

From the Back Seat: The Pillion Report

Day #1: Saturday, April 21st – We rise bright and early to start our 2012 summer vacation to West Texas. It's a nice early morning ride and we stop for a late breakfast of bacon and eggs. After making a couple more stops for fuel, we arrive at our destination for Day #1 – The Stockyards in Fort Worth, TX.



After getting the bike parked and tucked away for the night, we freshened up and head out to join the crowd lining the streets to watch the 4:00 p.m. cattle drive of Texas Longhorns. This is the second of two cattle drives done daily with the first drive running at 11:30 a.m.

We watch as the cowboys drive the herd down East Exchange Avenue to the sound of spurs jingling, cattle bawling and hoofs clacking on the brick street. Imagine how it must have been back in the day when herds made their way down the streets of Fort Worth on their way to market.



After watching the cattle drive, we dine on a prime rib dinner before returning to the Stockyard to take a few more pictures of the herd of Longhorns in the corral located behind the Livestock Exchange Building.



Our evening entertainment is box seats at the Championship Rodeo. It is always FUN and exciting watching man vs beast. It's an evening of roping, barrel racing and the ultimate 8 second challenge of a cowboy bull riding.



The surprise of the evening was hearing the rodeo announcer invite all attendees to stop next door at Billy Bob's Texas, the world's largest honky-tonk. We were granted free admission with our rodeo ticket stubs. We watch a dance floor full of couples doing the latest country dancing while waiting to be seated to a live performance by John Rich, who is half of the country duo "Big & Rich". What a wonderful surprise and end of a great day!



We retire to our wonderful room at the Stockyard Hotel. The room is decorated in true Texas style complete with a cow skull and horns hanging above our bed. Mooooooooooooooooow!

Day #2: April 22nd – This is another great day of riding and enjoying the views and landscape of the great state of Texas. We arrive in Marathon and check into the Gage Hotel. The building was

built in 1927 for Alfred Gage to be a hotel and ranch headquarters for his 500,000-acre ranch. Our room is lovely and decorated with artifacts and authentic furnishings from Mexican, Native American and cowboy cultures.



After a refreshing shower, we dine next door at the “12 Gage Restaurant”. Dinner is a wonderful wild game meal of quail, antelope and wild boar sausage.



Day #3: April 23rd – We rise early to complete the 70 mile ride out to Big Bend National Park. About five miles from Marathon, we come upon a group of javelinas (wild boars) which I am able to snap a quick picture of before they run into the brush. As we go through a U.S. Border Patrol inspection station, we spot a lone javelina by the road. We turn the motorcycle around to get a picture of this javelina (that appears to be bigger than the ones in the group we just photographed) but were flagged back to the inspection station by the border patrol. They told us

motorists are not allowed to stop in this area. Fortunately, I was able to get a quick picture of the lone javelina before we continued on our journey to Big Bend National Park.



The park is more than 800,000 acres in southwest Texas. The Rio Grande runs through the park and forms the international boundary between Mexico and the United States. The view is spectacular with rugged mountains towering into the sky.



We arrive first at a visitor center, store and fueling station at a location called Panther Junction. We stop for a quick break and look around the visitor's center before heading on to the Chisos

Mountains Lodge. It is too early to check into our rooms, so we have breakfast at the restaurant before heading out to explore the East side of the park.



Our first stop of the afternoon was the Rio Grande Village. There was a small store where we enjoy a snickers ice cream bar. There, we take a short hike down to the Rio Grande River. This was our first view of the river where there is a small boat dock and a few campsites.

We get back on the motorcycle and ride over to Boquillas Canyon. We hike the 1.4 mile trail that begins with a short climb, then descends a sandy path to the river and ends near a huge sand dune slide. At the beginning of the trail there are the standard warning signs to hikers regarding safety, carrying plenty of water, the danger of wild animals, etc. But, I was puzzled by an additional sign that warned it is illegal to purchase items from Mexican Nationalists. These items can be confiscated and violators prosecuted. After a short distance, we come around a corner on the trail to find a group of small trinkets on a rocky ledge. Wow!!! The citizens of Mexico cross the Rio Grande to set up displays of handmade items like walking sticks, jewelry and a collection of small stones and rocks "For Sale". They also have replicas of scorpions and roadrunners handmade from twisted wire and beads. There are price tags on the items ranging from \$2.00 to \$5.00 and a plastic container with a label requesting hikers to purchase some items or make \$ donations. The sign indicates the money will go to help the people of Boquillas, Mexico.



After viewing, but not purchasing, any of the illegal items, we continue on our hike. From the cliff, we enjoy a great view of the Rio Grande. We see a few canoes traveling down the river and a gentleman off in the distance on horseback. As we walk down the trail, we see the guy is now off the horse and on the Mexico side of the Rio Grande. He begins to sing in Spanish “Ay, ay, ay, ay” and stops as we walk on past him. We soon notice another plastic container surrounded by small rocks. On one rock is a note stating “Please make a donation for the singing Mexican, Victor”



We also spot another container close by with a note on a rock asking for donations to be made for the singing Mexican, Jesus. We are not sure if we had a short serenade from Victor or Jesus.



It was an enjoyable hike surrounded by the beauty of the area with sand, rocks, the flowing river and a breeze blowing through our hair. After the hike, we ride back to the lodge to check into our room. The room is small, but clean and no there is no TV. After getting unpacked we check out the area around the lodge and visit with a couple young ladies working in the store. The ladies are probably in their early 20's and work for the park service contractors. Employees working at the Big Bend National Park live in residential areas established around the park for employees only. One young lady has worked in this park for six months and plans to work there for at least another 18 months. They are able to transfer around to other National Parks as openings and positions become available. Mark and I thought it was a great opportunity and exciting adventure for someone young wanting to live in different areas of the country.

After visiting with the young ladies, we decide to ride over to Terlingua (Ghosttown) for dinner. This was a very small, remote town and eating places were very limited. We find an open restaurant. I have a couple brisket tacos and Mark orders a steak. We discover the granddaddy of all chili cook-offs is held right there in Terlingua. This event has been held for around 50 years and draws about 10,000 "chili-heads" to this area on the first Saturday in November. I bet these folks know how to spice up their Chili.



We return to the lodge in time to watch a beautiful sunset through the rock formation known as “The Window”. It’s been a long day, so we retire back to our room for a night’s sleep.



Day #4: April 25th – Today is Mark’s 53rd birthday. We enjoy a nice breakfast at the lodge restaurant before heading out to explore the West side of the park.

Our destination is the “Santa Elena Canyon”. The view is spectacular as we walk the 1.5 mile trail through the canyon. We start out walking along a ridge above the canyon before it drops down to the river.



We take a break and sit on some large boulders, drinking our water and enjoy the magnificent view of the towering canyon walls. This place is simply stunning!



After the hike, we decide to return to the lodge. While riding along, I spot a cow drinking from a stream. I only mention this because on the ride to the canyon Mark noticed “droppings” along the road to indicate that cattle had been in the area. I was almost certain that cattle were nowhere around, but Mark was correct. All I will say about this now is “This farm boy knows his droppings”.

We return to the lodge for a light lunch. We are entertained by a roadrunner outside the restaurant trying his best to find a way inside. A few of the guests take this opportunity to take some close up photos of a roadrunner. But unfortunately, we left our cameras in our hotel room.

We chill out around the lodge the rest of the afternoon and enjoy the view through the rock formation called the Window. We watch as three deer wonder around the parking lot below.

Dinner that night is rainbow trout. We also enjoy a piece of carrot cake in honor of Mark's birthday. Happy Birthday, Mark!

The evening ends with another amazing sunset before returning to our room. We pack most of our items back in the trailer that night to prepare for an early morning departure the next day.

Day #5: April 25th - With our stay at Big Bend complete, we head out of the park around 8:00 am. Along the way back to Marathon, we spot a coyote and a jack rabbit. We stop for breakfast at Johnny B's in Marathon before heading toward San Antonio.



After breakfast, we see a few bicyclists riding along the highway. We come upon flashing lights just outside of Sanderson, TX that appears to be some type of roadblock or inspection. But, we get another surprise on the trip when we are informed motorists are being stopped for about a 20 minute delay while drivers compete in a qualifying run for the “2012 Big Bend Open Road Race”. This type of road racing is currently held in three states; including Texas, Nevada and Nebraska. For more information visit their web site: www.bbrr.com



We get off the bike and remove our helmets and enjoy visiting with a couple other motorists. One motorist is a young guy and he tells us about his car and how he hopes to compete in this event next year. We wish him good luck and may his dream come true.

There are only about 10 cars that arrive for this qualifying run. The organizers stopped us about 50 yards back from the starting line so we could not get close to the cars.

Mark was able to take some good pictures as the drivers arrived and took their places in the starting line. The qualifying run was started with the cars being released one at a time. Minutes later, we are back on the road ourselves.



We stop for lunch and enjoy a brisket sandwich and a cold drink of ice tea and root beer as a little break from the afternoon heat. The hottest temperature we saw that afternoon was 99 degrees. We arrived at our destination, “The Riverwalk Vista Inn” in San Antonio around 5:00 pm. After parking the bike and getting settled in our room, we cooled off with a snack of oatmeal cookies and lemonade.



We had a nice visit with the Innkeeper. She grew up on a farm in Michigan and was retired military. She spent a couple years in Korea in the 80's. Mark could relate to this since he grew up on a farm in Indiana and spent 15 months in Korea during the late 70's.

After this short rest and visit with the Innkeeper, we went outside to explore the city. It was in the middle of a 10-day celebration known as “Fiesta”. The riverwalk was busy with people dining, mariachi bands playing, and boats going up and down the river giving tours.



We decided on dinner at an Italian restaurant before returning to our room for the night.

Day #6: April 26th - We enjoy a relaxing morning on the river walk with breakfast at a Mexican restaurant. While dining, we watched early morning joggers on the river walk. We also watch the maintenance crew water the lush green plants from a boat using water from the river.

After breakfast, we walk around San Antonio. The city is busy preparing for the evening events. A big parade is scheduled for the next day. The streets are lined with bleachers and folding chairs.

We see policemen standing by their modified white/black GL1800 Honda Gold Wing motorcycles. They allowed Mark to take a few photos which he needed to send to a few of his Harley friends.



After walking around and enjoying the sights and sounds of San Antonio, we walk over to the Tower of the Americas. This is a 750 foot observation tower/restaurant. Both of us decide to have the Lobster Grilled Cheese sandwich with Lobster bisque for dipping. It was an amazing meal! We topped it off by sharing their signature dessert “Hot Chocolate Lava Cake”. We preordered this dessert at the beginning of our meal after our server suggested we try it. He explained that it takes 30 minutes to prepare. This dessert was heavenly!

The afternoon is spent checking out the Riverwalk Mall. We decide to check out the comedy club for entertainment that evening. This ended up being a low budget performance with us being 2 of only 13 people in the audience. I am sure it was as long a night for the comedians on stage as it was a long night for the 13 of us watching them.

Day #7: April 27th - We are up and ready to leave San Antonio by 7:00 am. Vendors are already setting up and spectators are marking spots for the parade that afternoon.

It is a cool morning and we ride for a while before stopping at what we thought was a restaurant. Buc-ees but ended up being more of fueling center/gift shop. There were no tables, so we make space on some outdoor grills to eat our breakfast burritos. We also purchased some fresh jerky which reminds me of some we got on our ride by the Great Lakes a few years ago.

Since we left San Antonio early, we get into Houston before lunch time. We stop for ice tea and take a break before going on to the Sullivan’s. John is the foster brother that spent his summers, school breaks and holidays on the farm with the Campbell family. We enjoy a nice visit catching up on events and spent the night in their guest room.



Day #8: April 28th - Seems vacation is almost over as we head out from John and Vickie’s around 7:00 am. It is 650 miles back to our home in Memphis. We enjoy a nice cool ride. Mark

surprises me with lunch at “The Shed” in Scott, LA. Although this is a franchise location, they do the baby back ribs up right... just like the original location in Ocean Springs, MS.

After a couple fuel stops and a break at Chic-fil-a, we arrive back at our home in Hernando, MS around 7:00 p.m.

It was a great vacation! I always enjoy the rides with my best friend.