

Vesuvius VA – Boston MA

written by Marcus | 1 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!”.

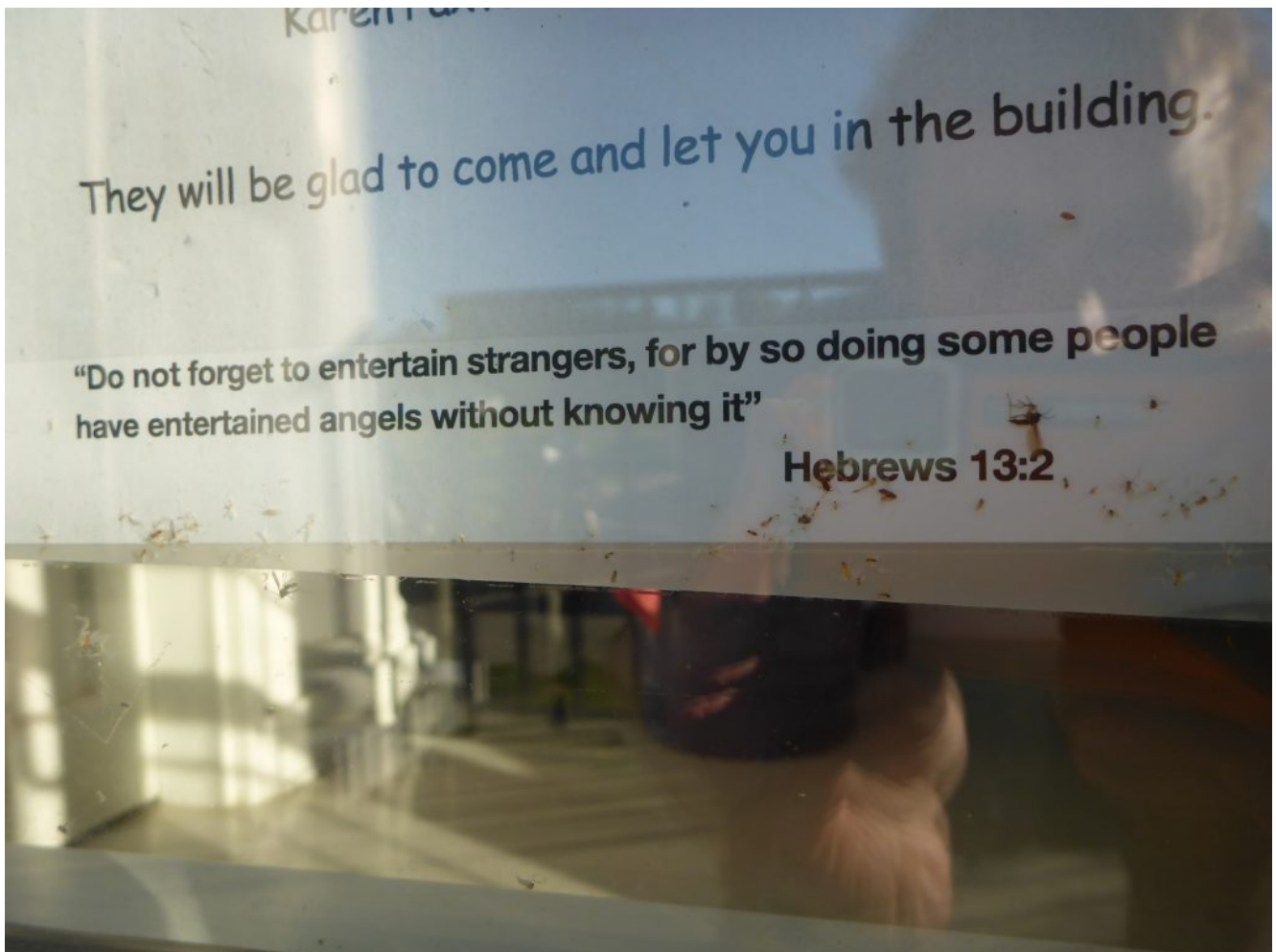


Richmond Battlefield



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

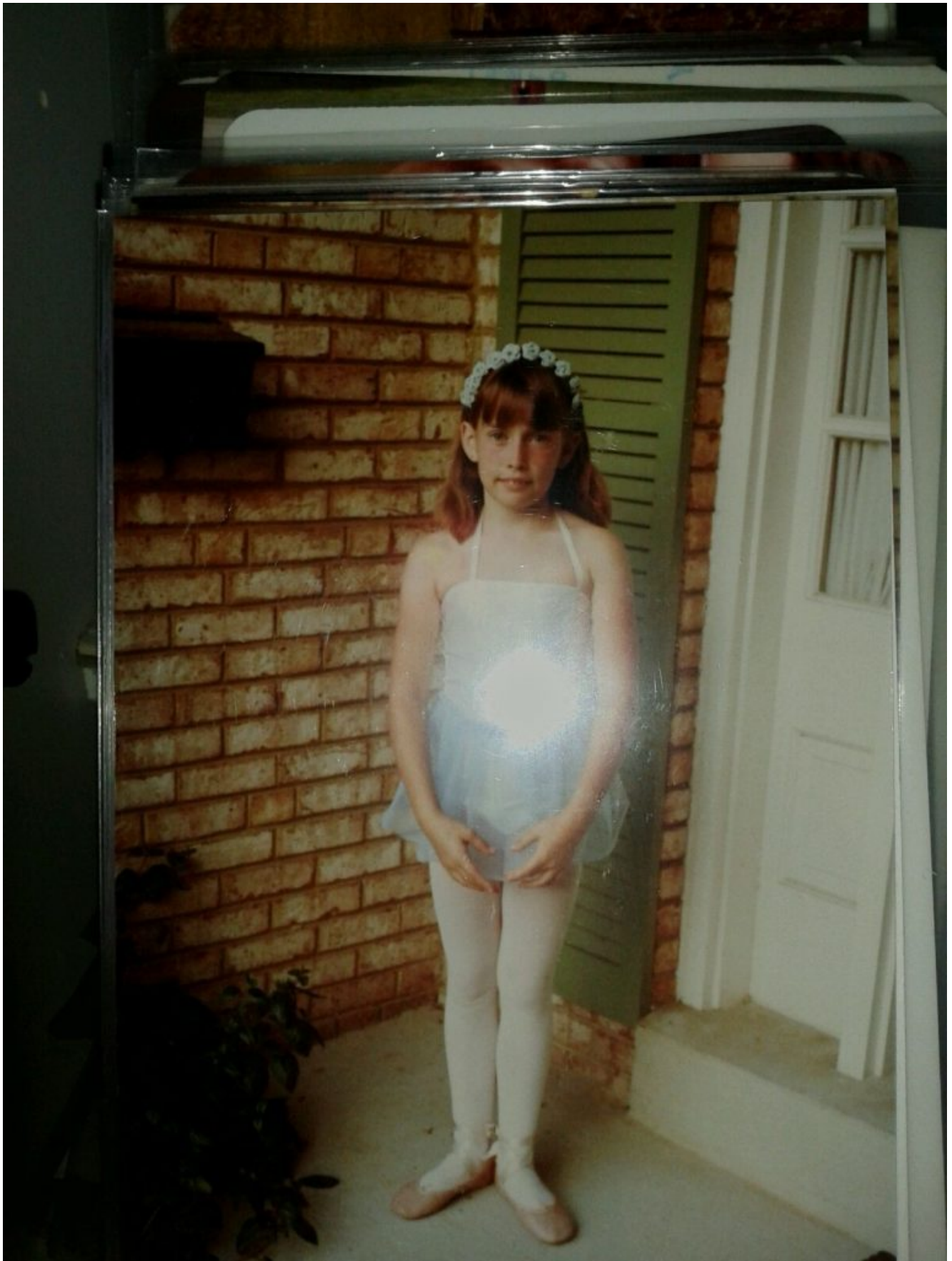
house!”. Sadly the current occupants aren’t home so we don’t get to look inside, but standing on the porch brings back lots of memories for Kirsty. She snaps away with the camera to show her mum and sister.



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



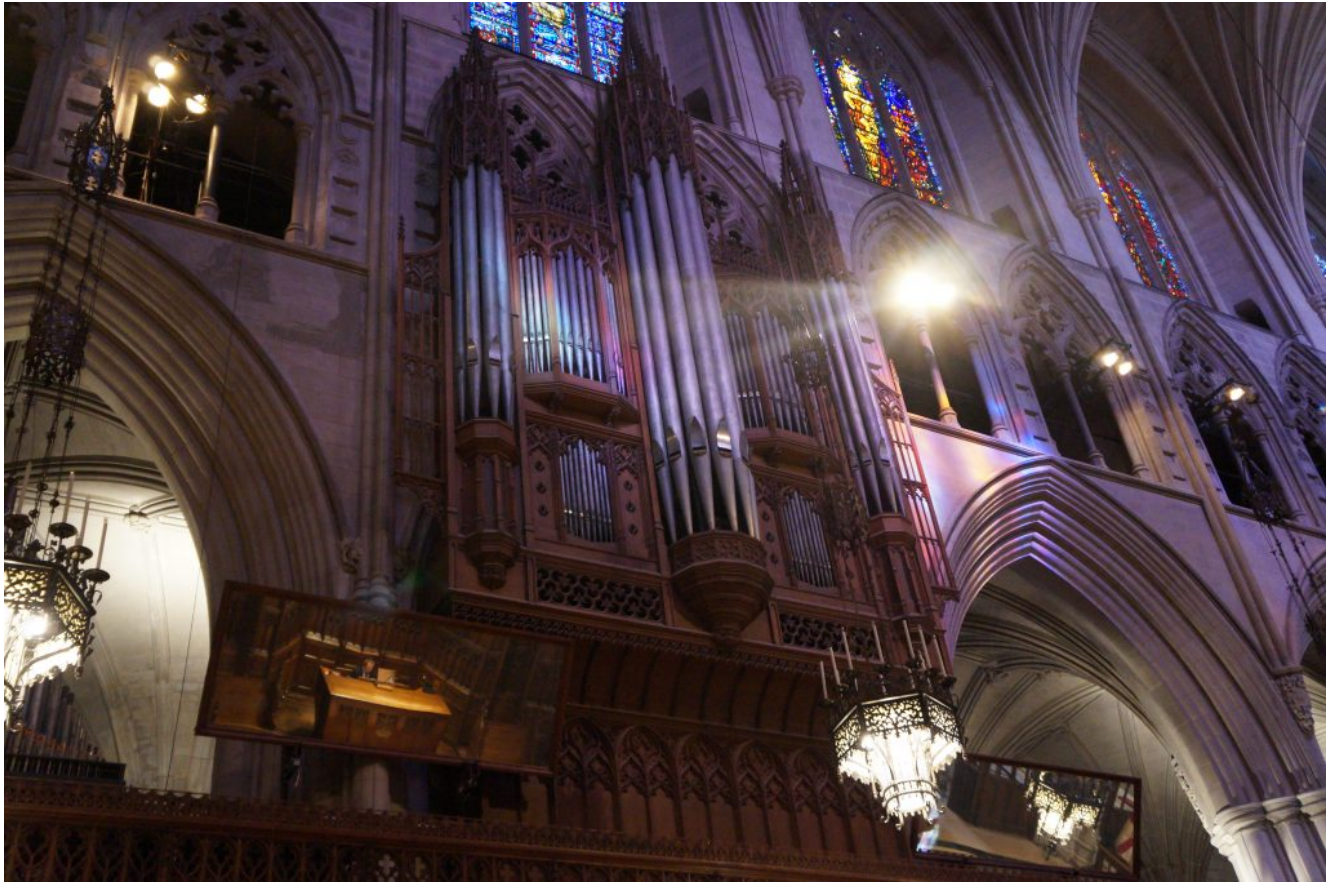
Lincoln Memorial



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.

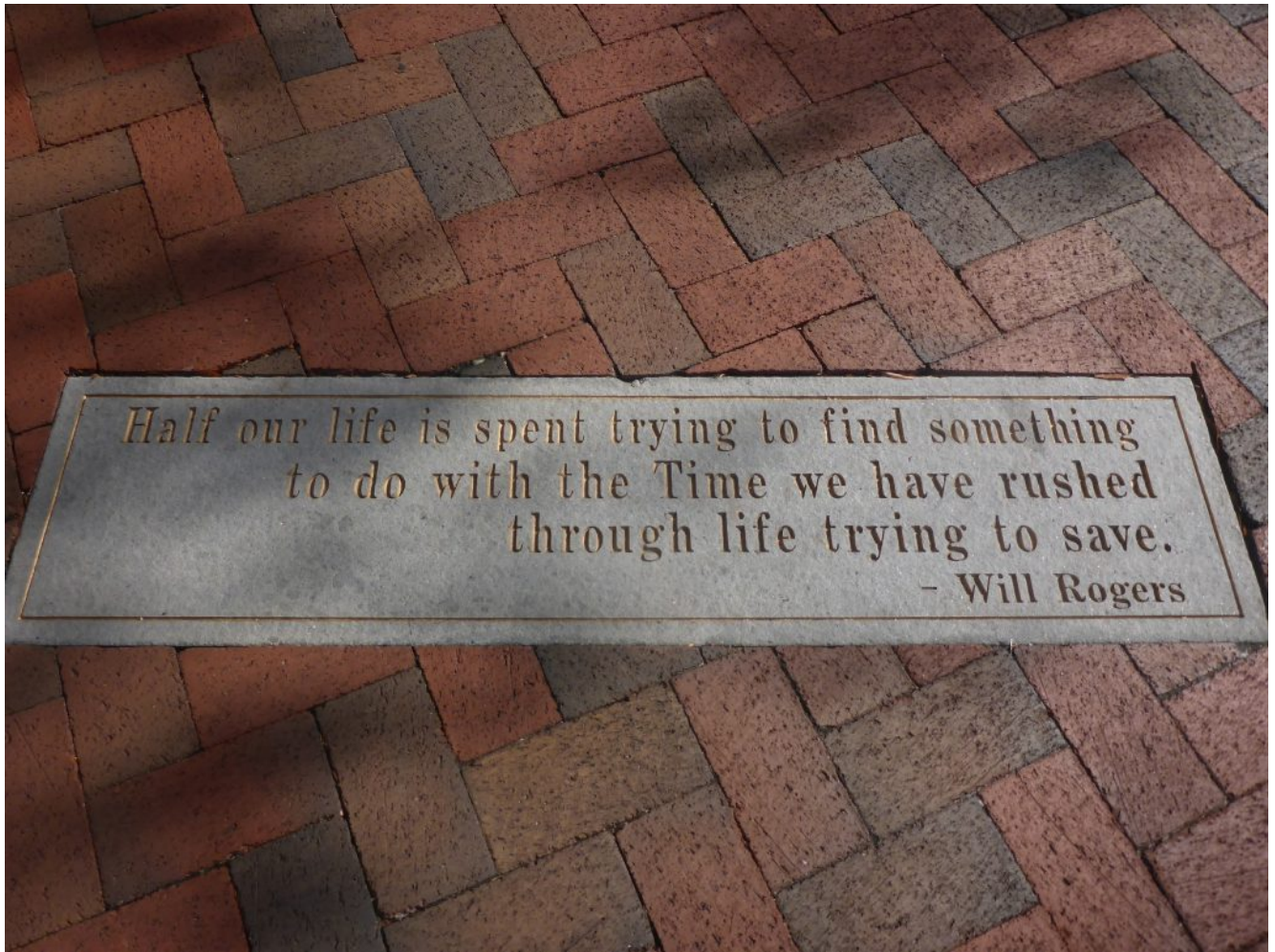


Hello Boston

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