

Accidental Tourist

NICK
PIPER

GLOWING TO AMERICA

Discovering small-town USA was a trip of lights fantastic

WE 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 (population 7 064). This somewhat scenic town was the location for some BMW ads in the '90s and Bette Davis almost bought a house here in the '60s. A non-descript entrance led us into a non-descript restaurant. We turned down the offer of a starter (having learnt to do so early on in our travels around the US) and went straight for a po boy, which is essentially a baguette filled with a mountain of deep-fried seafood — heaven for 20 minutes, hell for the next two hours. Saying "goodbye y'all" to the pleasant staff, we made the reluctant decision to

make up some time on Louisiana Highway 1 and hoped this wouldn't give us the same heartburn as that po boy.

By this stage in the day, the wind had died 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, shining 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 search of a place to spend the night.

The off-ramp for Natchitoches (inconceivably pronounced "nuk-ee-desh", as we later learnt) was a welcome sight one hour into darkness. Although not feeling unsafe, we were short on petrol and keen for a drink to cap off a day on the road. The town (population 18 323) didn't offer much to us at first, bar the pleasing campus of the Northwestern State University, but we had yet to discover its *pièce de résistance*. Following the signs to the historic town centre, we quite suddenly arrived at a river waterfront absolutely strewn with a ridiculous number of fairy lights. There was a giant American flag in red, blue and white lights; at least 10 life-size nativity scenes involving people, animals

and angels; lights spelling out the name of the town; and various Christmas messages. All the trees were lit up, the promenade was glowing, and light animations depicted trotting horses, Santa in motion and faux fireworks were everywhere. It was a scaled-down, subtle, Christmassy version of Times Square or even, for want of a better analogy, Las Vegas Boulevard. A sign in between it all — lit up, 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." The night air was now warmer and there was a calm that came with strolling through the town amid the fairy lights; people seemed to talk in whispers.

We ended up having that long-awaited beer and ordered two or three of Natchitoches' famous meat pies for good measure. Holed up in a cosy bar overlooking the river for several hours, we felt far removed from New Orleans. We were, for those few hours, exactly where we wanted to be. — © Nick Piper

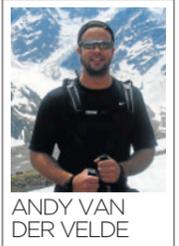


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My Kind of Holiday

Where did you spend your last holiday?

Antarctica. I climbed Mount Vinson and then skied the last degree to the South Pole.

ANDY VAN
DER VELDE

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 pinched 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 Sodwana 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

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