Accidental Tourist

GLOWING TO AMERICA

Discovering small-town USA was a trip of lights fantastic

W e left New Orleans one day after Christmas. The tornado warning from the previous day had been lifted, but it was still windy, causing the rain to strike sideways into the shuttered wooden doors of bars closed hours ago. The pre-dawn drive through the streets of this hedonistic city brought back memories of the previous two nights and we knew it was time to leave. We needed a dose of small-town America.

Our chosen route led us north, hugging the Mississippi River’s west bank, along the aptly named River Road. We snaked along, all the while smug in our snubbing of the much faster, but less charming Louisiana highway system. We passed several tiny towns, and were reminded by signs posted in each one that we were sinners and that only the Baptist church could save us now (how did they know what we had done in New Orleans?).

After over four hours, but only 200km, we stopped for lunch in Plaquemine. We turned down the offer of a starter (having learnt to do so early on in the restaurant. We turned down the offer of a baguette filled with a mountain of cheese and a jambalaya). The town was the location for some BMW ads and the town was a giant American flag in red, blue and white, and the rain had all but stopped. These were pleasant driving conditions, made all the more agreeable by a Paul Simon CD on repeat (“The Mississippi Delta, shoring like a national guitar”) and the discovery of more small towns. We took in the outskirts of Alexandria at sunset and then sped along Interstate 49 in the ‘90s and Bette Davis almost bought what they now call the town; and various Christmas animations depicted trotting horses, Santa in motion and faux fireworks were being hailed, of course — read “Welcome to the City of Lights”. It flashed at us repeatedly, as if to say, “You see? This is what travelling is all about — being surprised when you least expect to be.”

By this stage the night air was now warmer and there was a calm that came with strolling through the town amid the fairy lights; the signs to the historic town centre, we had to get through. I had to get through some crowds before I found my friends and a welcoming towel.

We ended up having that long-awaited meal on the town; and a welcoming towel. We ended up having that long-awaited meal of the much faster, but less charming Louisiana highway system. We passed several tiny towns, and were reminded by signs posted in each one that we were sinners and that only the Baptist church could save us now (how did they know what we had done in New Orleans?).

My Kind of Holiday

Where did you spend your last holiday? Antarctica. I climbed Mount Vinson and then skied the last degree to the South Pole.

What was the best thing you did while there? The entire trip was an amazing adventure. I went with good friends, with whom I’ve done many crazy expeditions in the past. It was led by Sean Disney from ADI, by far the best and most experienced mountain and polar guide in South Africa. The best part was the time spent with this team and the laughs and support that took place in the harsh and cold conditions.

Your favourite city abroad, and why? I have many cities. I call favourites but one that was a bit different and stood out was Anchorage in Alaska. To be clear, I was there in summer so I got to experience the city and sights at their best and enjoy the 24-hour daylight.

What must a first-time visitor see there? During the day, go white-water rafting, salmon fishing and hiking in the forests. At night there are plenty of bars and restaurants that are all unique and attract some interesting people, who seem to have come out of a long winter hibernation to celebrate that there is some sun.

What should they not bother with? Don’t pack glitzy, glamorous clothing. This place is down-to-earth and rustic. Gents, the longer your beard is, the better you will fit in.

And your worst? What happened? Shopping in Bangkok with my wife. Need I say more?

The best thing you have been given on holiday — or pinch from a hotel? A warm bath in Kathmandu after spending six weeks on Mount Everest without washing.

Have you had any embarrassing moments as a traveller? Skinny-dipping on New Year’s Eve at a huge beach party in Sowalana Bay. When I came out of the sea, my clothes had been stolen. I had to get through some crowds before I found my friends and a welcoming towel.

Your best piece of travel advice? See some countryside; you can combine this with most city visits.

One travel destination you would call “never again”? Tingery in Tibet, the stray dogs that roam the streets rule.

Andy van der Velde is an extreme adventurer and explorer.