of Chris and Amina. Jim had to leave the other two as he had a shorter window of time to complete the trip. We'd keep seeing him at various roadside stops for the next few days.



#### A Lone Sunflower

This stretch of the TransAm has provided some of the most diverse range of places for us to stay. As well as the numerous churches, we've slept in small huts, been offered the floor of fire stations, camped in town parks and been invited into luxurious houses thanks to generous WarmShowers hosts. Just before the final big climb of the Appalachians we find the best place we've spent the night so far.



A Night at Troutville Fire Station





Mick and Lee who hosted us in Radford VA  
We'd contacted Meghan though Warmshowers and although she wasn't going to be there she had offered use of her cabin for the night. We arrive late in the day and almost miss the

subtle track into the woods that leads up to her property. Pushing up through the trees we're not sure we can be in the right place as the track becomes more and more vague. We round a corner and then there it is. Meghan and her partner have built this 160 square foot cabin themselves from salvaged materials and it forms a beautiful structure in a peaceful clearing. Mismatched windows compliment the reclaimed wood paneling. Inside we find a basic kitchen area and a stove that soon heats the tiny space up. A heaving bookshelf includes titles about self sufficiency and low impact living. There's no running water, mains electricity or bathroom and certainly no wi-fi



### Meghan's Cabin

It may have been the cumulative effect of the last few weeks of riding or the hearty supper we had cooked ourselves but in that tranquil little space we both sleep better than we have for a long, long time. Easing my eyes open in the morning and looking out into the woods I smile contentedly. This is a very special place and we can see why Meghan has decided she will



move here permanently. It gives us lots to think about regarding how we might want to live when we eventually return home and we hope that we can borrow more than a few ideas from this place.



Room with a View



### Cooking in the Cabin

We know that today will be a challenge with the tough climb up Vesuvius to tackle that will bring us onto the final ridge of the Appalachians. We pack up and reluctantly leave the idyl of this woodland clearing. We need to get our minds ready for the challenge ahead and with bellies full of porridge we swing onto the foot of the climb. It quickly steepens into double digit gradients as I work down through the gears to find our granny ring. We grind, grunt and gasp for 5km. The fire in our lungs is matched by the intensity of colour all around us. The road sweeps up to the sky through a towering forest that is now resplendent in all the shades of autumn. The experience is an intense assault on the senses as our legs scream for mercy while we blink sweat out of our eyes to take in more of the surrounding view.





Climbing out of Vesuvius



### View from the Blue Ridge Parkway

We eventually find ourselves on top of the world at the Blue Ridge Parkway. Below us lies the flatlands of eastern Virginia with a patchwork of forests cascading down the hillside. We've timed our arrival perfectly with this being the most spectacular season to be here. In the far, far distance we're sure we can see the Atlantic Ocean. The finish line for the TransAm is somewhere over there, almost in sight. Beyond that, across the water lies Europe and home but surely it's too soon to be thinking about that? We gently make our way along the ridge, teasing out the lactic acid in our muscles. We've conquered the final big hurdle of the TransAm and we're ready for the final leg into Yorktown. But first it's time for lunch.





The End of the Appalachians





A Curious Groundhog

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