

David Hodes, "AMERICAN TRAVELS" Part 2

I do hope you found the first episode of our American travels interesting, and now I'm going to recall some specific vacations we had on our various visits to the southern States. When we were first married Elizabeth's American family set us into a bit of a routine: one year we'd go over to visit them, and the next year they'd come and visit us — if not her family, then her brother would send over close friends of his he'd made in Texas. Several of these were Labrador breeders, and most were professional people Michael and Joy knew; dentists, doctors, lawyers etc. Mainly we stayed with family and friends and I rented a car, and we travelled around Texas like that, covering quite a lot of Texas, and also on various visits to adjacent States - Louisiana, Oklahoma, Nevada and Utah.

At this time the divergence of the US dollar vs. sterling was significant, and for some years we made a point of taking an empty suitcase to the USA with us. We then shopped for new clothes, shoes, records, the old-style pre-digital "photo" films, etc., all of which were amazingly inexpensive compared to Britain, and staggered back loaded down with good quality American products at rock-bottom (to us British) prices. Usually tucked in there somewhere was a bottle of bourbon for my father. I met Elizabeth off one flight (she'd been over on her own for Michael's induction for his doctorate, I think) and she appeared in the arrivals hall at Gatwick almost hidden behind a huge six-foot square brown cardboard box full of American purchases including a small model rocking chair for our young daughter — try doing that nowadays with Ryanair! I fondly recall a prized purchase I made in a mall in Michael's first home in Wichita Falls (Sikes Center Mall). There, in an upmarket store (remembering that Wichita Falls was a city of "old" oil money with numerous wealthy families) I found a beautiful three-piece suit in an amazing feather-weight, light grey fabric, by a well-known American tailoring firm called Bill Blass. ("Manufactured in the USA from US-produced fabric" - no oriental rubbish there). It was marked down by 75% off from \$1,500. I was very lucky to get it; it fitted beautifully and I wore it at quite a number of up-market events and family occasions for the next 15 years. When I then changed my work, and hardly ever needed to wear a formal three-piece, I decided it was too good to dump at a charity shop, so I put it on e-bay; I wasn't surprised when somebody bid it up to £230. Our very first visit was to Wichita Falls, and one afternoon Michael took us out for a ride round the city. He pointed out many sites where a year or two previously, a home had stood — all that was left of many of them was just a concrete slab with a few pipes poking forlornly up. This was where a tornado had ripped through Wichita Falls a few years earlier, and people's homes had simply disappeared as they disintegrated in the force of the tornado and all the pieces flew away across the roads and fields. Michael told the tale of a lucky lady who'd tried to escape the tornado by driving away in her car, only to be caught up in the force of the storm. Her car was carried for almost a mile across the fields, to be set down almost gently on its four wheels and she was able to open the door to just step out! He'd kept copies of the local newspaper with dozens of photographs and it stated that one-third of the homes in Wichita Falls had been destroyed or damaged. This particular area in northern Texas and southern Oklahoma is called, for good reason, "Tornado Alley".

On my first ever visit to Texas — over forty years ago! - after staying with Michael and Joy, we flew down and stayed for a week with Patsy Hall, mentioned earlier, who lived at Clear Lake on the outskirts of Houston, close to her employment at NASA. Elizabeth had planned the visit (unknown at the time to me) so we were there at a time when there's a rather bizarre period (to English eyes) - a week when many of the wealthy residents of Houston opened their homes for other residents to go round and visit with, and walk round, other peoples' homes — and maybe stop for a coffee & a natter - not something you find happening in the UK. I was told this was where the term "rubber-necking" originated.

Of course Elizabeth and Patsy, girls after all! - were interested in viewing other peoples' homes, so we had a couple of days driving around Houston viewing and visiting other homes of the very wealthy. But one I remember vividly was when we went to one of the areas of very expensive homes called "Post Oak" and we parked at the

curb of a striking, very large house, set atop a slight incline, and sat in Patsy's car viewing this house from the curb — we didn't get out for a walk-round which we'd done at other locations. Patsy said it was because this house wasn't open for viewing, but she'd come here to show Elizabeth where a doctor who worked in Methodist — where Elizabeth had worked — owned this house and he'd married nurse "somebody".... gossip gossip. We sat admiring the house, with tennis courts, swim-pool building and several cars parked in the driveway, and Patsy casually said that they'd paid \$18.5 million for that house — and this was over forty years ago!

We also had several more planned vacations, one of which was us renting an R.V. ("recreational vehicle") better known to us as a Winnebago or motor-home, although there were, and still are, of course, many different manufacturers of these vehicles. Mainly they're very large, very wide vehicles built on a commercial truck chassis, offering six or eight berths, with all home comforts aboard, such as showers, baths, microwaves, washers, dryers, ovens, cook-tops, often several TVs, out-door showers, outdoor BBQs, power awnings sometimes with an outdoor TV below, with a garage that will hold a small car. Nowadays they're very sophisticated travelling homes (I recently found one on the 'net' costing over a million dollars) but back then they were a bit more basic. We rented one offering four berths, taking our young son Alexander, and my sister Anita rented another identical vehicle, with a close friend of hers, May, and they took with them our daughter Stephanie. In that way we were comfortable with only three people in each four-berth R.V. They weren't your actual Winnebagos, but were built on Ford truck chassis, for a very large American motor-home rental company called Cruise America, which has depots across the whole USA and Canada. They were — to us Brits — well equipped with cruise control, auto gear-shift, a/c, power habitation steps, shower, microwave, etc.

We chose to start in Las Vegas, being the nearest point to the areas we wanted to visit — the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, the Hoover Dam and the Painted Desert. I took the two children out early, ahead of Elizabeth, because Cruise America demanded a two-day "catch-up" to recover from jet-lag, before they'd let you have an R.V. We had a very comfortable flight via Minneapolis-St. Paul with NorthWest Airlines to McCarran airport in L.V. where the pilot told us during landing they had over 600 planes arriving every 24 hours. Elizabeth's nephew had made bookings for us in Las Vegas, in a then-new, enormous hotel called The Excalibur, based on a theme of King Arthur & the Round Table. It was very comfortable, but very cheap, as most are in Las Vegas, quite simply they want people to go there, stay in a luxurious but inexpensive hotel, and then lose a packet in the gambling casinos. Rooms for six for \$25 were the way to go, with all-you-can-eat breakfasts for a dollar a head. (That was then — this is now, so I'm sure prices have moved somewhat). Frankly I didn't like Las Vegas very much. It's huge, glitzy, hellishly hot, dry and dusty, a madhouse of roads and traffic, fast-food outlets and O.T.T. Hotels, and the sidewalks heaving with people, covered in a litter of empty drinks cans, fast food boxes, discarded chewing gum and cigarette ends. I'd guess it's even more so now, 20-plus years later.

There was a friendly, very handsome young man on the check-in desk (a deliberate tactic — the hotels employ attractive graduate girls and guys who are filling in before, or between, other jobs) who was wearing a lurid retina-searing red-and-yellow quartered pastiche of a mediaeval get-up and he had the grace to blush when he realised we were actually British, real denizens from the land of King Arthur. All the hotel staff (he told us 2,000 of them) all wore these weird Disney-esque fake-mediaeval clothes. I told him not to worry, back in England we all wore similar outfits under our normal every-day clothes and it took a moment or two for the penny to drop. I didn't have the heart to tell him that the legend of King Arthur is very probably complete rubbish. Oh yes, they've got King Arthur's (fake) sword there, in an illuminated glass case, and they've got a round table as well

As we had two days to wait, I rented a car, and one day took the children on a tour of Las Vegas, and doing that we saw the other side of all the glitz and glamour, in endless sprawls of "tract" homes, trailer parks, tumbledown shacks and similar cheap homes where the hordes of low-paid hotel workers had to live. Many homes had bolt-on later addition air conditioners humming and rattling away. In one mall we went to there was a sudden reminder of home — and a famous European brand - one shop was having a closing-down sale and I

bought a deluxe model Philips electric shaver for ten dollars (over £70 back home), albeit under Philips' north American brand - "Noreico". Our children had a wonderful time with the almost endless array of fast food; Big Macs of course, Wendy's, Denny's, Domino's, KFC, El Dorado (Mexican food), Louisiana Kitchen, Dunkin Donuts, Starbuck's, Pappadeaux, Whataburger, Dairy Queen and Popeye's, to name but a few, and several frozen yoghurt outlets. Only having a small give-away map with the car, I mistakenly took a road out of the south of Las Vegas, a divided four-lane highway, and after a few miles it ended abruptly in the desert in a litter of fag-ends and drinks cans.

After Elizabeth arrived at McCarran we collected her from the airport in our little convoy of R.Vs and headed down the Boulder Highway to visit the Hoover Dam. This is an art-deco style amazing engineering masterpiece damming the Colorado River; back then before the threats of terrorism visitors were allowed to descend in striking art-deco style elevators down into the bowels of the dam; and later wander along the highway which runs along the top of the dam. We then headed to the Grand Canyon — it's impossible to convey in words how truly amazing it is. It is of course absolutely enormous with stunning vistas of multi-coloured layers of rock and fantastic rock formations covering dozens of miles. We took three days driving round the Canyon, stopping at many of the viewpoints to look at yet more amazing vistas. The entire area is "owned" by local Native American Indian tribes; the Havasupai and the Hualapai, and there is also a Navajo Nation visitor centre as well - and no building whatever is allowed anywhere, so the entire Canyon is as fresh, pristine and uncluttered as it has been for millions of years; there is one older intrusion from many years ago as there is the Grand Canyon village on the south rim. The only recent modern exception is the new "Skywalk" which is a built-out glass-floored structure over a point in Grand Canyon West, an area owned by the Hualapai tribe — I'm amazed it was ever permitted. However I'm told you can venture out onto the 4-inch thick clear glass floor and peer down into the abyss to the canyon floor 4,000 feet below you!

One afternoon we took a flight from a small airport at Tusayan on a Canadian-built "Vistaliner" with glass sides and floors for a fifty-minute flight actually INTO the Canyon along its two major "arms" - a scary but wonderful experience. (Google "Grand Canyon Airlines" - it's still operating.) We could look down at the Colorado River flowing along the bed of the Canyon, looking like a narrow ribbon from the height, and the pilot commenting that the Colorado had been cutting its way down through the rocks, to create the Canyon, for the past six-and-a-half million years. It's a place to make you feel very small and insignificant.

After the Canyon we circled around to the north and west to visit Monument Valley, I'm sure well-known to all, where of course many "western" movies were filmed. We were fortunate that we met with a very friendly young lady, a member of the local native Navajo Nation, who sat and happily chatted and told us all the names of the various "monuments"; again apart from some basic camping facilities the Valley is largely unspoiled, albeit again blazingly hot, dry and dusty. We then were travelling north of the Grand Canyon to a point further upstream of the Colorado, where another major dam had been created. This is Glen Canyon dam with a vast lake created behind it, where we parked up and went for a swim in the warm water (muddy bottom though) and admired countless miles of sheer rock walls in a multitude of colours, devoid of vegetation, that contained the lake (Lake Mead). We stopped close by the dam at a small town called Page, Arizona, where, while outside eating burgers for lunch, we all saw our first "gold-plate" Cadillac glittering in the sun: a convertible with immaculate white exterior and red leather interior; we were told later that wealthy owners have all the car's brightwork plated in gold and some of the small ornamentations are actually solid gold: then they go and spoil it with a set of steer's horns right across the front

We then crossed the Painted Desert, a region of very colourful rocks and desert landscapes, bone dry and inhospitable. The last place on our drive-round was travelling through Bryce Canyon, with some amazing and strange black-&-white almost chequer-board rock formations, and Zion National park, just across the State line in Utah. During the week we stayed in a series of locations called (typical American spelling — or mis-spelling?) the Kamp Grounds of America, the K.O.A., which maintains a vast range of kamp-grounds across the entire USA and

Canada (and maybe Mexico by now?) which offer fairly uniform facilities for R.Vs, back-packers, hikers, campers, canoeists, sailors and what-not — the wide range of restless Americans endlessly travelling. One night we stayed at Bryce-Zion Kampground with its extremes of climate; hot as Hades during the day —touching 100 deg. in June - but at night the little drips from our water hookups froze solid. It had been an amazing week and one we'll never forget.

During his work as a minister of the Episcopalian church, Michael took up several appointments in different cities, so when he had a stint in New Orleans we took the opportunity to fly over and do the visitor bit. Again we took our two children, who were a little older by then, and we all very much enjoyed a week visiting "Nawlins", and this was before Katrina struck. Michael met us at the airport in one of his vehicles, a large ten-seat Dodge minibus, and when we got to his home he casually pointed out a large hole on the "waist-line" in his other, daily use car, a Pontiac Trans-Am (finished, he said, with the effrontery to call it "British Racing Green" - hah!). He said that he'd been sleeping at night a few weeks before; he'd been woken by cars roaring by with police sirens blaring, and what he thought were gun-shots, and there in the morning was this large bullet-hole in his Pontiac with the bullet still rattling around inside the body-work somewhere. Not much like Suffolk, I said to myself!

New Orleans is a very diverse and striking city with the famous "levees" lining the river; again it's very hot, right on the Gulf of course, but this time quite humid. We stayed with Michael who had a large single-storey home in a suburb of the city called Harvey. While we were there we did all the various interesting sights. We had a day riding a genuine stern-wheeler on the Mississippi, called "Natchez", apparently quite a lot of similar-appearing vessels are in fact screw-driven with a fake paddle-wheel flapping astern. "Natchez" still has her original steam engines really driving her impressive huge paddle-wheel. We had a fascinating day in the striking modern Aquarium of the Americas, and an obligatory visit to the "Café du Monde" where they sell their famous "beignets" and coffee in a typical tourist trap. I didn't care for it, the beignets were pretty much tasteless, the coffee was poor and previous diners had generously scattered their leavings across the floors.

We had a much better day visiting in the hot, shady and humid river backwaters where we had a full-day ride on a low-freeboard launch to view the crocodiles, water-snakes, turtles, fish and other river denizens amid all the trees with dangling curtains of Spanish Moss. At one landing they had the huge jaw-bones of a crocodile, propped up and gaping open, big enough for even me to walk through — a scary monster of a river-dweller.

One of Michael's parishioners owned a large plant nursery and garden centre, where he grew poinsettias in both the red and white varieties for the Christmas trade — I've never seen so many poinsettias in one place, stretching out in the bright lights of the huge greenhouses.

One memory is still vivid in my mind — when we stood close to the Mississippi waiting to board the "Natchez" - looking at the river, very wide at this point, with noiseless ripples in the stream, flowing fast and deep on its way to the Gulf — the unforgettable impression of immense power of the river, the sheer volume of water, anyone falling in is swept away/ and river flows with such force that the stream carries on unchanging for many miles deep into the Gulf after it leaves its banks at New Orleans. I don't mind confessing that my knees wobbled a bit as we boarded, with the "Natchez", big though she is, was like a match-box compared to the river, tugging hard at her moorings. The river leaves an indelible impression of immense sheer menacing power. Many years later with all the damage caused by Katrina, I remembered the Mississippi during that visit and shuddered a bit at the immense damage the river and the hurricane had caused: I could visualise the brute force of all that water overflowing the levees.

I hope to put a third and last episode together for the next "Newsletter".

- D.J.C.H.

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