

Biking Across America

Leaving Pittsburgh

Sunday, May 24, 1998

Today was the start of my big adventure. Friday was *supposed* to be the start, but, well, packing up takes a lot longer than I thought. I'd managed to set my friends up with most of my big items (furniture, TV, etc.), and on Saturday I rented a storage locker for the rest. Larissa and Scratchy were both very good to me, loaning me their cars to shuffle boxes back and forth, and Sandra and Brian not only took my bed and my bicycle, but drove my desk and a bunch of boxes to the storage locker. Thanks guys! And thanks to Vandi for letting me sleep at her place on Friday night. But the stuff kept coming. So finally, on Sunday, I did what I should have done from the beginning: I rented a U-Haul. After distributing the rest of my stuff all over Pittsburgh, I left my apartment for the last time, climbed on my bike and started my voyage. It was 10 minutes to 3pm.

My original plan was to stay Friday night at Murph's parent's place in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and be in New Orleans on Memorial Day. But now Murph had left for the beach, and I had to haul ass to get back on track. It would have been cool to stay at the beach, to dip my feet in the Atlantic Ocean, and then drive to Los Angeles and dip them in the Pacific, but I didn't have time. I set my sights for Knoxville tonight, and New Orleans tomorrow night.

By the book (i.e. driving the speed limit on the interstate and never stopping), it's 9 hours to Knoxville, through Pennsylvania and West Virginia to Tennessee. But I'd decided the back roads would be a lot more fun, so I hopped on U.S. 19 out of the Fort Pitt tubes and didn't see the highway again until just before finding a hotel.

The first thing I discovered is that, although the speed limit is 55 mph (90 km/h), you rarely reach that because there's turn after turn after turn. There'll be a 35 mph turn followed by a 45, followed by a 25, or even a 20. And man, it's a lot of fun taking them at 10 or 15 mph over the limit. The bike really leans, which gets the adrenalin going. And the scenery is gorgeous. Weaving through the forests and hills of the Appalachian mountains is a lot better than the interstate. The back roads are also fun because you pass a lot of small towns full of car dealerships, auto repair stores, dive bars and a couple other buildings. These slow you down too, though, because the speed limit is lower.

I decided to stop for dinner at the first hole in the wall I saw after 7pm. About 7:30, in the back woods of West Virginia just north of Weston, I passed a black rectangular building that didn't have any signs except a big neon "OPEN" and a couple pickup trucks parked out front. I decided to check it and turned around.

Turns out there was a small wooden sign, "Lawrence's," that you couldn't really see while driving by. The door was locked, which was very strange. I later found out why. After peering in a couple windows (which were tinted, so I couldn't see anything), some guy came out.

"Hi! You've got to push the buzzer, see?" He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, dressed scruffy in a T shirt and blue jeans, and seemed friendly enough.

“Oh! I didn’t know there was a buzzer there!” I said, and followed him in.

The place was definitely a West Virginia hick bar. Lights were dim, simulated wood was everywhere, and country music was blaring from the juke box. There were five people sitting at the bar and two playing pool.

“Do you have food, or is this just a bar?” I asked the bartender.

“Wut you lookin’ for?” she said with a smile.

“Dinner” I said as she pointed to a menu over the bar. It was your standard fried bar food, which is just fine with me. So I took a seat and she asked me what I wanted to drink. They only had Bud and Bud Lite on draft, so I got a Bud, an 8 oz. glass for a dollar.

As soon as I sat down the two people next to me, a man and a woman, said “Hi!” This is awesome. You just don’t get that kind of friendliness in the big city. Or along the interstate. They looked like your stereotypical hick white trash. I’d say they were both in their thirties or forties, wore jeans and cheap T shirts, and the woman had her brown hair curled so it poofed up. I, on the other hand, was wearing a mostly lean pair of jeans, my “fashion” long sleeved soccer shirt and, of course, my now signature shaved head and long thin side burns. I have no idea what they made of me, but they were friendly none the less.

I said, “I just saw this place as I was drivin’ by and decided to stop in.”

“Oh! Whare you goin’ from?” I’m pretty sure that’s what the guy asked, although it was kinda hard to hear him. I told them I was coming from Pittsburgh and heading to L.A. and they were mighty impressed. The woman turned to the man and said “And he’s going through West Virginia!” I couldn’t tell if her tone was surprised or more I-told-you-so.

I turned to the bartender—a kind, friendly, but quiet gal—and asked about some chicken planks. She said they were all out, and the woman of the couple suggested the chicken wings—but only if I liked spicy. I figured they couldn’t be too spicy, and got those with fries.

I talked a bit with the couple, mostly with the guy. Turns out they’re married, and live just down the road. I asked if he’d always lived in “these parts”—throwing in some hickspeak I’d picked up from watching too much Dukes of Hazard as a kid. He said yes, although he lived in a couple other places for a short time. Florida was the only one I could make out. In fact, he was pretty soft spoken, and what with his really thick hick droll and the country music blaring out the juke box, I couldn’t understand much of what he said.

I asked him about Florida. He didn’t like it because of the Haitians, and that if you couldn’t speak Spanish, you couldn’t get along. I wonder if he even know that Haitians speak a variant of French, not Spanish.

His wife (her name is Pammy) wished me a happy Memorial Day and pointed out her Vietnam Vet T shirt. “There’s only one problem with this shirt, it should be for all vets! We won the war and we’re still buying Japanese, damn it!” I considered telling her I was riding a Honda, but thought better of it. During all this, one of the other guys at the bar (the one who pointed out the buzzer) put his hand on Pammy’s knee, kinda fondling it, and started whispering in her ear. Pammy’s husband looked like he didn’t like it, but didn’t say anything.

Around this time, something else interesting happened.

Pammy was very irritated with the couple over by the pool table. Apparently they'd made some mess and weren't cleaning it up. I couldn't see the pool table from where I was sitting, but Pammy brought a mop and bucket to them and yelled at them to clean it up. I was kinda shocked, but I didn't let on. Her husband sheepishly explained that she worked there during the day, and when she got back I realized she was drunk. (At 8pm on a holiday Monday.) The bartender said to the husband, in a stern voice, "You'd better take her home, right now." He started telling her, in his own stern, parental voice something about not doing that, but she would have none of it.

While all this was going on I looked around the bar, and noticed they had a NASCAR race on. From what I've heard, NASCAR (basically stock car racing) is very big in the South. It's the premier form of entertainment after drinking and having sex.

Anyways, this little skirmish went on for a while, getting louder and louder. The other three guys at the bar occasionally yelled out something about the location of the door, or that the couple at the pool table weren't welcome. It occurred to me that if they got kicked out you wouldn't want them coming back, which is why the door is locked. But it looked like there was going to be a bar fight, and I had ring side seats! And a plate of chicken wings to boot!

In between yelling at them, Pammy and her man told me about two other bars down the road to check out, Bodeen's and Crossroads. They said a tall black woman worked at Bodeen's, with "big tits," an "amazon woman." The guy said "big tits" with an expression on his face like "Woah man," but a little later said "I wouldn't want to get involved with her!" I get he thought she'd crush him or something.

It turned out the bar fight was not to be. Pammy eventually apologized (I don't know if they cleaned it up first), then the guy at the pool table came over and talked to Pammy's man. Pammy's man apologized and pool table guy said there's no need for any of this. I don't know whether he meant the incident as a whole, or the apology. Then the woman from the pool table, who moments before had been yelling, came over in tears. It was pretty clear they were both drunk. Pool table guy turned to Pammy's man and said "Can I have a cigarette sir?" and when he got it, "Thank you, sir." A little while later, they left.

I'd eaten most of my wings by now. I couldn't even taste the spice on them, they were that bland. Pammy's man told me a story about the guy who had just left. He;d come in really drunk one night and puked all over the bathroom stall. Pammy's man went in to use the bathroom, and not very pleased at the sight, asked the guy to clean it up. "I didn't make that mess!" he said, and refused to do it. A week later he came back and said "you know what, that was me who made that mess and I should've cleaned it up."

A little later, the guy who was fondling Pammy's knee started draping himself over her, and even kissed her. (She didn't protest, although she didn't encourage him either.) He leaned over to her man and said, in a drunk, menacing voice, "She's going home with ME tonight!" Pammy's man really started to squirm, but still said nothing. Then the menacing guy turned back to his bar stool and left them alone.

A few minutes later I had finished my dinner and was getting ready to leave, when the the menacing guy and Pammy's man were talking. Pammy's man kept saying he didn't want a fight, and introduced me. That didn't seem to distract him, so a few moments later he intro-

duced me again. This time it worked, and he said Hi to me and shook my hand. Pammy's man introduced him as Ronny. I forget what Pammy's man's name was, but it had been modified to end in y too.

I talked to Ronny for a little while. Or should I say, he talked to me; boy did he like to tell stories. Apparently he didn't like cities much. The biggest city he'd been to was Charleston, the biggest city in West Virginia at population 57,000. The focus of his resentment was that it actually had one way streets! He told a couple other stories which I've now forgotten (he had some buddies in Pennsylvania), and eventually I broke away from the conversation and left.

I walked out of there saying "Man, you can't *pay* for that kind of entertainment." I'd just spent an hour with a bunch of West Virginia freaks, having one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I left thinking "I'm never taking the interstates again!"

It was still light out, but getting dark. After a few miles I passed Bodeen's, and decided that I had a lot of driving to do and really couldn't stop. Another few miles and I passed Crossroads, and decided I had a lot of driving to do and really couldn't stop. Then I decided "Oh what the hell, I'm only making this trip once," and turned around.

In the Crossroads parking lot there were three bikes parked near the door, and one far away, all by itself. I started to park by the three. Then I realized they were Harley's, and the other was a Honda. I moved.

Inside wasn't very impressive. I said a few sentences to the bartender, but she wasn't interested in talking, and I was sitting next to two women who talked to each other and oblivious to everything else. After half a beer I left.

Soon it was dark. Since my headlight points forward, I could only see the part of the turn I was on, not what was coming up. There were storm clouds ahead, in the direction I was travelling, and the occasional flash of lightening. The lightning lit up the road a bit, but not enough to make much of a difference. I started thinking about all the drunk people at Lawrence's, and how they drove around in that state. While the back roads were exciting during the day, they were terrifying at night. However, I had pledged that I would stay on them, so I kept at it.

After an hour or two I decided to look for a hotel for the night. Thinking back, I hadn't seen one for a long time, and it dawned on me that there probably wasn't much call for them on the back roads. After all, only locals seemed to be using the back roads, and they certainly didn't need a hotel. I figured I'd look for one for the next half hour, and if I didn't see one, take the interstate into Charleston and find one there.

It was hard to look for a hotel, because I had to focus my whole attention on the road. Since the turns were just at the limit of my perception, I really couldn't look away, even for a moment, which added to the fear. After a while, though, I discovered what I call the "Zen of fear." It was a certain trust that, all evidence to the contrary, nothing would actually go wrong, that the turns really could be taken at the stated limits, and that nothing would appear in the the few feet of visible road that determined my fate.

As for sightseeing, there was almost nothing to see since everything was pitch black. However, there was one really cool thing: fireflies. You've never seen fireflies until you've seen them at 40 mph (65 km/h). They're slow enough that you can easily make them out, but fast

enough to be fun. They were definitely the highlight of the night drive.

Finally, I pulled into Charleston. I had seen a sign on the highway for \$45/night, but figured I could do better than that. To make a long story short, I couldn't. After spending almost an hour trying to find my way around Charleston, I ended up at a place that charged me \$55. By this time it was 1am, I hadn't slept much the night before, I'd just had a long, terrifying ride, and all I wanted was to get to sleep.

And so ends the first day of voyage across America. I covered 277 miles (443 km). I thought back on the day and some of the things I'd learned:

Packing takes longer than you think. Get all the free boxes you can find before hand, but once you start, buy the rest. There's a lot more to see on the back roads. And *no one* takes them. Which means they're full of friendly people who may never have met someone from another state, let alone another country. Stay off the interstate whenever possible. However, they can take a *lot* longer, and there's nothing to see at night. Pittsburgh to Charleston is supposed to take 4 hours, but it took me 9. You're not going to get a conversation going if you're just stopping in for a few minutes. Do it right or don't do it at all. Finding hotels on the back roads can take a long time. Maybe there's a guide for truckers or something, but without that, you're better off looking for signs on the interstate.

And so I headed off to sleep, reflecting on the day and planning tomorrow, my life in Pittsburgh already fading from memory.

Charleston, WV to Birmingham, AL **Memorial Day, Monday, May 25, 1998**

I needed to cover some distance to get back on schedule. I decided that I couldn't make it to New Orleans in one day, since it's about 15 hours non-stop on the interstate. Even if I did make it, it would be after most of the night life was over. So I settled for Birmingham, AL today (9 1/2 hours by the book) and New Orleans tomorrow (another 5 1/2 hours).

Luckily, on the route I was taking (I77 to I81 to I40, through Knoxville, to I75 to I59), there were back roads that paralleled the interstate most of the way. I decided to stick to the interstate, but switch to the back roads to find places for lunch and dinner. Even the interstate had turns with reduced speed, so I started to suspect the back roads would be a little straighter in other states. The lunch road followed the interstate pretty closely, and only had restaurants near highway exits—and they were the typical interstate type, generic and largely impersonal. I did pass a couple bars and “Rick's Fried Chicken,” which looked run down just the right amount, but they were all closed for memorial day. So instead I had BBQ and some hot peanuts at a Sunoco station.

In the south, Barbeque can be used as a noun as well as an adjective. Barbeque is some meat (usually chicken or pork from what I can tell), barbecued in lots of barbeque sauce, then ground up and served on a bun. The sauce to meat ratio is generally about 50/50.

Anyway, dinner wasn't much better, chicken souvlaki at a roadside family restaurant. I did have fun trying to order a drink, though.

"Can I have a soda?"

"A what?"

"A pop?"

"You mean a coke?"

"Sure."

"What kinda coke would you like?"

"Ah, a Sprite?"

Luckily I remembered that in many parts of the South, "Coke" is a generic name for all kinds of pop.

In Knoxville I stopped at a gas station for directions, and talked to a guy on a Kawasaki motorcycle. He looked like something out of a Rockford Files episode: really tanned, wearing beads around his neck and with his shirt open. His accent was so thick I couldn't really understand him, but I managed to figure out the directions on my own.

On the way to the Motel 6 in Birmingham, I followed a sign on the highway for a cheap motel in the run down suburb of Bessemer. There were a pair of cops hanging out outside the motel. I asked them where I could find a bar where some locals hang out, and they pointed me to the Ramada Inn next door. They said in the other direction were some knock down, drag out bars that one of them had worked security at, that I should avoid. Apparently, they were full of Good Ol' Boys. Figuring my shaved head and sideburns wouldn't go over well, I headed for the Ramada.

The lounge was almost empty, maybe 10 people in there. It was karaoke night, and some semi-drunk woman was belting out a country tune. The bartender was really friendly, and since they didn't have anything on draft I asked them what they had in bottles. She said "well, everything." I guessed what this meant, and she confirmed: "Bud, Bud Lite, Coors, Coors Lite, Miller, Miller Lite, ..." In other words, no microbrews, no imports, just generic american beers.

After a couple country songs the karaoke was silent for a few minutes, then a younger guy—looked early twenties—got up and sang. He didn't look like a typical southerner, he looked a lot more "northern." He had really short, black hair with a patchy goatee. Well let me tell you, you haven't heard "I am the Walrus" until you've heard it with a southern droll. He went on sing "Love Potion No. 9," a slow Eagles tune and a couple others.

I tried talking to two guys sitting at a table in front of me, but they weren't too interested. I learned that they were from Mississippi, and were here "workin' pipes," had been here five weeks. By this point the kid was behind the bar, and after a while I talked to him. Turns out he's from Saint Louis, but moved to Birmingham because he ran out of money and his parents were here. In fact, they owned the bar and his Mom was the bar tender.

He said he was from "the 'hood" in Saint Louis, and what he really wanted to do was be a DJ, "techno, hip hop, that kinda thing." By now his droll had disappeared, and every other sentence ended in "know what I'm sayin'?", with lots of fuckin' this, and that shit. He didn't seem to know many techno groups, just the Chemical Brothers and one or two others. He didn't have any turntables, and didn't have any experience, but he really had the desire. He told me that beat matching with

CDs just didn't sound the same.

I turned him onto WRCT (CMU's college radio), which he could listen to live over the internet, from their web site (www.wrct.org). He asked how much disk space the player took up, because (as he told me) he only had 770 gig free. I assured him it would definitely fit.

Anyways, he told me about the local radio and club scene, which sucks, according to him. There aren't any public access or college radio stations. He also didn't like some of the locals too much, especially the racist ones. He wasn't racist—in fact, he wanted to be black! The few black people he told wondered why in the hell he'd want to be black, but he wanted to be that way all the same.

At some point, after the legal closing time of midnight (the bars usually keep serving anyway), he asked his Mom if he could have a beer. Turns out, he's twenty and the drinking age is twenty one. She said ok, if he locked the door, and he had a something lite and smoked a lite cigarette. He wanted his parents to get Guinness on tap, and when I suggested that the local crowd probably wouldn't drink it, he got a crest-fallen look and agreed.

After talking to him for a couple hours I decided it was time to leave. As I walked out he came after me and gave me his email address on a pack of matches (on AOL). I gave him mine, and promised to email him when I got to L.A. (I did; it came back with "user unknown", and he never emailed me.) I left laughing to myself. Poor kid, he wanted so badly just to be cool. I said good night to the cops as I headed for my room.

In retrospect, I should have gone to one of the Good Ol' Boy bars. Cops tend to overestimate how dangerous places are. It's like, if you ask an ER doctor about riding a motorcycle, or a clinical psychologist how many problems the average person has. Most potential fights get resolved some other way, like the one in West Virginia. I've read that, a couple hundred years ago when duels were very widespread (a couple U.S. presidents were in duels while in office), most of them fizzled out. And any bar that had a fight every night would end up having a cop or two stationed there. Brawls just don't happen that often.

And so ends the second day of my trip. I covered 606 miles today (970 km), for a total of 883 miles (1413 km). I thought back on the day and some of the things I'd learned:

Pick a cheap motel chain and get directions to one of their motels at the start of the day. Head there but look for cheaper places on the way. Interstates are decidedly faster than the back roads. When in a hurry, consider taking them. Bars are definitely the place to strike up a conversation, not restaurants. The smaller and dingier, the better, and look for cars or pickup trucks outside. It's best to get a motel in a more run down part of town. Go to dive bars, where it's easier to strike up a conversation.

I drifted off to sleep, my mind swimming with thoughts of the boy who wanted to be black and the back roads to New Orleans.

The plan today was to drive through Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana to New Orleans by sun down. Since it was only 5 1/2 hours by the book, I decided to take the back roads. But first, I wrote in my journal.

After checking out I sat out front of the motel office, next to my bike, and wrote. A few people were going in and out of the office, and one of them kind of eyed me and the bike for a few seconds, then started asking me about it. We talked for maybe 15 minutes. I told him about the trip I was taking, and he told me about a Gold Wing club in California. A Gold Wing is a Honda motorcycle that's made for travelling long distances. Mine's a Honda, but not a Gold Wing, and the fastest it's comfortable going is 55 mph (90 km/hr). I was riding 80 mph (130 km/hr) on the interstate, but it was straining. Anyway, a little later another guy saw me and asked if I was selling the bike. I told him no, it had to get me to L.A., and we got to talking. It turns out his brother used to drive a motorcycle, until he got in an accident. The brother says a car rear ended him, but from the way the accident scene was laid out it looks like the motorcycle cut off the car. Anyways, the bike was totaled.

"What happened to your brother? Was he alright?"

"Well, he's in a wheelchair now. He had a good helmet, so his head was ok, but he's paralyzed from the neck down."

Wow.

After I finished writing, I headed to a gas station to fill up. As I was getting ready to go another guy came up to admire my bike. I told him I was going to L.A., and he told me to be safe. He started telling me about good and bad neighbourhoods, and how every city had them, so no city was better than any other. He said he was from Savannah Georgia, which (he said) was supposed to be the worst city for violent crime, but it doesn't matter because you have to be careful wherever you go. Then he started telling me about the L.A. riots, about how the Rodney King verdict was just an excuse for vandalism. He reminded me about the truck driver who was beaten to death by the rioters, and about people sitting on rooftops with their rifles. Now, I hadn't said anything at all since he started telling me to be careful, and I have pretty much the opposite world view of this guy. If he wasn't a racist militia member, we was doing a good imitation of one. I doubt my biggest danger, either on the trip or in LA, was going to be racial violence, and non militia members don't usually start talking about riots and guns when I say I'm biking to LA. So I said I better get going and I left.

I headed down U.S. 11, which follows the interstate, but is far enough from it that it has it's own character. Man, the back roads are great. You see so much that you wouldn't see on the interstate. The first sizable town I went through was really poor. All the buildings needed a new coat of paint, badly. And what's more, every single person was black. This was pretty surprising, it was something I'd expect to see in the fifties, not in the nineties. At least the town's cop was black.

I went through a bunch of small towns that day, some rich, most poor. All three states were completely segregated (in the areas I went through) — it was hard to find a black face in the rich towns, and the poor towns were completely black. And all the black people were very dark skinned. Pittsburgh's blacks are largely light skinned, but I guess in the deep south there just aren't any mixed marriages.

Lunch was at some small restaurant near Tuscaloosa, Alabama — a BBQ sandwich and a “coke.” I actually had a receipt with only “BBQ” and “coke”, but I forgot to keep it when I payed. The place advertised “open pit barbeque,” which I assume is the preferred way to cook it, but the sandwich came on a hamburger bun like the cheap kind you’d get at the grocery store. As far as I could tell, it was barbequed chicken smothered in BBQ sauce. Cheap and good.

I saw my first armadillo road kill that day, which continued pretty much into Nevada. On a bike you’re a lot more in tune with your surroundings, especially in smell, I found out. Boy does rotting flesh smell bad. Somewhere in Mississippi my licence plate fell off the back of my bike, but luckily I heard it and stopped to pick it up. It had fallen off before, and I put it back on with these aluminum brackets that I realized later were pretty brittle, so I expected it to fall off. Still, I started to think about how much I depended on my bike, but how if I took care of it, it would treat me well. I was starting to think of it the way a farmer thinks of a work horse, not the way you think of a car. So I decided it wasn’t an it, but rather a she, and that she needed a name. I didn’t think of one that day, but it did give me something to think about during those long hours on the road. I also started taking it easier on her, only going 70 instead of 80 (110 instead of 130).

I pulled into New Orleans just as the sun was setting. Right outside town was a five mile bridge over a bay (a bay that opens onto the gulf of Mexico), and it was just gorgeous. It was like riding a bridge into the ocean itself, and it just kept going and going.

Throughout this trip I was planning to stay in out of the way places and eat at cheap restaurants, but New Orleans was an exception. I wanted to have seafood at a nice restaurant and check out some cool local club. I figured I’d skip the French Quarter and Bourbon Street. My guess was that they were full of yuppies and tourists and cheesy bars. I’ll do that when I’m old. Instead, the plan was to ask a local where the good places were to go. If I couldn’t find anyone decent to ask, the default plan was to go to Jimmy’s, a place listed in “Let’s Go USA” as a more run down college hang out.

I pulled into a gas station on the outskirts of town, ready to call one of the hotels listed in “Let’s Go USA.” Well, near the phone was a guy changing the tire on his car. He seemed all right — he was black, middle class, but dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, not frat boy/yuppie clothes. I chatted him up about his car, then asked if he knew of any clubs I could hang out at. I told him I was interested in authentic blues or something, some place away from the tourists. He thought for a while, unable to come up with something, so I asked, “well where do you hang out?” He pointed me to a place called “House of Blues” in the French Quarter, which also happened to be the first listing in “Let’s Go USA.” Now I figured there’s an exception to every rule, and if there was a cool place in the Quarter that was fine with me. He also pointed me to an area of cheap hotels, on Tulane Ave. north of downtown and I10. As we were finishing up he mentioned a hip hop bar on Commons St., with a big sign out front that said “Whisky Bar.”

So I got back on the I10, got off at Tulane and stopped at a gas station to ask directions. I was confused because, as I later discovered, I10 doubles back to Tulane and I had somehow missed the first exit and got off at the second — in a pretty seedy area of town. The woman I talked to pointed me to the Rose Inn down the street.

The Rose Inn was cheap, but not too bad. The front desk was behind plexiglass and the Chicano who was there told me twice, in his thick accent, that no visitors were allowed — “you know what I mean?” I assured him I did. I showered and headed to the French Quarter.

Now House of Blues has a restaurant as well as a bar, so I headed down there for dinner. It was getting on 10pm and I was pretty hungry. I had a little trouble finding it — New Orleans streets are as poorly laid out as Pittsburgh’s, partly because there’s a big river that winds through town, making any sane layout impossible.

But eventually I found it, and the people at the door explained that the band tonight wasn’t blues but country. I’m not a big country fan, but I figured I’d at least have dinner there before heading to the hip hop club. But when I wandered in, I discovered — I WAS IN YUPPIE HELL! I might as well have been at a Houlihan’s or some other suburban style chain restaurant/bar. To let you know just how unauthentic this place was, they had a huge sign over the bar — “this joint is dedicated to the memory of Jake Blues” — and some Blues Brothers pictures.

I didn’t know where else to eat and it was getting late, so I wandered over to the bar, hoping to at least strike up a conversation with someone. The entree’s on the menu were all expensive — over \$15 — and if I was going to spend that much it wasn’t going to be at a place like THIS. so I ordered the cheap \$7 chicken tenders. Even the bartender was an idiot — he was competent, but rather nerdy. I thought back. How could this have gone so terribly wrong? And then I realized. That guy wasn’t changing the tire on a car — it was a SPORT UTILITY VEHICLE! MY GOD! HOW COULD I HAVE MISSED THAT! As I looked over the crowd of ugly 40-something tourists with their pale, milky legs protruding from under their gaudy shorts, I could feel the back lights slowly sucking the soul from my body, like so much sewage from a septic tank.

I had lost this battle, but I wasn’t beaten yet. I resolved to eat my food quickly and go find the hip hop club. Even if the crowd there was cheesy there, at least I’d like the music. Not what I’d had in mind for my big night in New Orleans, but better than nothing. I thought of talking to the people around me at the bar. On my right were two guys and a woman, all three looked middle class suburban. One of the guys was trying to act all big and important, talking authoritatively about things he probably had no clue about, and standing with his chest out in a posture that epitomizes the expression “strutting your stuff.” He looked kinda like the moneys at the zoo. I half expected him to jump up on the bar and pound on his chest while making screeching noises. On my other side were two women who looked like typical members of the Society for Creative Anachronisms. They were busy talking to each other, and I wasn’t interested. Ian Davis later told me that the House of Blues is a national chain owned by Dan Ackroid, which explains the Blues Brother references, as well as the cheeziness. Apparently some really authentic blues players play there, but not this night.

So I scarfed down my dinner and walked over to Commons St. I couldn’t even find the street on my first try, the streets are that poorly signed. I often went past a street before I saw the sign for it. As I wandered for blocks and blocks down Commons, I started to picture the place in my head. Images of the House of Blues crowd trying to dance to hip hop washed through my thoughts. After a while I gave up trying,

or even wanting, to find it. It was time for plan B: Jimmy's. I headed back to my bike, hoping to bump into someone more "alternative" looking, who might know about the local scene. But there was no one. They probably didn't want to be there any more than I did.

It was a quarter to 11pm. The night was still young, and although my earlier plans had missed, it was still quite possible to have a good time. I headed back to my hotel room to get the address, and managed to end up somewhere completely different. I eventually got back to my hotel and got a map from the front desk, and looked up Willow St. There were four Willow Streets! I looked them all up and tried to find the biggest one (since the address was 8200). It was a main artery, and although it was a little awkward to get to, it was only 10-15 minutes from the hotel.

I never found it. It took me 10-15 minutes just to find the first intersection I was supposed to turn at. I must have made two dozen U turns that night. When I finally got near where Willow St. was supposed to be, I kept finding Washington St. but never Willow. I can only guess that the map was either wrong or old, and Willow was actually Washington. By the time I'd convinced myself I was in the wrong place, it was after midnight, I had no idea where Jimmy's was or how to get there, I was tired, and had a long drive ahead of me the next day. Besides, a "college hangout" could mean anything from a cheap, unpretentious bar (like the Panther Hollow Inn in Pittsburgh) to a frat boy meat market. Given that it was listed in Let's Go and had a \$3-12 cover charge, and given my luck, it was probably the latter. I finally threw in the towel and headed back to the hotel.

It's kind of ironic that the one traditional tourist stop, where I actually had a plan, is the one I ended up wandering around for hours looking for something decent to do. I thought back on the day and some of the things I'd learned:

Gas stations are a good place to find people to ask for directions or other advice. Just make sure they look like they have the same tastes as you. The underground scene can be hard to find. Avoid the tourist district; instead, wander around downtown and find people to ask. You could also try calling the local college radio station, but make sure they're playing the kind of music you want to hear. Hyla Willis suggested looking in the yellow pages for a non chain record store, and ask them. "Let's Go" and other travel guides are for YITs (Yuppies In Training). They suck.

I had travelled 364 miles (583 km) today, for a total of 1247 miles (1995 km). Tomorrow was another long haul to Austin, Texas, where I was crashing with an old friend of Peter Coppin's. Tomorrow was another day.

New Orleans, LA to Austin, TX

Wednesday, May 27, 1998

Today was another long ride, through Louisiana and half of Texas to Austin. According to the map, going the speed limit on the interstate and not stopping it would take 9 hours. I stuck to the interstate until Houston, where I had to take U.S. 290. There really weren't any

back roads going my way, so I didn't have a choice.

Just outside New Orleans are the most beautiful swamps I have ever seen. Acres and acres of lush, green plants with swaths of deep blue water meandering through, sometimes wide and straight, other times narrow and snaking, crisscrossing with each other. The whole thing stretches out to the horizon, interrupted only by the interstate.

Once I got into Texas I found out why there weren't any back roads. The land is flat, and there's not much around. Somehow, I expected Texas to be dry, but this part, at least, was humid. And hot. It was like riding through a sauna. And there were a fair number of plants for a supposed desert, some as tall as a car, but most smaller.

After riding for a while, with all this time on my hands, I started worrying about what else could go wrong enough for me to miss my first day of work in L.A. I decided there were three classes of things: a mechanical problem, bad weather or theft. Writing this now I realized I never considered an accident from driver error — either my own or someone else's. Anyway, a mechanical problem could cause anything from being stranded in the middle of nowhere, to a wipe out at 70 mph (110 km/hr), which would almost certainly (I figured) put me in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. Bad weather would, at worst, make me pull over and wait it out, since I wasn't about to ride in any significant rain. And if someone stole my helmet or some necessary part of my bike, I'd be really screwed, since bike shops are few and far between, and I'd have no way to get to the next one.

This got me to worrying about riding without a licence plate. Luckily there aren't any cops on the back roads outside of the towns—at least, I never saw any. I pictured myself being pulled over by a State Trooper with an attitude the size of a Texas cockroach, looking to teach some city boy what they think of outsiders in these here parts. And not only was my rear brake not working, but the tread on my back tire was getting low, which got me to thinking about a blow out, and whether it would make me spill.

And so I enjoyed my trip to Austin. I figured I really should treat her (my bike) better, and come up with a name for her. Something related to my trip, and appropriate for something that works tirelessly for me, as long as I take care of her. But I couldn't think of anything that didn't sound corny or random.

I hit the outskirts of Houston just as rush hour started, and got caught in slow traffic, but it was surprisingly light. I only lost about 10 or 15 minutes, and that was because of an accident blocking traffic. I pulled into Austin around 9 and headed to the address I'd been given. I was staying with Doug Easterly, an old University buddy of Peter Coppin. We'd only ever exchanged one email a piece, so all I knew was he lived in a warehouse with a bunch of artists.

I met up with Doug and he showed me around. It was exactly what I expected a warehouse of artists to be: a big space with wood floors, a pile of large canvasses stacked in the corner, piles of wood and wood scraps in another, random organizations of metal, tubing, cloth and some things I couldn't quite identify. Parts of it were hidden behind black curtains with laser printed "Do Not Enter" signs scotch taped on them. There was a lack of drinkable water, but an abundance of power tools. One end had a stage built into it, with a bunch of seats in front that were taken straight from an old movie theatre, couches and living room behind those. Walking behind the stage, I discovered it half

blocked the way to the bedrooms (converted offices). On the other end of the warehouse, a door led to the living room/kitchen. Just off that was a small maze that led to other bedrooms, offices, and a bathroom with makeshift walls enclosing it.

Then Doug and I headed to dinner. He was driving an old U.S. Postal Service mail truck, which had been painted white before he bought it at an auction. It was pretty clunky, and didn't go highway speeds, but it could haul stuff, it was cheap, and it worked. Dinner was at an authentic South American restaurant (Ecuadorian, I think), and the only waitress on duty didn't speak English. I ended up ordering something that was like meat and potatoes on shredded lettuce. It wasn't all that great, but it filled me up and it was cheap.

Doug and I spent a while talking over dinner. The among other things the warehouse was home of a performance art group called Circus of Fools, explaining the stage. Doug's got his Master's degree in Fine Arts (if I remember correctly) and will be teaching Media Arts at a University in New Orleans. I tried to get him to tell me some good stories about Peter, but he said he didn't know any.

After dinner we headed back. Doug had to get to sleep pretty early, so after showing me where I'd be sleeping (in an office behind the stage), he headed off and I headed outside. One of the other denizens, Christina, was preparing for an art show the next day. She was cutting plywood and painting under halogen lights. I said a few words to her, but she was looking possibly at an all nighter already, so I let her be. I sat down by the side of the loading dock and wrote in my journal.

A little while later, another roommate, Morgan, drove up on a motorcycle a lot like mine. He was looking to relax for a little while before going to sleep, so he joined me and we chatted. Mostly about motorcycles, having one as your only vehicle, riding cross country, how we both don't like Harleys and the egos that drive them, and so on. Then we both headed off to sleep.

Everyone was gone by the time I woke up, so I showered and packed and started writing in my journal again. Another roommate, Luke, drove up in his van, said hi, and started rummaging through a storage room. He looked kind of like Abe Lincoln, he had a long beard that came straight out from his chin and bushy side burns. After an hour or so of writing I decided to try to attach my licence plate again. I was afraid of doing it half heartedly, since if it fell off again I might not notice, and then I'd be really screwed. So I found an old wire coat hanger under a dumpster and used my pliers to bend it into a couple loops. Luke also helped me out by giving me some bailing wire. I figured that if one kind of wire broke, hopefully the other wouldn't until I could figure something else out.

Everyone who lived in that warehouse was really friendly and very comfortable with me staying there. They didn't feel like they had to entertain me, which I hate, because I feel I'm imposing. All in all, they were a great bunch of people. Too bad I didn't get a chance to know them better.

Thinking back on the previous day, I thought about what I had learned:

Students, living in a space that's organized for their craft rather than their comfort, are some of the best people in the world. I've stayed with people who live and breath "corporate art"

(graphic design and editing video for the underground scene), but image was their life, and there didn't seem to be too much underneath. It's best to fix any obvious problems with the bike, if for no other reason than that you don't stress about them.

I'd travelled 521 miles (834 km) the previous day, 1768 miles (2829 km) total. Today was the last long haul, through even sparser territory, to El Paso, TX. I opened the throttle and headed for the highway.

Austin, TX to El Paso, TX

Thursday, May 28, 1998

Today was another long haul day, 9 1/2 hours by the books. Almost all of it was on Interstate 10, since there weren't any back roads going the right way. But it didn't matter, since there weren't any trees to block my view. And there wasn't much to see, either. West Texas is pretty barren. The only evidence of civilization, other than the road I was on and the occasional fence, was cattle and oil fields.

I came to a big bridge over a river — and the river was completely dried up. Over half the rivers were dried up; I guess this wasn't the rainy season. The rest were really low. And unlike East Texas, West Texas was really dry. I had to fill up my water bottle at pretty much every gas station I stopped at.

And today I finally thought of a name for my bike — Billie, after Billie Holiday. At House of Blues in New Orleans, there had been bas relief "pictures" of Blues artists on the ceiling, and for some reason I kept looking at Billie and thinking about what it must have been like for a female blues singer. To me it brings images of someone doing something out of the ordinary, experiencing life in the American south and persevering through whatever happens, rather than taking the easy way out.

After dark I stopped to get gas at some random gas station, and on the door I noticed a sign saying "PLEASE CONTRIBUTE. We don't charge people to look at our tigers, but they do cost money to keep and we'd like to build a bigger cage for them and get a white tiger." Tigers? Sho'nuff, they had a tiger out back, kept in a metal cage maybe 50 feet on a side. It had a small room in one corner (out of the elements, but not much bigger than the tiger), and big florescent lights on at night. Pretty inhumane if you ask me. On the way out, I noticed the place was called "Tiger Truck Stop." Go figure.

About an hour out of El Paso, well after the sun had set, I passed through some town big enough to have street lights. I looked back and couldn't see my licence plate! I pulled over and discovered that one of the two screws that holds it was gone, and the other one was coming loose. Will there be no end to this madness?!? I used one of the old bolts from the bracket, tightened them both as much as I could, and I was on my way.

By the time I got to El Paso it was late and I was tired, so I just made a phone call and went to sleep. By the time I went to bed it was 1am Austin time, midnight local time. I slept until after 9 am; I was really tired. I had travelled 579 miles (926 km) today, for a total of 2347 miles (3756 km). But this was my last long haul (the last three days were all under 400 miles), and I drifted off to sleep thinking about New

Mexico and Arizona.

El Paso, TX to Globe, AZ

Friday, May 29, 1998

New Mexico was a lot like West Texas: arid with brown grass dotted by small green trees. I saw the odd cactus, the short kind with circular, flat branches. It was hot but dry, my sunburn was hurting a bit but it didn't feel like it was getting much worse.

I passed the Rio Grande, a big, famous river because it defines the border between Texas and Mexico. Illegal Mexican immigrants are sometimes called "wetbacks" because they've been known to swim across the Rio Grande to get to the U.S. Anyway, when I passed it, it was really small, maybe twenty feet across and only a few feet deep. "That's it?," I said to myself, "*That's* the Rio Grande? It should be called the Rio Wimpy." Then I noticed two levies well inland on either side. If it swelled to reach these, it'd be four or five times its size. Man, this really *is* the dry season.

Close to the Arizona border I turned onto U.S. highway 70. As I've said, you get to see a lot of small towns (and some bigger ones). I was a little worried, because there was a head wind that was wreaking havoc with my gas mileage. I actually ran out of gas in my main tank just before my first fuel stop, and had to switch to reserve for a mile or two. These U.S. highways are only used by locals, so they don't necessarily have gas stations spaced closely enough for a motorcycle. But I decided to take my chances.

Some of the smaller towns were really run down. I passed a bunch of houses whose front yards were literally covered with rusting cars, car parts and all sorts of other junk. There were a couple small houses that were falling apart at the seams, and a few made from a patch work of corrugated steel. They weren't boarded up, so if the whole town wasn't deserted people still lived there.

There were also a lot of mobile homes and trailer parks, which were generally in good condition. I resolved to stop for dinner after 5 pm at some bar (not restaurant) just outside a trailer park. Maybe I could get one of the locals to share their latest conspiracy theory.

A little further on I hit the Rocky Mountains. At first the hills looked like they were formed by erosion. You could see the strata in the rocks, through the small bushes that dotted the landscape. Later, though, they looked like more traditional peaks.

Eventually I got into even bigger mountains, stretching off into the distance in all directions. It was a really beautiful sight, with the green bushes dotting the yellow grass, and mountains fading to brownish purple in the distance. I even stopped to take a picture. And I'm not usually impressed by landscapes.

There was gas every forty miles (sixty kilometers) or so, so I was never in danger of running out. After 5:00 pm I didn't see any more trailer parks, or even small bars, until I got to the outskirts of Globe, AZ, just past an Apache Indian reservation.

I saw a bar that looked about right called "Mark's Tavern." As I pulled in, a pickup truck with two Native Americans pulled in too, and one of them got out and followed me into the bar. He was in his late 20's to early 30's, looked pretty big and strong and wore a cowboy hat. Inside was another, much older Indian, who looked almost like the ste-

reotype of the Chinese village elder you see in movies. I expected him to call me “grasshopper” or something. Except he was a Native American. The younger guy ordered a shot of Jim Beam and a coke, and I ordered a Bud (they only had Bud and Bud Lite on draft) and a pizza. It was pretty clear that the younger Indian was already drunk from the way he was slurring his speech and swaying. He liked the way the bartender poured the drinks — close to a double shot — and the way they only cost \$3.

“Damn that’s good. I’ll remember *you*. What’s your name?”

“Carla,” she said.

“How much were they again? Give me another for the road.”

After he left Carla started talking to me. She’s really cool, especially for someone from the back woods of Arizona. Roseanne came on the T.V. and it turns out she’s a fan, like me; we talked about that for a while. We both liked the wit and sarcasm of the show, and the biting humor. She told me about the final episode and I told her about my favourite episode, the one where they find out D.J. is masturbating.

The old Indian guy was mostly just staring off into space. At one point he turned to me and mumbled something in really slurred speech. He was really drunk, and had been for a while. After a couple tries I figured out he was asking me for some change — I said no. A little later he asked Carla something, and after a few tries she figured out he was trying to sell his watch for \$10 - \$15. She said no and pointed him to the pawn shop next door. A little later he stumbled out, and she explained that she felt sorry for him, but didn’t want to feed his addiction.

At this point an old white guy walked in and sat several seats down. He was in his late 50’s, thin and his white hair was shaved close. He seemed nice enough, was quiet and kept to himself. Carla told me that this bar was sometimes a strip club, and that she used to be a stripper, but liked bartending better, even though it paid less.

I told her about my trip, how I liked to stay off the interstate to see what the area is like. She pointed me to a real Country & Western bar, and also to a \$20 motel down the road. It was an hour out of Phoenix, so I’d have to drive an extra hour the next day, but I was happy to save the money and see the sights. She also gave me two beers on the house.

She found some chips and salsa in the back somewhere, offered them to the old guy, then to me, then asked him to take them to a group down by the river. It turns out there is a group of alcoholic Apaches that sleep down by the river. One of them had hassled Carla yesterday (she had the change the keg at it was taking too long). Even though the hassler was clearly in the wrong, Carla wanted to show that she was actually looking out for them. When he got back he said that they thanked her. He also says he lost his cigarettes.

The three of us got talking for a while. Wayne (that was his name) reminded me of the rummy from “To Have and Have Not,” the Bogart & Bacall movie. Both from how he looked and the way he acted. It turns out he served two tours in Vietnam, a total of two or three years, and hadn’t worked since. He didn’t have any stories to tell (or didn’t want to), except that his group was cut off and pinned down for seven days until helicopters airlifted them out. Also, a high school friend of his was killed there after one week. The boy never smoked or drank, didn’t take any risks. “No matter what you do to change the odds, it’s

still crap shoot,” I offered. He agreed.

The owner was tending bar now. He was a cheery Hungarian guy, although he was a little too busy to talk to me very much. Carla told me he was a Vietnam Vet too. He played cards for a while with a friend of his, another Hungarian. Later I asked him if there were a lot of Hungarians around. He said “No, we’re the only two.” I asked him why he moved here, he joked because it was supposed to be a retiree’s paradise. Then he said “look at my paradise!”

So I talked to Wayne some more. He hasn’t worked since he got out of the service, but he was married to an Apache for a while. Wayne, Carla and I got to talking about racism. I said “There’s good and bad people of all types — good and bad Indians, good and bad Whites, good and bad whatever.” Carla perked up and said “Yes!” and I toasted to that. Wayne’s opinion was that “People is people.”

By now it was early evening, the time when non-alcoholics start showing up at the bars. There were about seven other people in the bar, all Apache except for one white guy — who brought everyone a beer, including me. Later I thanked him and asked him if I could buy him something, but he was just drinking 7UP and didn’t need another of those.

Two Native Americans sat over by a table. They looked like the elders of the group. I wanted to talk to them, but Wayne had realized that I would give him cigarettes if he kept talking to me. He asked me to buy him a beer, and said I’d bought him a beer earlier. It must have been out of the tip money I left on the bar. He was an honest guy, just seemed perpetually down on his luck — as you might be, if you’d been an out of work alcoholic for thirty years. He did offer to let me crash at his place, which I accepted. I figured that was worth a few cigarettes and two beers.

Also in the bar was Wayne’s ex-wife, the Apache, and some of her friends and relatives. At some point I said hi, and we talked for a minute or two. Either her or her female friend (I can’t remember which) asked me to dance, but I politely said “Sorry, I don’t dance.” That was partly because I don’t like dancing, partly because I didn’t know the politics in the room (for all I knew, she had a boyfriend or a jilted lover in the bar), and partly because she wasn’t what you’d call attractive. To put it nicely. I told them about my trip and how I was just passing through. They offered to let me stay at their place, which I thought would be really cool, but I’d already agreed to stay at Wayne’s.

There were also a bunch of people playing pool, and I even ended up exchanging a few words with them. Pretty much everyone was very friendly. There’s a lot to be said for small towns, and small town bars. A while later, Carla’s boyfriend came in, and I said a few words to him, but he seemed pretty distant. Carla was surprised I wasn’t gone by now, but I was having more fun talking to people here than I would at the Country & Western bar. A little while later, they left.

When it was finally time to leave, Wayne started saying that his place was very small, just a room really, there there wasn’t really anywhere to sleep, ... I took the hint, although it pissed me off. He probably just wanted to offer to repay me somehow, and didn’t think I’d accept. It must suck to try and keep your pride when you’re in a situation like he is.

I checked into the motel. I had travelled 329 miles (526 km) today, for a total of 2676 miles (4282 km). The next night was gam-

bling and drinking in Vegas. Only two more days to go.

Globe, AZ to Las Vegas, NV

Saturday, May 30, 1998

Today was another "short" ride, 6 1/2 hours by the book, almost entirely on the back roads. I was looking forward to my second planned "high light" of the trip, after my disastrous experience in New Orleans. I was soon out of the Rocky Mountains and the road was pretty flat. Even in the Rockies there are occasional plains, like clearings in a forest. It was pretty rad, driving through the desert, surrounded by mountains in all directions, on a hot sunny day with the wind keeping me cool. In a couple places I did go through the mountains, and the rock formations were pretty bitchin'. In some places it looked like someone had piled a bunch of boulders in little heaps, stacked really high and narrow. It looked like a couple of strong people could push the top rock off. I suspect the "piles" are actually one big rock that eroded or weathered in strange ways. Maybe there were veins of softer rock in them or something.

This is where I passed the continental divide, where the rain that falls in the mountains eventually ends up in the Pacific, not the Atlantic. At one point I had to stop and take a break — I was getting tired and had to fight to stay awake. The plants around here were pretty amazing — certainly unlike anything on the east coast. None were all that big, but the shrubs came in a ton of different kinds and colours. It brought out my explorer instincts, I wanted to wander around and see what I could find, but I didn't have time.

About half an hour out of Las Vegas I passed the Hoover Dam, a testament to the Depression era ideal of technology for the betterment of humanity. I stopped and looked around, and it actually is pretty big. You have to understand, I grew up in Toronto, and my idea of a lake is a Great Lake. Anything you can see the other side of is a pond. And the nearest waterfall is Niagara Falls. So it has to be pretty big to impress me.

Well, the Hoover Dam is. I thought about going on a tour, but the sun was setting and I wanted to get into Las Vegas before dark. So I stopped, took a couple pictures, and headed out.

I made it to Vegas just before dark, thoughts of gambling dancing in my head. I had decided a couple things during my ride that day. First, I'd only gamble \$20. Second, most people, when they're winning, don't want to stop, so they keep playing until all their money is gone. So I'd stop if I'd won \$80. And anyway, "Let's Go" promised me cheap food and drinks: "Almost every hotel-casino in Vegas courts tourists with cheap all-you-can-eat buffets" and "Most casinos dole out alcoholic drinks for free to those who are gambling and for under \$1 to those who aren't ... yet." So even if my luck was bad at gambling I could still get a good meal cheap, then drink myself stupid while watching others gamble, or maybe chat someone up at the casino bar. (I made sure my hotel was withing staggering distance of "The Strip," the main row of new casinos.) I was most interested in playing blackjack, since I'd heard it has the best odds.

I headed out just after dark, and selected the huge, black pyramid hotel in the distance. Arriving a little after 10:00, I discovered it was part of the Luxor, an ancient Egyptian themed hotel and casino. I

stepped inside to the main gambling floor. It was huge, like a couple high school gyms stuck together and mashed into a circle. I marvelled at the vast array of slot machines and card tables, the crowds of people wandering to and fro. The din of people taking, slot machines clanking. And the occasional sound of quarters clinking out of a slot machine, one after the other, in rapid succession, a seemingly infinite march, yet always over too soon.

I wandered over to the restaurant in search of a cheap meal, and got my first shock of the night — the entrees were \$15- \$20 (Cdn \$22 - \$30), like this wasn't Vegas. I hadn't paid that much for a meal on this trip yet, and I wasn't about to start now in the promised land. Since I wasn't that hungry I decided to wait until the next casino to eat.

I headed back to the casino floor and watched the blackjack tables. There was a lot of money changing hands here, especially with the \$5 minimum bet, and soon it would be my money. As I watched people play I thought about what I'd do. I looked at their hands, figured out whether I'd stay or get hit, then see what the player did and who was right.

I actually started getting a little nervous. I mean, this was a lot of money, at least for me. Five bucks a shot, a few quick decisions and it's all over in less than a minute.

The basic house rules (draw at 16 or under, stay at 17) are no doubt optimal, not knowing the player's strategy or what cards they have. But the player can see the dealer's top card, and knows her strategy. How should you change your strategy if they're showing a two? a seven? a face card?

Eventually I was ready. I took my place at a table, got my four chips and bet one of them on the next hand.

I had a king and an 8, and the dealer had a face card showing. I stayed put. The dealer's other card was ... another face card. Damn. The next round was the same. I got a good hand, but the dealer got better. Same with the next. And the next. In less than 5 minutes I'd lost my entire \$20. I can think of a lot of fun things I can do for \$20 — most of them lasting more than 5 minutes. Now blackjack is supposed to be almost even odds, so the chance of losing four hands in a row has got to be around 15:1 — and the chance of winning one more around 50%. After a few hands went by I decided coming all the way to Vegas for 5 minutes of gambling just didn't work. I put another \$5 down — and lost again.

Well, this gambling thing just wasn't working out, so I decided to drown my sorrows and perhaps chat some up at the bar. And at the bar was another surprise — even the lowly Vodka & Tonic cost \$4! And everyone at the bar was in groups of 2 or 3 — no chance for conversation.

And this was the same story at the three other casinos I visited. Expensive meals, expensive drinks, loud bands near the bar and no one to talk to. Although these companies go to great lengths to make radically different structures on the outside — huge sphinxes and pyramids (Luxor), a medieval castle with a dozen towers (Excalibur), or a dozen buildings from the New York Skyline (New York, New York) — they're all the same on the inside: a huge area of gambling, surrounded by bars, lounges, restaurants, cafe's and buffets. At least I was drinking on an empty stomach. I only needed 3 Vodka & Tonics over the next two and a half hours.

Given my luck at the card table, I decide to people watch. I eventually realized that no one else was people watching, unless they were watching a friend. I also noticed that no one was winning over all. In fact, winning streaks were pretty short — everyone's stack of chips went down, slowly but surely.

There was one woman I watched for quite a while, maybe an hour. Guys kept sitting next to her, gambling a few rounds, and when she lost, pushed some chips toward her. She'd push them back, her body language all of a sudden awkward. The guys would always get up and leave soon after. Like the other players, she didn't talk much. She was pretty serious and intense about the game. She didn't seem to like losing, although she did it well. It reminded me a lot of the atmosphere inside the video arcades I went to in the early '80s, except more up scale. And at arcades, the more you play, the better you get and the further your money goes.

I decided, one last time, to put \$5 on the table. I lost again. It occurred to me at this point that I shouldn't become a professional gambler. I resolved that when I had some spare time near a computer I'd figure out the optimal strategy for blackjack, for each possible card the dealer could be showing.

After a couple hours I retired to my hotel room for the night. I had travelled 380 miles (608 km) today, for a total so far of 3056 miles (4890 km). And tomorrow would be a big day — the day I arrive in L.A.

I thought about what I had learned that day:

Casino bars are not where you can meet people. At least, not easily. In fact, there's nowhere in the casino to make friends. Don't stand behind gamblers and watch them. It's rude. Have I mentioned that travel guides suck? Planned fun isn't. There's adventure everywhere, if you know how to find it. When in doubt, avoid societally designated "fun activities."

Las Vegas, NV to Santa Monica, CA

Sunday, May 31, 1998

I decided to head back to the Hoover Dam and check it properly, for the Eco Terrorist demo level. I figured the best place to find books about it is probably the gift shop itself — I doubt there are many new books coming out about it. I may be able to find some info in old Scientific American articles (maybe they'll have their index on line, at their web site), and maybe there'll be some out of print books in some of the bigger libraries (U of T, Carnegie Libraries of Pittsburgh, U of Pitt), but this is my best chance. Also, I wanted to take some pictures in better lighting, get the power lines and towers, etc. I was also hoping to take a tour and some pictures of the inside. So off I headed on the half hour ride to the dam.

I got there just as a tour was starting. I quickly walked to the visitors center — and saw a huge crowd of people ready to take the tour. I was thinking about how much I hate crowds at about the same time I notice a long line to buy tickets. There's no way I could even have bought a ticket in time. So I looked around the welcome center, took some pictures from outside (slides!) and rummaged through the gift shop for some books. I found two, one old one (originally published

around the time it was built, in the 30s), and a more recent one. The old one is great, it has lots of diagrams, even a topological map of the land around the lake and river. The new one has some good colour pictures, including a good picture of the generators.

Half an hour went by and I thought of going on the next tour, but decided I really didn't like crowds, and since I only had \$12 cash left, I'd rather keep the \$8. So I packed up my camera and headed back through Las Vegas to Sunny California!

Heading out of Las Vegas, the only reasonable route is Interstate 15 to Interstate 10, which goes right to Santa Monica. It didn't take long for me to notice the huge numbers of cars — like rush hour traffic, except on a Sunday afternoon in the middle of nowhere. It must be people returning to L.A. from a weekend in Las Vegas.

Just out of Vegas I saw signs for cheap food in Primm, a small town near the California border. Determined to get a famous Nevada cheap meal, I stopped for lunch. The place was as busy as the road. It was another casino, and the slot machines were busy even now. They advertised \$2.99 for three pieces of fried chicken. It turns out that was just a special, their other food prices were more normal, but I didn't care, I ate my fried chicken and was gone. Success!

A little while later, around four pm, I got my first taste of California highway driving. Outside the tiny town of Barstow, CA, traffic literally stopped, then crawled along at five miles an hour. I was in a rush hour traffic jam ON SUNDAY IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE! It went on for almost two hours like this, although different speeds, once as high as 30 miles per hour. In that hour and 45 minutes I had only managed 30 miles. By this point I was supremely annoyed. I was beginning to hate California.

The rest of the ride was pretty uneventful. I eventually hit Interstate 10, and from there on it was urban. At some point I came over a hill, and saw Los Angeles stretched out before me in the twilight of the setting sun, red and orange clouds over it, enveloped in mist. It looked kind of beautiful, if you tried to forget that the mist was actually smog.

Then I pulled into Santa Monica and called Gordon Moyes [The Grandmaster of Funk!] from a gas station. He was my office-mate-to-be and my crash pad provider for the next few days. He was a quite agreeable chap, Australian, with a healthy sense of sarcasm and, at least outwardly, fatalism. He even called me a "bastard" in that first phone call (if I remember correctly): we were trying to decide what to do for dinner, and after a silence said "Mahtin, you bahstid! I'd just given up on you and put a dinner in the microwave!" (I took it in the joking spirit it was intended.) We decided to go out for dinner anyways. He showed me the Third Street Promenade, where the teenage goths, punks, hippies and other freaks come to stare at the twenty-something yuppies, and vice versa. We got a slice of pizza, then stopped at a microbrewery and paid too much for a very tasty beer, while discussing the project we'd be working on (which changed two days later). Then it was off to sleep at his apartment as the day, and my trip, drew to a close.