

America as sanctuary, classroom



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Returning from a 1,200-mile drive through Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, a few things are getting clearer in my mind as the road dust washes off the car in another North Carolina thunderstorm.

I had never been to Chattanooga, Tennessee, nor anywhere in Alabama, with only a brief visit to Savannah, Georgia. This journey was educational in significant ways. It may sound like a travelogue, but buckle up and I'll show you where this is going.

In some ways we're typical travelers. We love the experience of seeing new places, meeting locals and trying the food and brews. The natural beauty that recognizes no state boundaries calls to us, making us feel each state is our land too.

We're more than tourists. We're on a class field trip and the whole country is the school.

Apart from the places, people and parks, it's the history that draw us to go deeper. What happened here and why? The lessons pour in like the flash and rumble of those southern rainstorms.

Images from the highway: paved pathways through tunnels of trees; rolling green hills and fields of crops; cloud-bursts that force you to pull off the road; "historic" towns beckoning for tourist dollars; endless strings of trucks full of

"essential stuff"; a "War on Terror" highway sign; a massive rebel flag; JESUS billboards; cross after cross after cross; welcoming rest stops to stretch weary legs and soothe tired eyes.

Chattanooga took us right up Lookout Mountain. A good symbol for what we like: a bit of history and a beautiful view. A sensual city shaped by the snaking Tennessee River. With emotion, we stood where Cherokee families were gathered for "removal and relocation."

On an evening crossing of Chickamauga Lake we saw osprey, leaping bass and a stunning sunset. Just over the Georgia border, a visit to the Chickamauga battlefield gave us more context for the Blue and the Gray.

In Dayton, Tennessee, we stood in the courtroom where a young teacher was defended by Clarence Darrow during the famous "Scopes monkey trial." Made me wonder how much we've really evolved.

Birmingham, Alabama, was where we began to see more clearly how religion can fuel either hatred or hope. Standing at the top of the huge iron statue of the god Vulcan overlooking the city, we could see where the fire of creative industry meets the destructive flames of injustice.

Birmingham was once known as "Bombingham" due to the frequent bombings of churches and homes. At the center of town, Ingram Park offers a beautiful walk through an ugly part of our history. Images from our national memory with blasting fire hoses and police dogs attacking nonviolent marchers become flesh-and-blood realities.



Touching history. Peace and Justice Memorial, Montgomery, Alabama
COURTESY OF CAROL HOVIS

Adjacent to the park, the National Civil Rights Institute is a powerful classroom that teaches both the stories of our un-civil wrongs as well as hopeful ways forward. In one corner you can stand at a large window that looks across the street to the 16th Street church where four young black girls were killed in a 1963 bombing. Then you scan over the park where marching children were met with hoses, clubs, dogs and handcuffs.

We drove across town to the site where Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" — something I would consider a modern day "secular scripture."

Montgomery was the center of the

classroom for me. Each block seemed to hold a startling story.

We walked by Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where marchers from Selma arrived in 1965. We stopped at the Greyhound station where Freedom Riders were met by an enraged white mob. We stood silent at the site where Rosa Parks stepped up into a bus, in the same square where slaves stepped up to be auctioned.

The Peace and Justice Memorial, newly opened in April, was perhaps the most disturbing experience. You slowly walk down into it and look up at "800 six-foot monuments [symbolizing] thousands of racial terror lynching victims in the United States." Reading the names, dates and, in some cases, the reasons these people (black and white) were lynched in counties across the country leaves you speechless. We observed a young black boy tracing names with his fingers.

Atlanta was the last major stop, to visit the King Center, his grave site, birth home and Ebenezer Baptist, where we sat to hear a recording of his first sermon there.

Finally, we swung by Stone Mountain, delighted by waterfalls washing over the sandblasted faces marring the natural beauty.

There's much more to see and learn in this expansive classroom and sanctuary called America, united by our deep need to listen for the truth of our shared history and learn more from each other.

Chris Highland served as a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. Learn more at highland.com.