

The Gazette

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Starting in the Midwest, finding America on roadways east

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As we gazed at the mastodon skeleton, we wondered how such an enormous vegetarian found enough to eat.

“They traveled,” said an enthusiastic student on duty at the Joseph Moore Museum on Indiana’s Earlham College campus.

It took plenty of spruce needles and leaves to feed a 6,000-pound animal, so the mastodons had to keep moving. For over a hundred thousand years they trod routes that led us to the museum in Richmond, Ind., nearly seven hours east of Cedar Rapids and Iowa City.

Engineers plotting modern highway routes owe thanks

to these long-extinct elephants. The lumbering mammals used topography efficiently to craft easy travel routes from one place to another. Their pathways were used by Native Americans and eventually, horse-drawn wagons. Some of the paths evolved into today’s modern roads.

If you go

Getting there: Richmond, Ind., lies 459 miles east of Cedar Rapids and 434 miles east of Iowa City, via Interstate 74

Details: turkeyrunstatepark.com, visitrichmond.org

People claim that America’s best engineering project was the Interstate Highway System that makes driving fast. Others counter that the massive roads destroyed regionalism by spawning gauntlets of chain restaurants and hotels.

Whether zipping by Muncie or Boise, the road view is monotonous sameness.

We often drive east to visit relatives. Tight timelines force us to follow fast interstates, but we’ve learned to escape the boredom and discover varied scenery, quaint towns, and locally owned eateries and lodging that retain local charm. To find them, we leave the mastodon-plotted interstates and follow modern versions of deer trails.

Unlike wandering elephants, deer are homebodies that spend most of their lives in a small area they intimately know. Their narrow paths wander toward food and shelter. Winding secondary highways radiating from interstate exits are like deer trails leading to overnight lodges and locally owned eateries.

Our recent trip on interstates 80 and 74 whisked us to Indiana, where we exited on a winding “deer trail” road to Indiana’s Turkey Run State Park west of Indianapolis. After checking in, we crossed a suspension footbridge and were surrounded by a deep, steep-sided canyon reminiscent of Utah. Far above towered hemlock trees common farther north.

“The park is an ecological relic. It retained a cool, moist climate as the surrounding area warmed and became an oak/hickory forest,” Park Naturalist Aaron Douglass said.

If mastodons still lived, they’d find familiar vegetation at Turkey Run.

After skirting Indianapolis, we exited I-465 to follow America’s most historic road. Paralleling Interstate 70 is U.S. Route 40, the National Road. Conceived by Thomas Jefferson, it was the first highway built by the federal government.

Construction started in 1830 and spanned 620 miles connecting the Potomac and Ohio Rivers. In 1830, nearly a century before cars, the road was paved with the then-new macadam process.

Thousands of people destined to settle the American Midwest followed the National Road. Instead of bumping along in a horse-drawn wagon, we followed the road in a comfortable car. The drive threaded through towns with early 19th century charm.

Approaching Richmond, Ind., we veered a half mile off to view the mastodon skeleton on the Earlham campus.

Motorists speeding past Richmond on Interstate 70 miss more than a museum. The medium-sized town has a rich music, automobile and railroad history.

Renowned Starr pianos were crafted there, and the town was once THE magnet for dozens of famous musicians. Songs recorded in Gennett Studio delighted listeners worldwide. Eventually the business was purchased by Decca Records. Today, a series of medallions along the Gennett Walk of Fame on the Whitewater Gorge Trail feature Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, Hoagy Carmichael and others who recorded there.

After visiting the once bustling Pennsylvania Railroad Depot, we noticed Roscoe’s nearby. While sipping coffee in this decidedly unchain eatery, we met Thomas Hill.

He helps with trail development and promotes cycling and walking on the Cardinal Greenway that stretches northwest to Muncie, part of the American Discovery Trail.

“A century ago, Richmond was a music town. Now it’s a trail town,” he said.

Had we not paused to visit we would never have learned of the town’s “borrow a bike” program. Anyone, travel-through motorists included, can borrow a cruiser bike at the Cycling and Fitness Warehouse and pedal trails radiating outward.

We passed the Ford Model T Museum, a gathering spot for classic car enthusiasts. On display are some of the oldest and most recent Model T’s, made between 1908 and 1927.

Hours after leaving Richmond and heading east on I-70, we needed a break from weaving between the Interstate’s trucks. A half-mile after exiting, we sipped coffee in downtown St. Clairsville, Ohio.

Following a deer trail road from the exit brought us to two delights. One was delicious coffee at Aquila, tucked into an eclectic shop with enchanting curios. The other was viewing the magnificent downtown courthouse. Again, a short detour helped us discover Americana without losing much trip time.

Back on the Interstate breezing toward snowy Pittsburgh, we exited downtown at the Heinz History Center Museum. We especially enjoyed memorabilia from the Steelers, Pirates and “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.”

Seeking a motel with local charm at an affordable rate, we lucked out. Our cellphone guided us to Lenape Heights Golf Resort, off deer trail Highway 28 connecting Pittsburgh to Interstate 80.

Blowing snow isn’t golfing weather, so the inn, perched high above a valley, had a vacancy with a delightful view of distant hills. The off-season rate compared with big box motels along Interstates, and the experience was far more fun. Information: lenapegolfresort.com.

Although we needed to quickly get to New Jersey the next morning, we spotted Punxsutawney, Pa., on our map. Driving to this famous groundhog town didn’t add many miles to the day. We enjoyed statues of Punxsutawney Phil before jumping on I-80 for a fast passage across Pennsylvania.

21st century guides

Our recent trip wasn’t unusual for us. When we must drive somewhere quickly, we follow the mastodon routes of interstates, but leave time to divert down deer trail roads to nearby places bypassed by most high-speed drivers.

Mastodons and deer relied on instinct and experience to find the best routes. In contrast, our cellphones guide us to interesting places off the next exit. We follow deer trail roads to a state park or town. There, we savor regionalism nonexistent near interstates. Coffee shops are our favorites. Usually locally owned and always individualistic, they offer an opportunity to meet local people and savor good coffee and sandwiches. And, pit stops.

Staying at Classic Lodges

We spent the first night of our recent trip in the Turkey Run State Park Lodge in Parke County, Indiana. Built in 1919, it oozed with rustic charm and clean comfort. Furniture and decor reminded us of iconic lodges in Yellowstone National Park. The experience was vastly different, yet the price was comparable to a chain motel.

Other state park lodges we’ve enjoyed include Pokagon in Indiana, Punderson in Ohio, Custer in South Dakota, and Nebraska’s Fort Robinson. All are historic, comfortable and convenient.

Not all lodges are in state parks. We’ve overnighted several times at Lied Lodge at the National Arbor Day Foundation in Nebraska. Our recent overnight was at Lenape Heights Golf Resort in Pennsylvania. Advanced reservations often aren’t needed off season, but we call ahead when we’re an hour or two out.

The fastest route from the Corridor to New Jersey is to follow I-80 for about 1,000 miles. It takes us two days. Instead, our recent trip along a more southern route added about 150 miles and a half day, but it gave us lasting memories of Richmond’s jazz history, mastodons, a slot canyon, and a pleasant stay high on a Pennsylvania hill.

Rich and Marion Patterson have backgrounds in environmental science and forestry. They co-own Winding Pathways, a consulting business that encourages people to “Create Wondrous Yards.”