

Regine Lord writes about the highlights of the 'little American Roadtrip' done by her and her husband Richard earlier this year. Join them in their journey from Louisville to New York City.



Regine and Richard Lord

OUR LITTLE AMERICAN ROADTRIP

A PLACE CALLED HAZARD

In February 2012, I flew to America to meet my penpal Bobz in person for the first time in my life. We had been writing to each other for 25 years. Bobz, his wife Dana, their teenage son Daniel, and their black-and-white dog Annie, fetched me from the airport, and we spent a week together at their home, near the small town of Hazard in the coalfields of south-eastern Kentucky. They made me feel completely at home, introducing me to their friends and colleagues, and showing me around their neighbourhood. It was like being reunited with family I didn't know I had.

A ROAD ADVENTURE COVERING 4285KM

Richard and I started our two-week road trip in Louisville (Kentucky), travelling through Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia and Washington DC before ending up in New York City.

WONDERS AT CHATTANOOGA

En route, we marvelled at limestone formations like the Frozen Niagara waterfall in Mammoth Caves National Park, the world's longest known cave system; we toured Ruby Falls, America's deepest cave and largest underground waterfall accessible to the public, outside the pretty town of Chattanooga. We had tea and toast at the famous Chattanooga Choo Choo, parked inside a quaint, pretty train station.

THE SMOKEY MOUNTAINS

We visited the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee, the birthplace of the famous long-running country music stage show, the Grand Ole Opry. We drove along the scenic mountain route of the Cherokee Skyway, and followed the Tail of the Dragon to the Great

Smokey Mountains; this road has 318 curves, mostly hairpin bends, in 11 miles! In the vast Daniel Boone National Forest of Kentucky, we walked across the Natural Bridge, an unusual sandstone archway.

FUN IN WASHINGTON DC

Washington DC, the nation's capital, has excellent (and free) Smithsonian museums; our favourite was the Air and Space Museum, where Richard flew a mission in an F-18 fighter jet flight simulator. The open-top City Sightseeing Bus showed us all the main attractions: the White House, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the World War II Memorial and Arlington Cemetery.

CYCLORAMA AT GETTYSBURG

We visited Gettysburg National Military Park, the setting of the pivotal battle of the American Civil War in July 1863, and the place where President Abraham Lincoln gave his famous Gettysburg Address. The 360-degree cyclorama at the Visitors Centre depicting this battle is powerfully brought to life with lighting, music, and gunfire.

NEW YORK CITY

In New York City we stayed in a cosy apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side, booked via Airbnb, a global network of accommodation offered by locals. After coffee at the Rockefeller Centre with its famous ice-rink, we walked miles in the fabulously beautiful Central Park which is faaar larger and more impressive than we had anticipated, and ended our walking tour with a visit to the Guggenheim Museum. It was freezing walking on Brooklyn Bridge, and enthralling in Times Square with its colourful flashing advertisements. We saw the Statue of Liberty from the southern shore of Manhattan. The 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero was profoundly moving.

FOOD AT THE CRACKER BARREL

The Cracker Barrel restaurants with their generous portions of wholesome meals became a favourite for us, and we lived off self-prepared padkos as much as possible. In America they drive on the right, petrol is called *gas*, you fill the car yourself, and the Welcome Centres along the interstate provide good travel tips.



ACCOMMODATION WITH FREE WIFI

Accommodation in motels en route was easy to find. Their 'continental breakfasts' are a joke though — we stocked up on nutritious cereal, fruit and yoghurt from grocery stores instead. However, all offered free, unlimited Wifi. Our nightly Skype calls to our American friends enriched our trip, helping us to understand each other's cultures and customs more deeply. For me, the highlight of the trip was, without a doubt, meeting Bobz. I will treasure that memory forever. ■



Main Picture Left: Ruby Falls Above: Regine on an 'ice mountain' in Central Park. Base of page: Yellow taxis in Manhattan.



Above: Regine Lord and American pen friend Bobz. "We've spoken on the phone countless times, and recently started to Skype, but seeing him in front of me, solid and totally real, not just a cluster of electrons displayed on a computer screen, was an overwhelming experience".



TEA UNDER THE TREES at Tokai Arboretum

We were pleasantly surprised when we visited Listers Coffee Shop at the Tokai Arboretum. The car park was teeming with walkers preparing for a hike up to Elephant's eye, cyclists were examining the information board to see which bike trail they would choose, and families with young children were having tea under the trees at the outside tables on the 'river side' of the coffee shop.

A short walk from the dining area we discovered a trickling stream with frog calls coming from every clump of vegetation. We strained our eyes to get a glimpse of just one of them — isn't this the Leopard Toad hide out?

Admittedly the day we went was one of those crisp clear winter days, but we noted that the coffee shop has tables inside for those inclement days. The menu ranges from pies through toasties and quiche with salad, all reasonably priced. Our 'prize' was a chocolate and vanilla muffin to take home, with the advice "just heat briefly in the microwave for the chocolate to melt".

The Tokai Arboretum was established in 1885 by Joseph Lister who planted a variety of trees from all over the world to see how they would fare in our climate. This knowledge was used to establish the forestry industry in South Africa. Some of the trees still have the identification labels. The incredible height of some of the trees is enough to cause vertigo. The area is also popular for birding enthusiasts.

Find your way to the Tokai arboretum by taking the M3 to the Retreat turnoff. Turn right into Tokai Road. Follow this road straight until you get to a fork in the road, keep right and keep going until you get to a T-junction. Turn left at the T (by the Tokai Manor House), and follow the dirt road until you reach the parking area. Don't be fooled by the Tokai braai area, or the Tokai research station. To contact the Lister Tea Room call: 021 715 4512

Top Right: Main path from the entrance going towards the hiking trail to Elephant's Eye. Middle: Lister's Coffee Shop and information boards. Bottom right: Chocolate and vanilla muffins.

