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Arkansas Blues

In search of a dry King Biscuit festival.

FAVORITE RIDE



Three tourists view the Mississippi River from the River Walk in Helena.

Rain.

After a solid month of dry weather, the weekend I had plans for a motorcycle trip, it rained. And rained. So we set back the start of our trip by a day, during which a lot of water fell on our little town of Benton, Arkansas. By some accounts, up to 6 inches. That's a lot of rain.

It was raining the next day, too, but just barely when we pulled out of town headed for Helena, Arkansas, and the King Biscuit Blues Festival, held annually on the second weekend in October. A 20-mile jaunt northeast on Interstate 30 took us to the other side of Little Rock, where we picked up the two-lane U.S. 70 for about 70 miles of flat, straight riding into the Arkansas delta region. Leaving U.S. 70 just before Brinkley, we took Arkansas 17, 241 and U.S. 49 southeast to finally hit U.S. 79 right at Monroe.

Shelia, my wife and riding buddy, is a native of the area and was giving me directions during all of this. Most went something like "turn right here and then turn left on the first paved road." Following the highway signs works just as well, but area natives frown on that.

We wound up at Cleo's Restaurant in Marianna for lunch. Cleo doesn't have a bad item on his menu, but his fried catfish is the best. On Friday night most

of the town heads for Cleo's for fish. It's a local tradition, and a good one. We ordered ours and were not disappointed when the sizzling catfish filets arrived, accompanied by crispy hushpuppies and homemade coleslaw.

From there we went to one of the town's three stoplights, turned left, and headed out Arkansas 1 to Walnut Corner, where we turned left again and headed east on U.S. 49 to Helena. We parked near Cherry Street, the length of which was dotted with stages and vendor booths. We made our way up the street to the main blues stage where Big Jesse Yawn was singing.

A sea wall sits atop the levee and separates the town from the Mississippi River, although I think the river would have to rise about 30 feet to be in danger of swamping the levee. It was painted a few years ago by local artist Larry Spakes with a blues theme. The audience for the main blues stage sits on the levee on blankets, folding chairs or on the ground to watch the shows. There are several smaller stages along the street where most just stand to watch the show.

Besides the official stages, many of the street corners featured aspiring blues masters playing out of guitar cases with tin cups for collecting tips. The rain, which was nearly constant, didn't seem to bother anyone.

We strolled in to the Delta Cultural Center to discover a musician named Doc Williamson wearing out the ivories on a keyboard while wailing out blues songs.



FAVORITERIDE



Big Jesse Yawn belts out the blues for an appreciative audience from the main stage of the King Biscuit Blues Festival.

His raspy voice sounded like it had been burnished with years of whiskey and cigarettes, although it may have just been a fortunate confluence of singing genes. His electric-purple suit and black fedora with an electric-purple band gave appropriate visual cues to his musical heritage. Williamson did justice to Unchain My Heart, She Put a Spell on You and The Thrill is Gone, along with some other hard-core blues songs.

Back at the bike we saddled up and went just a few blocks before stopping at one of the several antebellum mansions in the town. It's now a B&B called Magnolia Hill. A few doors down is the Pillow-Thompson house, another antebellum home, which belongs to the University of Arkansas. The university gives tours of the grand home, but we got there about an hour too late that day to get a look around.

Next stop was supper at Armstrong's. This restaurant specializes in barbecue, and it is among the best

in the region. I had a jumbo chopped pork sandwich with mild sauce (the hot sauce is delicious but removes two or three layers of skin from your tongue). Shelia opted for a chopped pork plate.

We had accomplished everything on our list for day one of the trip, so we headed for my mother-in-law's home in Aubrey, another 30-mile ride, retracing part of our path up U.S. 49 to Walnut Corner, then Arkansas 1 to Cypress Corner. We turned left on Arkansas 121 at Cypress Corner, which took us to Aubrey.

Day two was to include a run to Bear Creek Lake, the McClendon, Mann and



Doc Williamson hammers out some soulful tunes.

Felton Gin and the Louisiana Purchase State Park. But my camera jammed after my last picture of the

previous day and it was raining, raining, raining when we got ready to go, so I tanked those plans. I

decided to come back the following weekend and hit those spots, hopefully with some sunshine. We retraced our route and rode in the rain all the way back to Benton.

What a difference a week makes. On the following Saturday morning I set out to accomplish my original goals for day two of the trip, which also included the sinewy road in east Arkansas out to Bear Creek Lake. My riding buddy opted to stay behind and spend the day shopping. That meant I had complete control over the radio. Sweet!

I went the same route as before, taking a short run down U.S. 49 to the Louisiana Purchase State Park. The park itself consists mainly of a raised wooden walkway which allows folks to walk over the swamp area to the Louisiana Purchase marker. There are several historical plaques placed along



Tours are available of the Pillow-Thompson home, an antebellum home owned by the University of Arkansas.

the way. The stone marker sits in the middle of the swamp, with little in the way of fanfare to note its presence. It is located at the junction of Lee, Monroe and Phillips Counties and shows the point from which the Louisiana Purchase surveys started. The L'An-guille Chapter of the National Society



Cotton gins in operation at the McClendon, Mann and Felton Gin.



My Voyager parked at the end of the levee at Bear Creek Lake.

Daughters of the American Revolution in Marianna placed the marker in 1926 after the discovery of the gum trees that were marked by the initial surveyors in 1815.

After leaving the park I headed north on Highway 49, then east on Highway 79 toward Marianna, where I stopped at the McClendon, Mann and Felton Gin.



The Louisiana Purchase marker, located in a swamp near Blackton, Arkansas.

It is a large gin and has a lot of automation, giving it a capacity of 75-80 bales of cotton per hour, according to gin co-owner Larry McClendon.

"We can gin 80 bales per hour

pretty comfortably," he said. During ginning season it will produce 1,500-1,600 bales per day. McClendon welcomes visitors to the gin and frequently gives tours. If you want one, don't call first. "Just stop by. I don't like formality," he said.

After that it was a quick jaunt out Arkansas 44 to Bear Creek, on what I have found to be the only winding paved road in east Arkansas. A short seven miles later and I had crossed the dam at Bear Creek. This man-made lake in the middle of the St. Francis National Forest, at 20,946 acres, is the smallest national forest in the United States. I stopped near the boat launch area, took some pictures, then began my trip back home. Along the way I also stopped at Hazen on U.S. 70 to get some pictures of the Riceland grain elevator there, an impressive edifice. Then it was non-stop to Benton.

It was 300 great miles on a day made for riding. I'm looking forward to next year, when I'll take another blues festival delta tour. 37



The Riceland grain storage facility at Hazen on Highway 70.