



Jefferson, TX Shamrock Tour®

Bayou Chiefs

Text: Bill Drago
Photography: James Pratt



It is 1901. Dirt roads are evolving from indian trails and wagon routes to connect a country in the midst of a technological revolution. George M. Hendee and Carl Hedstrom have just completed their first 1.75-horsepower prototype of the Indian Motorcycle in Springfield, MA.

More than 114 years later, narrow remnants of those early roads still wind through the woods and bayous of Northeast Texas, many paved with aging asphalt, and the Indian Motorcycle has been reborn. The new 111-cubic inch Chief Vintage thumps beneath me while my friend, James Pratt, and his lovely wife, Kay, grace my rearview mirrors on a black Indian Roadmaster. A century ago, this road might have been merely a trail used by the Caddo tribe of Native Americans who called this place home.

Tall Trees and a Big Breakfast

Today's destination is the Big Pines Lodge, where we hope to catch a boat ride into the lair of the great bald cypress. It is early November and fall is in full swing. This is the perfect time to be here, as the rich greens of a wet summer give way to vivid red and gold foliage. Our machines, graciously provided by Scott Conway of Indian Motorcycles of Oklahoma City, seem fitting mounts for such an excursion.

After a tasty breakfast of individual egg casseroles, toast, and homemade jam served by our hosts at Captain's Castle Bed and Breakfast, we head southeast from Jefferson on Highway 134 toward Caddo Lake, home of the largest cypress forest in the world. These majestic giants lurk among the swamps, draped in Spanish moss and befriended by alligators.

The Swamp Tour

As we swing into the Big Pines parking lot, a tall smokestack captures our attention. It belongs to The Graceful Ghost, touted as the world's last remaining stern paddle-wheel, steam-powered tour vessel. The classic lines of these historical icons, the ship and our

Indian motorcycles, harken back to a bygone era of kick-starters and external combustion engines. We are approached by a tall, square-jawed, stout-looking young man who might have just walked off a movie set. A 21st century renaissance man, Byron Aldridge is a business owner, historian, Indian aficionado, and as luck would have it, an accomplished river guide. The next two hours are spent chugging through the shadows in a fascinating front row history lesson of Caddo Lake, the first over-water platform oil wells, and the near-demise of an ecosystem before cooler heads prevailed and began to revive this primeval wilderness.

Back on the bikes, we continue our counter-clockwise circumnavigation of Caddo Lake with a new appreciation for those who traveled by river during the 19th century. Skirting Shreveport, LA, we turn north and arc west back toward our home base in Jefferson.

At Captain's Castle, we change out of our gear and go downtown. After poking our heads in a few potential eateries, we settle on the Austin Street Bistro. It proves to be an excellent choice with fresh salads, soups, and breads served in a quaint European setting.

The Table of Knowledge

Our second day, we step out into a cold, rainy morning with plans to ride south towards Nacogdoches. In preparation, Kay fusses with her electric vest, finally giving up with the stoic statement, "It will warm up. Let's go." Tough gal. We roll south on Highway 59 through Carthage to put a few

Northeast Texas is a treasure trove of vintage art and architecture, much of it well-maintained and still in use.





An old Indian chief once said, "Follow my footsteps and you will discover the path to adventure." I found his words to be true.

- Bill Dragoo





A steamboat ride through these old cypress trees can take one back a hundred years.

Many northeast Texas farm roads are derived from pathways once traveled by Native Americans. The Indian Chief seemed right at home.

Jason Lee (Leebo) and Rex Wall tell us of the 17 miracles that led to the creation of Cycle 17 in Carthage.

One need only squint to see bushels of produce lining the shelves of this old roadside stand.

miles behind us before tackling the twisty backroads. An hour south we stop at Wanda and Renee's Café where an old fashioned breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and eggs is served with that rare "good" coffee demanded by locals, truckers, and travelers who remember where a satisfying brew can always be found. We decide to hunt down a shop nearby that can solder a broken wire on Kay's harness. Five elderly men at the next table offer as many directions to a computer shop where we might find a technician. They jokingly call themselves "the table of knowledge." However, we decide they are instead the table of confusion and agree among ourselves to look elsewhere for someone with a soldering iron.

A few blocks down the road we spot Cycle 17, a biker-style repair shop with two helpful souls eager to tackle our small project. When asked about the shop's name, Jason Lee, aka "Leebo" and his pal, Rex Wall, tell us about the 17 miracles that led them to finding and opening their business. They consider their work a ministry and refuse to give us a price for the repair. In keeping with their theme of service and gratitude, we leave a fair offering in appreciation for their help.

Carthage is also home to the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame and Tex Ritter Museum. We can't resist a brief stop at this resting place for relics of country music,



so we peek inside before continuing south to Nacogdoches. The nickel tour (\$5 admission) provides us with a wealth of information about an energetic era of live radio and Texas-born superstars.

Bonnie and Clyde

Nacogdoches is the southern tip of today's loop. Another town brimming with history, we learn it is the birthplace of Clyde Barrow, of Bonnie and Clyde fame. The local fire chief suggests that our motorcycles are parked in front of the drug store where the notorious outlaws first met, although other rumors conflict with that story. We stroll around the historic square and stumble upon The Olde Towne Restaurant and

General Store, a great spot for lunch. They are known for their meat loaf sandwich, BBQ baked potato, and homemade chili. We wrap up lunch, eager to experience FM (Farm to Market) 768 northwest out of Nacogdoches.

Those who frequent the area consider FM 768 the "Queen of Motorcycle Roads." This meandering ribbon of asphalt dissolves into its surroundings like a wispy progeny of the forest, luring us deeper into its midst. My GPS presents several irresistible side routes. Many of these roads are narrow and have been paved for years, but are still relatively smooth and unbroken, made for a street-oriented machine like

the big Indian. We wander almost aimlessly through the forest until sunset, and chilly temperatures force us to pick up the pace and become more deliberate about covering the last few miles. Touching Lake O' the Pines' eastern edge, we arrive in Jefferson late and hungry but energized by the day's travels.

Friends in High Places

Dinner at The Corkyard is a fitting end to our second day in Northeast Texas. We are greeted at the entrance by our river guide, Byron Aldridge, who also happens to be the restaurant owner. Patrons of The Corkyard are treated to wine and handcrafted beers, delicious food, and live entertain-



As the shadows grow long, Kay Pratt eagerly takes her turn at the helm of the Chief.

Breakfast at The Captain's Castle is an event worth waking up to.

LODGING: The Captain's Castle Bed & Breakfast

Built in the 1850s, the inn was recently refurbished by owners Bill and Angie Herlocker and once served as the home of a Confederate officer, Captain Thomas J. Rogers, and later as a house of ill repute. With the hard work of Bill and Angie, the bawdy past only adds intrigue, and the vintage charm remains preserved among the hardwood floors, tall draperies, and period antiques.



Each morning guests are greeted by the aroma of fresh coffee, soon to be followed by a gourmet breakfast served by the hosts. The owners' attention to detail is evident with every step through this historic home and enhanced by their sensitive hospitality. It seemed we need only to ask and any wish would be granted during our stay. Find it at 403 E Walker St., Jefferson, TX, (903) 665-2330, www.captainscastle.com. \$\$\$

ment. An outdoor dining area, complete with infrared heaters, eases our reluctance to end an enchanted autumn day.

Marsupials, Smoke, and Texas Pancakes

It is another wet, chilly morning as we gear up for our third loop, and Kay decides to stick around Jefferson. Highway 729 edges the north side of Lake O' the Pines, taking us west toward Lone Star. True to our theme of wandering, we take a number of side routes. The woods are ablaze with fall colors, and photo ops keep us stopping and turning down one dark pathway after another. Midmorning, we enter Lone Star and pull into Arnold's Family Restaurant, hungry and slightly chilled. I almost turn back toward the bike as I enter the restaurant and smell cigarette smoke, but my hunger and the understanding smile of the waitress quickly wipes away the discomfort. "Yeah, I don't like it either, but you get used to it," she offers, clearly accustomed to patrons' dislike of the smoke. I am happy that I embraced the diversity as soon as my lips touch the cup. This is uncommonly "good" coffee. My pancake comes out in the shape of Texas and ends up being one of the best tasting I've had in a while.

The day warms up nicely as we continue westward. Not far out of town we come across a field of kangaroos. It appears we have encountered an animal hospital that raises the bouncy critters to sell as pets. We are allowed to hold one of the youngsters, but neither of us succumbs to the temptation to adopt a marsupial.

We cross Lake Bob Sandlin and wind our way to Sulphur Springs where we take a break at Coffee Off The Square, a happy accident we stumble upon while rolling through town. Much of the joy of rambling down backroads comes from the local diners and coffee shops found along the way.

Yet another lake greets us as we turn northeast toward Jefferson. We jog around Lake Fork Reservoir and again find ourselves bumping against darkness and a chilly end to our day. We make quick work of the last few miles with our electric gear turned up to full power and proceed straight to The Corkyard for the day's final sustenance.

DESTINATION: Jefferson, TX



During the late 1800s, Jefferson was a river port connecting commerce and land travel to the west with Shreveport, a few miles to the southeast. Once a bustling city of over 30,000 inhabitants, Jefferson now has some 2,000 permanent residents and remains a popular attraction for tourists who appreciate 19th century architecture and

Southern charm. Jefferson's main street and outlying homes retain that river city appeal with much of that era's opulence still on display. Many of the old businesses operate as they did when steamboats frequented the ports, and brick streets still reverberate with the clip-clop of horse drawn carriages.

Some say that earlier residents have been reluctant to move on. Ghost sightings are a common theme among the dozens of B&Bs that have helped support the rejuvenation of century-old mansions. Numerous patrons claim to have seen apparitions among the old buildings, some inhabited and some not. Rumor has it that Steven Spielberg was once shooed away from Jefferson by an unfriendly ghost who tossed his briefcase back after Spielberg pitched it onto what appeared to be a vacant chair.

Nearby Caddo Lake continues to offer riverboat tours with The Graceful Ghost, a reproduction of one of the original stern paddle-wheel boats prevalent during the town's heyday, along with a few more modern, flat-top deck boats.

Restaurants range from casual dining such as Memories & More Restaurant and Piano Bar to the fancier fare of Austin Street Bistro with their fresh-made lasagna, tilapia, salads, soups, and breads. And of course if one's palate includes a taste for entertainment, there is The Corkyard.

Whether needing a home base for a swamp tour, a lover's getaway, or a refueling spot for two-wheeled exploration, Jefferson is well-equipped to please the traveler.



Texas is full of surprises. For example, I would not have expected to hold a kangaroo while exploring backroads.

The Corkyard is a prime example of the innovation of residents in creating a unique experience for travelers to this once dying town.

Art and old buildings, all reminiscent of a time when riverboats brought people and prosperity to Texas.



Secret Trails and the Path of the Indian

Our fourth and final loop takes us north toward Texarkana. Today is the coldest day yet, but the sun is beginning to melt the frost as we leave Jefferson. We deliberately selected today's roads to be almost technical, hopefully still keeping us on some semblance of pavement. Our first obstacle is marginally-graded dirt, disappearing into a tangled tree canopy south of Hughes Springs. I turn up the dirt road but notice that James is not following. Slightly exasperated, I return to where he waits on the paved county road. I don't have to ask why

he didn't join me, but he volunteers, "Bill, these guys will never loan us their bikes again if we bring them back trashed." He's right of course, but I didn't think a little dust ... well OK, a lot of dust ... would hurt. But the bikes are new, and buyers might not appreciate finding embedded grit in the nooks and crannies of their prized purchase. I relent, and we take a paved detour before continuing our circuitous northern loop.

Our way is impeded again in Omaha at the junction of Highways 144 and 259, this time by construction, which forces a reroute through Naples, a few miles northeast. Turn-



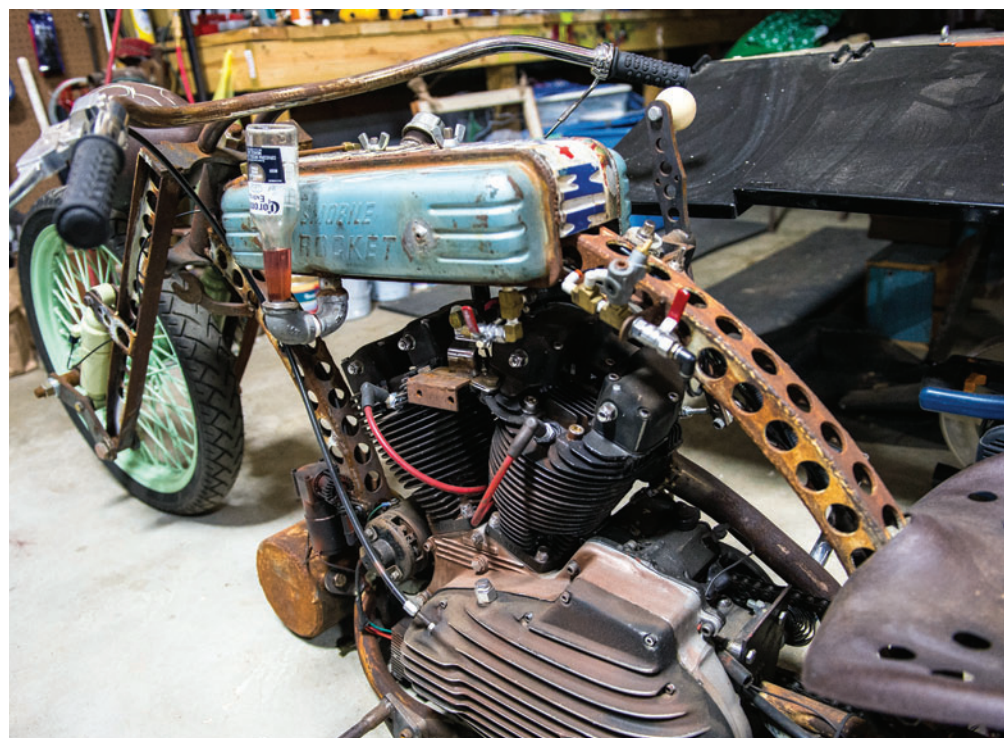


ing short of Texarkana, we navigate south-east on Highway 59 then jog due south on a series of obscure FM roads. These turn out to be a glorious series of something more akin to paved bicycle paths. With hardly a car to be seen, we scamper through the twists and turns with ease, enjoying the now-familiar feel of our machines. A few hard-packed dirt sections present themselves, but this time we continue on, appreciative of proper suspension and powerful motors. Even with their formidable size, the Indians are willing and respond to our energetic mood. The sun seems to hang on the western horizon just long enough for us to arrive before dark.

Turning Back the Hands of Time

We roll into town at sunset, stopping at some of the old buildings for shots with the bikes. Although winter has edged its way into bayou country, we relish the experience of the past few days. Predictably, passersby stop and ask about the machines. One old timer ambles over with a gleam in his eye and says he had a Chief back in the day. He recalls how it took a stiff kick to do what we now do with a touch of the thumb and, as the street lights flicker on, I would swear I can hear the distant sound of a steam whistle from somewhere down the bayou. **RR**

GPS files are available for download in each digital issue purchased or included in your subscription. Log in at www.roadrunner.travel.



The Big Pines Lodge doubles as a port for The Graceful Ghost steamship. It is also a great place to grab a burger before touring the swamp.

Some buildings house relics from the past. Often open, their proprietors are eager to share.

Facts & Information

In General

Northeast Texas affords a diverse allure for the motorcyclist, from historic towns and all the secrets they hold, to narrow, shady pathways through the woods and bayous. Spring and fall present the best weather and scenic opportunities, but Jefferson is a year-round destination. We couldn't seem to get enough of the new Indians as we explored the hunting grounds of its ancestors; hence, we racked up a few long mileage days. However, one could abbreviate the miles and enjoy more time afoot if desired.

How to Get There

Jefferson is two and a half hours east of Dallas and an hour south of Texarkana. Shreveport, LA, is an hour southeast of Jefferson.

Food & Lodging

A wide range of dining options makes Jefferson a pleasant experience, no matter the palate. Restaurants range from casual dining to fancier fair. And of course if one's palate includes a taste for entertainment, there is The Corkyard where (if lucky) riverboat pilot and owner Byron Aldridge will be on hand to entertain patrons with stories both historical and hysterical. Joseph's Riverport Barbecue and Don Juan's Mexican Restaurant lend even more variety.

Captain's Castle was an excellent choice for lodging, but Jefferson has dozens of alternatives. Whether one enjoys a stay in a 100-year-old mansion or prefers a simple but modern overnight accommodation, riders won't have any trouble putting a roof over their heads in Jefferson.

Roads & Biking

Northeast Texas covers more area than many states. Road conditions range from flat and straight to dark, canopied, and twisty with a touch of Spanish moss thrown in for good measure. From cruisers to dual sports, riders won't be disappointed in the roads around Jefferson.

Books & Maps

- *The Texas Overland Expedition of 1863* by Richard Lowe, State House, ISBN 978-1886661127, available used online



Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

- *Caddo: Visions of a Southern Cypress Lake* by Carolyn Brown and Thad Sitton, Texas A&M University Press, ISBN 978-1623492397, \$30

Resources

- Jefferson Tourism, www.visitjeffersontexas.com
- The Captain's Castle Bed and Breakfast, www.captainscastle.com
- Caddo Lake Paddle-Wheel Steamboat Tours, www.gracefulghost.com

Motorcycles & Gear

2015 Indian Chief Vintage and Roadmaster

Helmet: Nolan N104

Jacket: REV'IT! Oxford with Powerlet Microclimate H1 Liner w/ G1 Remote and Garment Controller

Pants: BMW City 2 Pants

Boots: Sidi Adventure GORE-TEX

Gloves: BMW GS Dry