



Come along with us...



Blog Post #2: MISSOURI

Greetings from the Show Me State!

Late afternoon finds us in Joplin, MO – a bit weary but in no way fatigued by the road! Storm clouds are on the approach, perhaps ready to abate the hot and humid days we've experienced since leaving Illinois. TJ has ventured into town for a coffee blast, and to track down some gear for the car. The 'Stang seems to roll along with energy and power... but, based on the slightly anguished look on TJ's face as we left Carthage earlier, maybe it's time to expect the unexpected... I'm sitting by the motel pool just now, enjoying the sky, watching the cars speed by, and reflecting on our great discoveries in Missouri.

Perhaps because we both live in urban areas, and our trip's point of departure was Chicago, we were very tuned in to towns and built environments as we made our way south through Illinois. The vintage structures, the signage – even the variations on asphalt – fed our curiosity and hunger for visual details. Happily, Missouri has taken us in a different direction. An anchor for this leg of the journey was a college friend of TJ's who works at the Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla. Our plan was to meet Trolley in St. Louis, and drive the state with him. Unfortunately, a last-minute crisis pulled Trolley off the Mother Road. Ever the gracious host, he provided us with tips for food and diversions from St. Louis to Rolla – where we were finally able to meet up. Of course, our stop in St. Louis began with a pilgrimage to Gateway Arch. Another nearby institution that we couldn't pass up was the Eat Right Diner at 622 Chouteau. In the course of our walk to the diner it began to rain, which proved lucky for us. That meant very few customers for a late lunch. We found two stools next to each other (12 are available when Eat Rite is empty), and fortified ourselves with bottomless cups of coffee and a Slinger for TJ (2 eggs, hash browns and a hamburger patty smothered in chili or gravy). Ah – the true riches of cheap eats! When the weather cleared, we visited the historic Chain of Rocks Bridge, and also spied the old "66" Park In Theater. Although we were running late into the day, TJ insisted that (per Trolley's suggestion), we stop at Ted Drewes for a concrete. As TJ dutifully flipped over his large cup with spoon inserted (contents and utensil indeed did not budge from the container), I laughed at the thought of him and Trolley doing macrobiotics and cleanses in their college days...

About that different direction. We've been so taken by the natural beauty of Missouri's landscapes – and have wanted to be out of the car more than in it as we continued into the heart of this passage. Any chance we had to get out and explore on foot was more temptation than we could master. Another anchor on this stretch of the road has been a small collection of Route 66 guidebooks – and, we've been reading Mark Twain aloud to each other. Huck Finn, Jim, Tom Sawyer and Puddin' Head

Wilson have been tag alongs in the car. Eureka indulged us with a morning of history and hiking at the Route 66 State Park. The Bridgehouse Inn (a 1935 roadhouse), serves as the visitor center, and welcomed us with memorabilia and an overview of the the area's environmental story. In Pacific we had a true taste of Americana at the Red Cedar Inn. Formerly a hotel, the structure now houses a restaurant that hit the spot for a late afternoon meal. Barn advertising near Caffeyville heralded the Meramec Caverns outside of Stanton. Learning that this was a hiding place in the 1870s for Jesse James and his crew added to the adventure of seeing Stage Curtain, a 70 million year-old "mineral cascade" (90' H x 50' W). Who could resist the Jesse James Museum and the Antique Toy Museum (... correct you are... not us!). In Rolla, Trolley made up for his earlier absence by showing us around the campus – including the local homage to Stonehenge (we all joked about feeling a sudden yen to watch "This Is Spinal Tap"...). Perhaps the best part of the day was hiking the trails at Lane Springs, and feasting on a picnic lunch. The hours melted away, and we felt like we could have been in an earlier decade, faithful roadster taking a rest while we took a deep breath of fragrant freedom. No schedules, no appointments and no commitments. To end the day, Trolley treated us to an evening repast at A Slice of Pie.

Onward next through Devil's Elbow and the Big Cut area. The Elbow names a bend in the Big Piney River where tree trunks accumulate. One can easily understand why this was a favorite Ozarks resort spot in the 1930s-40s. After hiking (and some splashing in the river), we visited Wrink's Market in Lebanon. Drinks and sandwiches in hand (not to mention some toxic but tasty eats for the road), we talked with the counter help and soaked in the lively story of this long-time oasis. Yesterday we toured around in Springfield, starting with a curbside view of the Shrine Mosque – Abou Ben Adhem. For some reason this reminded me of the Corn Palace in Mitchell, SD. Why – I have no clue! We also did a self-guided public art and sculpture tour, and carefully tracked Route 66 through town. Trolley had recommended that if we were tentative about the local restaurant choices, our go-to spot should be Steak 'n Shake. After a trip to Crystal Cave and a round of miniature golf at Fun Acre Miniature Golf, we fell into the first Steak 'n Shake that crossed our path. At this regional favorite, we shared Steakburger Shooters, and had side by side shakes.

On the way into Joplin, we were thrilled to stumble upon an incredible Thomas Hart Benton mural at the City Hall. This was a great companion piece to the murals we saw in Cuba. As an artist, these exemplars of history and community definitely gave TJ the itch to pick up his paint brushes. Alas, it's the web design work that pays the bills handsomely.

So, heartened by all the gifts that came to us in Missouri – scenic treasures, wonderful diversions, good friends and – of course – good food, we'll be quickly through Kansas and then on to my beloved Southwest.

More soon – take care and be well!