

Riding my self into a State(s): Part 2

In Part 1 of this trilogy Terry Dickerson travelled to Denver in the USA and made a right mess of a short ride from the airport to Denver. In this Part 2, the accommodation was not quite what was expected, but things improve in the Rocky Mountains. The next and final part will be about riding a 300km Audax from Denver.

After the trials and tribulations of the ride from the airport, the taxi driver's cheery "where to?" was quite comforting. I replied that I wanted the Youth Hostel, Downing Street.

"Is that off Colefax?" he asked, 'Yes I said'. The driver, just like a good old London cabby, gave me some advice; in this case about keeping moving on Colefax as I might get approached if I lingered. I pictured my limp body by the side of a dusty street with my lifeblood slowly trickling down a drain.

"Not that they will hurt you," he continued, "just hassle you for money, booze or drugs". I did not feel reassured as we travelled down this tacky, tatty street called Colefax. We drew up outside the hostel, unloaded my bike and other stuff and paid the driver.

I have stayed in US Youth Hostels before. My first US hostel was just like a British country hostel with dorms, a community kitchen, a big notice board with details of lots of things to do; indeed it was very nice in a rustic sort of way. Another hostel experience was - well, how can I put it - someone's house! A little old lady did B&B and it was called a hostel. Overall I have found US hostels to sometimes somewhat 'different' to those in the UK - different in a nice and interesting way that is. However, I was not prepared for the hostel in Denver. The building was a big square block of '50s period, which consisted of two stories and a basement. I dragged my bike and luggage up the steps in one go, as I did not want to leave anything alone for one second. The dishevelled manager welcomed me in his dishevelled office and I booked in for two nights. My room was on the top floor overlooking the now infamous Colefax. The whole place was rundown, peeling paper, threadbare carpets and doggy plumbing. The residents were a mix of migrant workers and travellers.

I went for a walk before going to bed, yes even the Colefax was preferable to the hostel - I did keep moving though! The up-side of the hostel was that I could sleep with my bike in the room. Or rather I could lie, being kept awake by the hot stuffy room, the unceasing traffic noise and the snoring of another resident. It was a long night and I was depressed and home sick - I was not sure if I could take another night of that hostel. Breakfast was served at 7 O'clock and I rushed down to find a breakfast bar with hot fresh croissants, over-easy eggs, crispy bacon, steaming mugs of coffee and many other treats. No, it was a hallucination caused by sleep deprivation. Breakfast was actually a serve yourself job with cheap coffee with a powder the yanks call creamer. The powder creates globs of goo on the coffee surface that slowly dissolved. Mind you they were preferable to the waffles, which were larger but otherwise looked similar, although I suspect they would not float on mercury let alone the coffee!

I changed into my cycling kit and grabbed my bike. Another flat, but the rear this time, meant I had a delay before setting off into the hills. It was a piece of glass this time that had caused the deflation; more pump, pump, and pump. The route to Golden in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains looked straightforward. Obviously I had not learned from the previous days problems. I set off in the traffic down Colefax, which did not look so bad in the light. It quickly became clear that the roads of Denver had not been designed with cycles in mind. After about 2 miles I stopped at a bus stop and decided to try out the cycle carrying facilities on the public transport. I have to admit I had checked out the bus routes and timetables that morning so I had not gone out completely unprepared. Within ten minutes a bus arrived. I took my bike to the front of the bus, pulled the bike rack handle and popped the bike on. Wow that was easy. The bus fare was just \$1.50 (£1.00) for the 12-mile ride. I was soon in Golden and alighted near the huge Coors brewery. I had a map but I soon found that many of the roads were not on it; I also had that perplexing problem of the lack of signposts. I guessed - a dead-end road! Guess again and I climbed up a hill to a major road junction - wrong again. Back to Golden, although but not before stopping at a bike shop I had seen. The bike shop was closed, but it looked good, I wonder if my sweaty nose print is still on the window? I decided to gather my whits and try to get some local knowledge at café. I ordered a large double latte with cinnamon, stirred anticlockwise at 64.3°C in a yellow beaker and "Oh I'll have one of those, looks good what are they?" The waitress with perfect teeth looked at me and asked if I was English and added, "They're scones of course." Well I may be English but it was like no scone I had seen before, for a start it was not small and round with burnt currents on the top. The scones were actually large succulent triangles bursting with real fruits, in mine blueberries.

To avoid an international incident of the culinary kind, I decided not to ask for jam and cream. After all I did not want to be responsible for the USS Nimitz being anchored off the Devon coast with armed cruise missiles while a diplomatic mission demanded the recipe for a 'real' cream tea.

On queue the waitress I was asked where I was heading? After a bit of bluffing was given the directions to 'Lookout Mountain' a famous local ride. Back to Golden and take a right on 12th Street. There may be crap signposting in the US but these numbered streets sure do make things simple. It was starting to get warm, about the mid '80's I guessed. The right took me up a steep street to the bottom of the climb proper where two manmade stone columns announced that I was entering into a park. This was much better and my sprits began to lift. The road carried on climbing at a gentle rate of I estimate 8%. I soon caught another cyclist named John who was a local. He told me that the climb was a famous local attraction for cyclists (and motorcyclists); many passing cyclists, mainly going down, confirmed this assessment. We stopped at a café complex after reaching about 7000feet in height. The site was built around the burial site of Buffalo Bill, the famous Wild West icon. John told me that Buffalo Bill was born in another state and that the other state has got a court ruling to have his body repatriated and reburied. As Bill (we were in first name terms by now) was a big tourist magnet, the locals were having none of this and one night encased the coffin in 80 tonnes of reinforced hardened concrete. Bill could not be moved. This is why Bills grave looked unimpressively like a WWII pillbox.

John turned back, but I went onward and upward to a junction with the I70 (big road). I was in ski and outdoor pursuit area now. A small retail area had a smart bike shop with plenty of titanium. I drooled over some Litespeeds and then splashed out on a new inner tube to replace the one I thorough away the night before. The nice man in the shop pumped my tyres up; I had only managed about 65psi with my mini pump - no wonder I was flatting! I said flatting!! I continued up a small rough road to a pass at just over 8000feet whoopee. I retraced my root hardly needing to pedal or brake for 15 miles - good decent that.

Back at Golden I went into one of those sandwich shops where you can have everything and anything you could ever imagine in a bread roll. But first you had to pick the roll from about 15 different types. My sandwich was so stuffed I could not close it. A chap rode past on an Ordinary, all dressed-up in 1900's cloths.

Now it was time to find my way back to Denver. I enquired at the tourist info office, the combined age of the three helpers was about 405 years. There was a picture of the really old guy in the wall; it was taken to mark his official retirement in 1986! They were very sweet and tried to be helpful but just could not cut the mustard (on my chin - from the sandwich). Another local advised me and pointed me towards a cycle track that followed the river back to Denver. The path was good but not at all signposted so I went down a few blind alleys. Eventually I could see Denver and the path took me directly into Confluence Park, which was near the city centre. Man was Confluence sports central. Three major bike paths met near the confluence of two rivers in which canoeists were paddling; cyclists joggers, bladers, walkers. And in the centre of all this was REI.

A bit more tussling with the traffic and I was back at the hostel with 150km covered. In the evening I wandered downtown, in particular to Confluence Park, it was about a 3mile walk and my legs ached after the ride. I headed for REI, which stands for Recreational Equipment Limited. The store was located in what liked like an old iron foundry. The building had been sensitively converted and much of the original brickwork and large riveted iron girders were on display. A climbing wall made full use of the building height and suspended walkways enabled the old building to be viewed from many angles. Now, I usually run a mile when I see a shop, but this one had such a nice atmosphere that I stayed for about one and a half hours. Of course I also managed to look at the bike equipment and buy Hilary some shorts during that time.

A free bus took me back the length of the main street, which saved my legs a bit. As the bus rolled up the street I managed to see about seven or eight coffee shops, all of which were the same famous brand. Back at the hotel while chatting with another resident, a Scott back-packing around the states, I mentioned the number of coffee shops. He jumped up and grabbed the yellow pages and started counting. There were over 80 coffee shops of that one particular brand in the greater Denver area!

The following day I left my bike and other stuff at the hostel and went to a welding conference in Utah - but that's another story.

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