

Riding the Perimeter of Virginia

By Dr. Richard J. Atkins #93162

When planning travel, my first choice is always to go on two wheels. With that in mind, I earmarked the third and fourth weeks in May for vacation. A client had asked me to conduct customer service training on May 15 and 16 in Ann Arbor, so I had to give up that week for business. I did manage to keep the final week of the month, the one leading to Memorial Day, “sacred” and free of commitments.



My travel destination was a clear choice – I was determined to ride the Skyline Drive and Blue Ridge Parkway again. The genesis of this journey came from an event a year earlier. In April 2005, I successfully defended my doctoral dissertation in front of a committee of scholars. I promised myself that I would explore these two roads (and others) as a reward for my success.

My cousin, Thom Vagt, expressed interest in joining me for that trip. He was unable, but pledged that he would join me “on the next one.” For the remaining 13 months, we called each other and visited together, all the while talking and planning.

To be fair, I made sure that my wife and children also enjoyed some time away from home during the time I would be gone. We arranged for them to fly to Charleston for a visit with some friends who live there.

After dropping the Atkins clan at LaGuardia Airport on Monday, May 22, I had time to take care of some last-minute business and errands and check to see that my R1150R was properly prepared and ready to go. All the gear was in place, so it was time to leave town.

A trip out of state for this Long Islander usually means a ride on the infamous Long Island Expressway (495). Fortunately, on a clear day after rush hour, the roads were somewhat less congested. Exiting the LIE where Calvary and New Calvary cemeteries stretch for as far as the eye can see, I joined the Brooklyn-Queens

Expressway (278) and took the Manhattan Bridge into the island-city. For those who know the three East River lower-Manhattan crossings by name, an easy way to remember their order is in using the acronym BMW (Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Williamsburg—south to north).

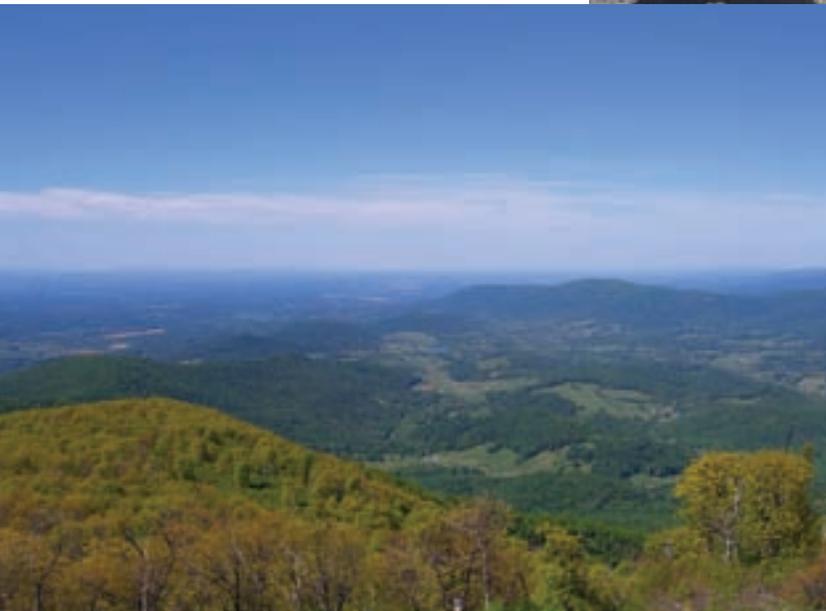
Taking Canal Street through Chinatown, I left New York City via the Holland Tunnel and made my way to east and south, around Harrisburg and Baltimore, ultimately arriving at the home of my cousin and friend in Oakton, Virginia.

As a way of celebrating his 50th birthday, Thom rented a motorcycle for a week to take this adventure-journey with me. Before going, we committed to strive for excellence in riding, lodging, cigars, and meals. We started that night with

some excellent Indian cuisine at Fairfax’s Bombay Bistro.

Thom with his mindwrap.com, and I with my improvingcommunications.com both worked all morning the next day. Early in the day, Thom picked up his rental motorcycle (a Harley-Davidson). Finally, the time came to hit the road. It was Noon and we were ready to go on vacation. We started from Thom’s house in Oakton and left on 66 (Custis Memorial Parkway) headed to Front Royal.

As it was past lunch time, we stopped at the Fox Diner for a couple of burgers and then entered the 105-mile Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park. We spent many hours on the cycles, pulled over for snacks and a couple of Nat Sherman cigars at the Byrd Visitors Center





Outside Jefferson Hotel.



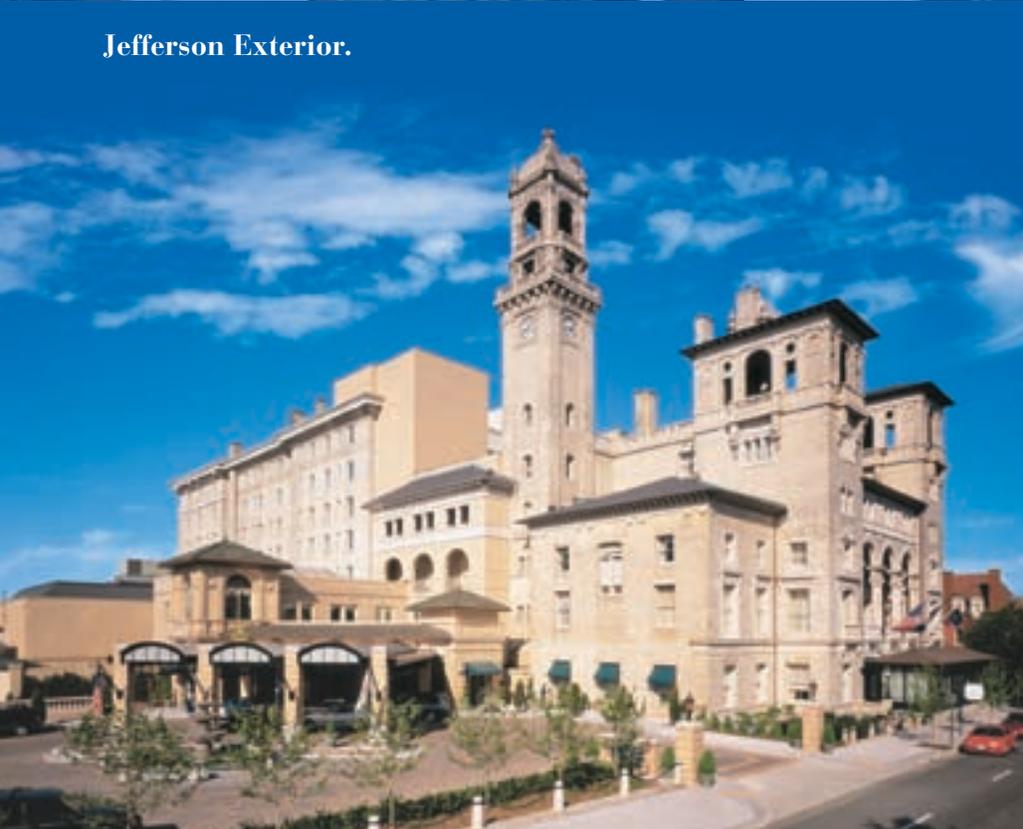
Jefferson Lobby.



Stonewall Jackson.



Shenandoah National Park.



Jefferson Exterior.



Hotel Roanoke.

Virginia

(and even checked the laptop for some electronic mapping directions).

Skyline Drive winds along the crests of the Blue Ridge Mountains. To the west is the Shenandoah Valley. To the east is the rolling Piedmont area. We took advantage of the plentiful scenic turnouts, which provide views in all directions. Amidst the spectacle of vistas, mountains, valleys, ridges, and forests, we noted and enjoyed (and avoided hitting) the deer, birds, flora, fauna, and waterfalls. The air was crisp, the skies were clear, and the temperature was mid-70s. Could it get any better?

Exiting the drive and taking Route 64 to the west, we spent the night in Staunton (pronounced STAN-ton), the birthplace of Woodrow Wilson. An excellent room at the Stonewall Jackson Hotel (www.stonewalljacksonhotel.com) provided us with a short walk across the street for dinner at the Old Mill, the site of the Mill Street Grill. We dined on Oysters Rockefeller, salads, prime rib, and barbecued ribs.

Wednesday morning started with a breakfast of pancakes in the hotel's dining room. We had a late morning again—due to work! After refueling the motorcycles

and a lunch at Five Guys Burgers & Fries in Staunton, we got underway for the day. Back on the Blue Ridge Parkway, we continued south with no specific destination in mind.

The road's construction was authorized in the 1930s as a Depression-era public works project. The Parkway connects Shenandoah National Park in Virginia with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina. The 469 miles in between are all National Park property. We stopped early on in the day at a picnic ground near Humpback Gap and enjoyed some Edge cigars by Rocky Patel under the tree cover.

Sometimes called "America's Favorite Drive," the Blue Ridge Parkway is the most visited unit of America's National Park System. According to the National Park Service Web site (www.nps.org), "Spring is a wonderful time to visit and May is probably the best overall month for seeing the variety of wildflowers that dominate the roadsides and trails." Clearly, our trip through the southern Appalachian Mountains was well timed!

Exiting the Parkway, we took 221 into Roanoke and stayed at the historic Hotel Roanoke (www.hotelroanoke.com), a Doubletree property. Built in 1882, this is an impressive structure. In addition to

that, the city of Roanoke has undergone a considerable revitalization in recent years. This is a "must return" destination.

We dined at Trio Bistro, a combination bar, restaurant, and wine store. Our meal consisted of Trio's Signature Salad, Southwestern-Style Calamari served with a Chipotle cream and salsa rojo, and a Shrimptini (jumbo shrimp with lump crab meat served with remoulade and cocktail sauces. The night was completed with Bolivar Cigars on the veranda of the Hotel Roanoke.

Thursday we started with breakfast in the hotel VIP lounge. After leaving Roanoke, we reentered the Blue Ridge Parkway for the last time on this trip. Below Floyd, at Tuggle gap, we exited and took Route 8 on a twisting decent, through reverse-camber hairpin turns on the way down, all the while, paying close attention to the recently-milled asphalt. In Woolwine, we stopped to have double burgers at the Brick House Café. After lunch, we got onto 40, (Franklin Street)—and its curves—through Ferrum and as far as Rocky Mount.

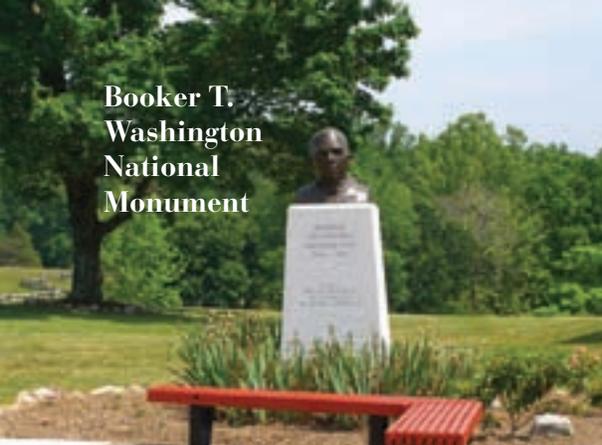
We were riding through the heart of Franklin County, the "Moonshine Capital of the World" (a name earned during Prohibition and trumpeted today by the local chamber of commerce). We took



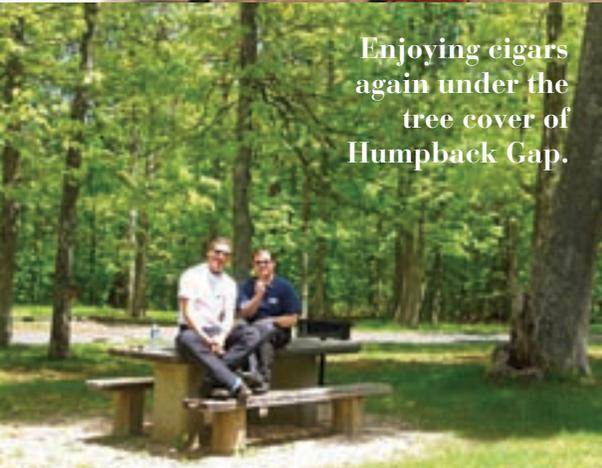
Blue Ridge Parkway.



Booker T. Washington National Monument



Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel



The Blue Ridge Parkway



Virginia

122—Booker T. Washington Highway—and stopped along the way at the national monument dedicated to the leader, educator, and author. Further along we came to Smith Mountain Lake, where we stopped right on the lake to have Camacho Corajo cigars and discuss events and the surrounding area with two officers from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

Back on the road again, we continued on 122 and made a right on 24. Ultimately, we ended up on 460 and headed for Appomattox (where 24 meets 460), which offered little in the line of appealing lodging. Stopping for a coffee and a snack in the historic town, we decided to forge ahead to Petersburg. My map software showed plenty of hotels there. On the way, near-death experiences were averted at a gas station, where, instead of gas going inside my fuel tank, the flammable liquid flowed freely all over my hot motorcycle. Meanwhile, a tree truck nearly backed over Thom's.

Shaken (and stirred), we arrived in Petersburg, and determined it was not where we wanted to stay. Tired and sore, we forged on to Richmond, where we checked into the Thomas Jefferson Hotel (www.jeffersonhotel.com). A late dinner at TJ's Restaurant in the hotel included parmesan crusted Virginia oysters with caper tarragon aioli, Jefferson peanut soup, traditional Caesar salad with aged asiago and herbed croutons, lobster pot pie, and veal steak. This was followed by AVO Signature cigars in the hotels Rotunda, which showcases the famous staircase that appeared in David O. Selznick's *Gone With the Wind*.

Friday started with breakfast in the room – eggs, bacon, and hash browns. We checked out and started riding again. Exiting Richmond via 5 south, which turns into the John Tyler memorial Highway, we enjoyed beautiful roads and comfortable tree cover. Turning right on 199 brought us to the Cheatham Annex Naval Supply Center (on the map, it's called the United States Naval Weapons Station). When the gun-toting gatekeepers saw us coming, they explained that the signs for the Colonial National Historic Parkway were knocked down in an accident and never repaired.

After a ride on the Colonial Parkway, we joined the overcrowded Route 64 through Hampton and Norfolk and exited to take the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, a four-lane 20-mile-long crossing of the lower Chesapeake Bay. Officially named the Lucius J. Kellam, Jr. Bridge-Tunnel, it provides the only direct link between Mainland Virginia and the Delmarva Peninsula. The series of low-level trestles are interspersed with two one-mile-long tunnels. Not only is it convenient, but it's also a tourist attraction. From there, we took Route 13 all the way up and past the Maryland line. After a stop for some clams and crab cakes, we were back on the road headed for Bozman, the place of Thom's weekend home, Trader's Point.

During the last half hour of riding, the skies opened up. This was it—we were

Dinner that night was with well-known author, journalist, and television personality Bengt Göranson, and his wife, Lisa. Tuna tartare, grilled ribeye steaks, asparagus, and “kitchen sink” salad provided an excellent base for the delicious homemade birthday cake to celebrate Thom's fiftieth year. Incidentally, Bengt Göranson is the irreverent author of *Hurray for Sweden* and *Hurray for the USA*, among many, many other claims to fame. That overnight was spent at Trader's Point.

Sunday morning, after a breakfast of eggs and bacon, jams and jellies, and fresh bread, we enjoyed a couple of Excalibur 1066 cigars and said our goodbyes. Driving through Easton, Federalsburg, Bridgeton, and Georgetown, I made my way to the Cape May-Lewes Ferry. From the base of the Garden State Parkway, I was

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done! Running out of gas and steam on routes 50, 322, and 33, we arrived at Fair Point Play Farm, owned by friends Udo and Cornelia. Here was a chance to stop, tank up, have an espresso, and charge the proverbial batteries.

We borrowed their truck, went to pick up Thom's boat, drove it to the water and deposited it. Dinner that night was at Chesapeake Landing. A spectacular crab dip and steamed clams were served as appetizers. Then, a spinach salad was topped off by a serving of crab cakes and stuffed rockfish.

After breakfast and shopping in St. Michaels for a few hours on Saturday, we took a boat ride to Tilghman Island for an enjoyable lunch at Bay Hundred Restaurant. Softshell crab sandwiches were the order of the day. In addition, I ordered oysters served with a delicious salsa.

about 185 miles from home. Clearly, I would need to stop for dinner.

After passing through Manhattan again, I exited the BQE at Queens Boulevard and made my way to the Kebab King, on 37th and Roosevelt Avenues. A chicken Makhani and mixed vegetables dinner, with some rice and naan insured that I would not arrive home hungry.

Finally, I was on my way back home. Port Washington is a town that F. Scott Fitzgerald referred to as “East Egg.” Motorcycle rides through the tree-lined streets of Sands Point and along the water accentuated the words of his 1925 offering: “The white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water.” It's always reassuring to return to the familiar—and home is that for probably all of us. Being away for a period of time may be the very reminder of why it is my refuge. ●