

Up From the Mouth

I love the feel of the pavement running fast under the tires, the smooth thrust of the engine as it hurls the bike and me down the road. The wind is a white noise that becomes like the noise of the blood rushing in your ears, the noise of the earth turning in the universe.

My brother, Peter, and I were riding I-10, riding east along the Texas coast toward New Orleans. On the Interstate you've got to love the feel of the pavement, cause that's about all that's going on – somehow Interstates always seem to wind their ways through lowest common denominator landscapes. We were riding BMW K1200LT's, and one of their great features is the ability to chew up miles and miles of Interstate.

We had both been jonesing to go on some kind of extended motorcycle trip, and we found four days between Christmas and New Years when we both could get away. One nice thing about living in the South is that you can ride almost year round, and we looked at the trip as a great way to get the heck out of 2001 and launch into 2002.

We planned to go through the Deep Delta Country to the mouth of the Mississippi, or at least get as close as you could get with a couple of big touring bikes (i.e. bikes that don't like to get off the pavement).

We had grown up in New Orleans, and always had a fascination for the delta lands downstream from the city. In his book, *Deep Delta Country*, noted Louisiana historian Harnett T. Kane wrote,

(As) “the Mississippi nears the end of its long travels, it suddenly finds itself in a new land, a region in some ways like no other in the world. From New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico, for one hundred and fifteen miles or so, spreads the river's deep delta.

“The Delta is never fully in balance. Where the soft soil fails to receive a regular renewal from the river, it begins to gradually drop away, dissolving into uncertain marshes, into water-ringed ridges and then into nothing; and the Gulf slips inland, to swallow everything in sight.”

This would be our first trip “as adults” into this area. I was eager to be in the middle of that shifting landscape again, and see if a breeze through on a bike could reveal any of its mystery. Right. Anyway, that was the thought. And Peter was planning on getting some oysters.

The sun was getting low as we approached the outskirts of New Orleans, and a few miles out past the airport, the freeway stopped. Welcome to the Big Easy. Crap.

It took us almost 45 minutes to get downtown. We rode down Canal Street to the river like we were in our own parade, and turned back into the French Quarter. We were going to stay in one of those little courtyard hotels that are so much a part of old New Orleans.

After checking in and getting settled, we went down to the bar to see if Peter could get his first dozen oysters on the half shell. Sorry, sir, we've run out. Run out? Yes sir, we didn't get our delivery today. Bugger. So we headed off into the night.

The French Quarter is a world unto itself. Just walk down the street. If you're hungry, stop when you smell something good. We had ribeyes smothered in some kind

of crabmeat and shrimp sauce. It was amazing. But that restaurant didn't have any oysters on the half shell either.

The French were the first to actually settle in this part of the world. In 1698, a party led by Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville was sailing in the Gulf of Mexico toward the delta, running from a storm.

The Spanish had sailed the Gulf waters around the delta for years before the French arrived, never able to find a passageway into the river. They had told the French that great rocks blocked the mouth, calling it the River of Palisades.

As night approached the French sailors looked ahead to find a frowning barrier of rocks, just as the Spaniards had warned. Iberville decided that grounding near land would be better than getting swamped out at sea so he continued on, his men bracing for a crash. A slight jolt was felt, some scraping sounds heard, and the ship sailed through. The barrier was only a trick of the river – an accumulation of timbers and mud, dried in such a way as to resemble rows of boulders. So Iberville and his party sailed upriver and began the colonization of this new land they named for their king, Louis.

We got on the highway to the Mississippi River Bridge around noon, after spending the morning visiting with our former neighbors. If you like to ride across bridges, this is a good one. It's quite high, so you can see for quite a distance if it's clear.

Shortly after crossing the river, we exited south onto State Highway 23 and drove through Gretna. After what began to feel like an endless succession of stoplights, the road opened up into a nice divided four-lane highway. The highway meets the river here, near what is known as English Turn.

From a motorcycle, English Turn is a wide sweeper, the grassy green levee on the left running parallel to the highway. The road had opened up and the traffic lightened so we could wick it up a little bit through the sweeper.

Presently we came upon Belle Chase. There's a Naval aviation base there, with a full-sized Blue Angel jet mounted right along the highway in front of the main gate. That was worth slowing down for. The jet seemed larger than life, sleek and powerful and deadly and somehow impossible angled there ten feet off the ground, but there it was.

A little further down the road is Jesuit Bend. A Father Paul du Ru had settled here in the late 1690's, building the first church in Louisiana out of wild cane walls and a palmetto roof. Later arrivals brought sugar cane from the Jesuit plantations in Santo Domingo, introducing the crop that would become the basis of Louisiana's agricultural economy. The Jesuits still run an old farm there growing sugar cane and oranges.

This was near the beginning of miles of citrus orchards, mostly naval oranges. The trees were everywhere, rows and rows of their dark green leaves and bright round orange fruit. It seemed that every landowner that had a spare half-acre had put it up in orange trees. Every few miles there would be another roadside stand piled high with orange spheres of varying sizes. The oranges smelled very sweet as we rode along.

Many of the towns along the lower course of the river are named after sugar cane plantations that were established in the mid-1800's – Myrtle Grove, Deer Range, Woodland, Magnolia.

The original owner of Myrtle Grove, Theodore Packwood, brought an engineer named Norbert Rillieux (rilly-*you*) to his plantation in the early 1840's. Over a period of many months, Rillieux developed an elaborate apparatus to perfect the evaporation process for sugar. He received a series of patents in 1843, and his machinery birthed the modern commercial sugar industry.

The planters' lives during this period were rooted in the sugar industry, their fortunes rising and falling with the prices, the weather, the size and quality of the crop. Mark Twain wrote of this area, "The cane is cultivated after a modern and intricate scientific fashion, too elaborate and complex for me to attempt to describe; but it lost forty thousand dollars last year. I forget the other details."

Deer Range was the next town, built near the plantation where Louisiana hot sauce was first created. An Irishman named Maunsell White wanted something to splash on his oysters and brewed up another signature of the deep delta - *Bam*.

The road closes down to two lanes outside Deer Range and gets closer to the levee, curving back and forth as it follows the meanders in the river. The traffic was pretty light the day we rode, and going around those sweepers was great fun – strafing runs heeled over till things were sparking from under the bikes. The two lanes continue some 15 miles, through Woodland and West Pointe a la Hache, almost to Magnolia.

There's a ferry at West Pointe a la Hache that crosses the river over to East Pointe a la Hache. I've thought ferries were cool since I was a small child, once asking for a ferry boat ride for my "big birthday present" one year. The ferry between the Pointes provides the most southerly view of the river you can get from a land vehicle. The highway returns to four lanes just south of West Pointe a la Hache and heads into Magnolia.

The earliest plantation of any size in the delta was Magnolia. Captains Bradish and Johnson owned the pilot business between New Orleans and the Mississippi mouth. After years of piloting ships up and down the river, they knew every sharp turn, every sand bar, every sucking eddy. One day one pointed out to the other a piece of land on the west bank about 35 miles below New Orleans. Neither had ever seen it under water, and they both thought it the best land for many miles.

When they sold their pilot business, they bought the land and built the first mansion along the lower river. For some years the two families lived contentedly together, and when Mrs. Johnson had a son, they named him Bradish Johnson. They entertained (and probably did business with) Jean Lafitte, among others notables of the day.

But eventually the house could not contain both families. The estimable women reportedly first had tiffs with each other, then furious rows, and finally icy anger. According to one historian, "the captains reluctantly sat down to settle the matter while the women tapped their feet." Bradish bought Johnson's interest, and Johnson purchased Woodland, some five miles north.

There's another stretch of two-lane that goes through the busy Port Sulphur. Lots of helicopter companies are located in and around Port Sulphur, ferrying workers out to

the offshore oil rigs. The tone of the landscape changes markedly here. What had been agricultural is suddenly petro-industrial.

Once past Port Sulphur, the petro-industrial recedes but the agricultural doesn't return. Just the native landscape. The land is very flat here, the horizon broken by stands of trees and increasing amounts of water.

A little further on the four lanes return. The highway takes another sweeper north of the town Boothville, around the Detour des Plaquemines, Persimmon Bend. In 1746, the French had built a fort on each side of the river there, and they had been re-fortified (so to speak) since then. What is now known as Fort Jackson still sits on the west bank of the river, and is open to the public.

It's maybe ten miles from Fort Jackson to Venice, another town busy with supplying the varied needs of the offshore oil industry. Suddenly you're in the midst of a very industrial hubbub. Oil-related service companies, welding shops and truck repair places line the highway, and lots of trucks rumble back and forth.

The road turns here and narrows to stay in the middle of a ridge of land. The water comes right up to the road in several places, and fingers of land go off in different directions. Commercial fishing marinas are built in every body of water deep enough to float those big boats, and processing plants line the banks of the marinas.

We continued on a few more miles until we came to a big oyster shell turn-around. This was it – the end of the road. Helpfully a sign had been placed there, welcoming all to the southernmost point of Louisiana. Although the map said we were in a town named Tidewater, there was no evidence of a town. Just some small boat repair shops and lots of fishing boats. Still, this was undeniably the end of the road.

I zoomed in and out on the GPS to see how far we were from the main channel of the Mississippi, and it looked to be a mile or more east of our position. The water that surrounded our bit of land had come up from the Gulf, not down from the Mississippi.

Naturally we had to take pictures of each other on our bikes in front of the sign. We hung around for a little while, trying to soak in the feeling of the place, and then headed back north.

Back in Venice we stopped at an indigenous café. The metal chair and table sets had mostly been bought at the same time, and in the decades since then the proprietors had accumulated a wealth of local paraphernalia and tacked it to the walls. The wall behind the cash register counter was solid with one-dollar bills, their varied ages marked by accumulated dust and faded color. Many of the tables had spots on their tops where peoples' forearms had worn away the original finish. It wasn't upscale in any way, but this was where Peter finally got his oysters on the half shell. The seafood here was right off the boats.

After lunch, we lazed back up the river, basking in the afternoon sunlight. At one point where the highway approached close to the levee, we came upon a little dirt road running up to the top. We parked up there and walked down the other side. A line of woods started at the base of the levee and extended out a ways past the water line. We walked out to the edge and beheld. It is quite a river. Sadly, human droppings of all

kinds were caught up in the vegetation in the water and along the bank – it's amazing how many white plastic shapes there are.

It was mid-afternoon at this point and we decided to head north to Baton Rouge. Another choice would have been to take the ferry at West Point a la Hache over to East Point a la Hache, and ride up the east side of the river, winding up someplace like Bay St. Louis or Pass Christian. But that would have been a different ride.

Baton Rouge was about a hundred and forty miles away so it was head down riding for the next couple of hours.

Later at dinner we toasted the gods of good fortune, and our guardian angels, for a successful adventure. We had looked in a little at the mystery of why we jonesed to take motorcycle trips, even if we didn't happen upon anything mysterious in the Deep Delta.

We had done everything we had hoped to, and then some. Tomorrow we would ride north along the winding Atchafalaya River to Natchez, and take the Natchez up to Vicksburg, but there at dinner as we toasted and for the rest of the evening we were flush with the tingle of the ride.

- Paul Yeager
Houston, TX
March, 2002