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**Trans-America Trail, Part 1:
Tennessee to Southern Colorado**

BANJOS, TEARS, & CORN NUBBINS

Text and Photography:
Joseph Trey



I have arrived in Tellico Plains, TN, and the official starting point of the Trans-America Trail (TAT). It took thousands of miles just to get here, but as I prepare to make my first turn onto the trail, I feel a weight and a reality of what I am about to do that I did not expect.



“It took me many miles before I realized, I was not missing the trail, the trail was *finding* me . . .”

- Joseph Trey

Early morning passing through a Mississippi farm just east of Arkansas.

In the beginning, the trail was muddy from constant rain. So, any dry day was a good day to stop, reflect, and enjoy the view.

My emotionally-charged adventure in July began far north of Tennessee in Connecticut. I flew in from Colorado to pick up my dad’s KLR, still mourning his loss from October 2012 when a car pulled out in front of his BMW Funduro. Riding and speaking to his KLR is like having him with me. I ask if he, too, can hear the famous banjo picking from *Deliverance*, or if it is only in my head? I snap an official “I was here” photo and my adventure begins . . .

Day 1: Detours and Whiskey

Day one. Hour one. I am already detoured due to construction. I struggle to find a way to reconnect to the trail and try to temper my frustration. Nerves and the rumors of slick-rock water crossings in Tennessee have me a bit anxious. I didn’t expect to re-route so soon. I take a deep breath to focus. Riding alone in the woods of Tennessee has



me on edge. In an effort to alleviate the frustration, my first diversion is to Blythe's Ferry, a location that is home to the Cherokee Removal Memorial Park and the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. This section of the Tennessee River is only passable via the bridge, so I double back and cross over. Word from the trail tells me of a rider who lost their Dakar to the rushing water only days ahead of me. I suspect I am subconsciously routing myself around the more serious water crossings. I am disappointed but also relieved.

After a morning of acclamation, high emotions, and an inaccurate trail selection, I decide to head toward Lynchburg, TN. Unaware that I am entering the Midwest time zone, I stroll into the country's most famous "dry" county and home of the largest producer of Tennessee whiskey. The time change affords me a spot on the final Jack Daniel's tour of the day, which I gladly accept. At the end of the tour, I am given the opportunity to purchase a commemorative bottle filled with "free" whiskey, a work around to the county's ban on alcohol sales. I defer and instead backtrack to

Tullahoma, TN, where I enjoy some tasty carnitas at Las Trojas before bunking down at the Quality Inn for the night.

Day 2: Wrong Turn to the Dam Park

Other than water crossings, Tennessee does not get a lot of press among the TAT community, so getting my bearings continues to be a challenge. I feel lost, both emotionally and geographically. I soon confirm that I am off track again when I view the words, "*Audemus jura nostra defendere*" translated to mean, "We dare defend our rights," which just so happens to be the state motto of Alabama ... and also happens NOT to be on the TAT! It's the journey, right?

I return to Tennessee and Pickwick Landing State Park. In the 1840s it was a popular riverboat stop before becoming home to one of two dams on the Tennessee River established by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Nowadays, it hosts some of the biggest fishing tournaments of the year.

I arrive early and call it a day. I re-familiarize myself with my GPS tracks and roll

charts in an attempt to get in sync with the trail. After ordering the park's "dam steak," I remember that I am in catfish country. One bite sets a future reminder in my taste buds to order the catfish next time!

Day 3: Friendly Faces in Unfamiliar Places

I wake up determined to stay on the trail today. Things click along nicely as I dance between the raindrops, using my rain gear to scare away any substantial moisture. As I plow mile after mile of deep sand, keeping dry by the overhanging trees, I think back to *RoadRUNNER's* Maggie Valley event and a question fielded by Dakar Rider, Kevin Muggleton. When asked, "How do you ride through all of that deep sand?" He replied with a smile, "Go fast!" Taking his advice to heart, I push past the instinct to slow down. I simply turn the throttle, and my nerves and the KLR move in and out of the sand like a fish in water.

As sand becomes firm soil, I turn left when I should have turned right. "Right" being a relative term. A white-haired woman races down her driveway in a way that can only

be described as a shuffle sprint. A man to my left sits on the porch of their trailer. He makes a gesture that resembles a wave before returning to the contemplation of the length of his right shoelace. She introduces herself as Ms. Myrna as her yippee dog chomps down on my shifting boot like it's a freshly cooked rabbit. My fear of trespassing subsides as she expresses delight in having a visitor.

She shares stories with me about how she catches raccoons with "corn nubbins" and the best way to "cook 'em up." She continues with gossip as if I am a fellow neighbor, familiar with the players in her stories. I smile at the special circumstances that have put two disparate strangers together at this unpredictable moment, thanks to the TAT. I recognize that the TAT is not just about passing through places on dirt roads. It is about stopping and getting to know the people who call these *places* home.

At the end of a long day, I settle into a Ramada Inn in Batesville, MS. I consider looking for a place with raccoon on the menu, but instead I opt for gas station chicken.

Day 4: Waiting for a Sign

The sun warms my back as it rises. I find peace and rhythm in the early morning when only farmers are awake to wave as I pass. As the sun reaches my shoulders, I am presented with several legitimate water crossings. They are not simple straight passages across. They twist around trees and out of sight. I walk along the edge, pondering the depth and length of the challenge

in front of me. I call out to nearby cows for a second opinion, but they are too busy chewing their cud to assist me. I enter the water with enough momentum and control to move forward, while navigating the rocks and finally making it to the other end.

Later in the day, I cross the Mississippi River into Arkansas. Within a few miles, a hand-painted sign welcoming TAT riders to Trenton, AR, appears like an oasis. I am overwhelmed with excitement and a bit of relief. This would be a great moment for a riding partner and a high-five! Farther up the road, a mangy but friendly old dog greets me. His 70-year old owner, Percy, soon follows him. Percy offers me a Coke, and we sit together on the front porch of the old Robert Heidelberger & Company building, which now houses antiques and refreshments for TAT riders, courtesy of Percy and his family. He explains how he doesn't travel much but getting to meet the passing riders is like seeing the world for him. Eventually I move on toward Heber Springs and the Greers Ferry Dam, which was dedicated by President John F. Kennedy just a week before his assassination. It is yet another piece of history worthy of a diversion.

Day 5: Pushing Through to Pork Chops

This morning starts off with strong rain followed by several heart-racing water crossings. Soon, I am faced with numerous road closures and detours. Tracks by these signs reveal where previous riders have forged onward, but I suspect little sympathy if I run into trouble. I navigate west toward the

Just South of La Veta, CO:
In a series of lucky turns, I manage to navigate around the hail laden rain clouds all day before a quick stop at home.

Dodged a bullet or at least quite a bit of hail just north of Trinidad, CO. I better filter this before putting it into the Jetboil for a fresh cup of coffee!

Many sections of the trail, such as this segment in Arkansas, resulted in unexpected detours (aka new adventures)!





Riding into the town of Westcliffe, CO, I discover that they named a park and a road after me (the Adventure Hermit). How else do you explain it?

Trains, no planes, and a KLR: Pausing for a moment to appreciate and reflect on the rail system that was so vital to early Trans-America travel.

Ozark National Forest, adjusting at each closed road, before arriving south and east of Fayetteville, AR. I go north for a shower and some pork chops courtesy of the Mexico Viejo restaurant.

Day 6: In-Transit to Oklahoma

After a short morning ride I cross into Oklahoma. The trees shade me from the sun as I ride beside the Illinois River. The owner of the Eagle Bluff Resort rides up and greets me on his ATV as I stop to take photos of the Chewey Bridge. He asks about my Connecticut "In-Transit" license plate, and I explain how I am traveling home to Colorado.

He looks suspicious, stating that there must be a more direct path than through Tahlequah, OK. I describe the TAT and my trip so far and suggest he get the word out about his resort as a possible stopping point for future riders. We shake hands, and I continue my day weaving in and out of non-descript wooded areas before selecting Enid, OK, for a quick stop before tomorrow's journey to the Great Salt Plains Lake.

Day 7: I'm Going to See the Wizard

It is very early and I take advantage of a spot by the Great Salt Plains Lake to fire up my Jetboil and enjoy a cup of coffee next to the KLR. The area is known for its selenite crystals; I scour nearby hoping to find a souvenir, but my lack of excavation skills becomes quickly apparent. An additional bypass near the National Wildlife Refuge reveals no animals seeking sanctuary. It is dry and lifeless. A bit discouraged, I continue to Oklahoma





Pickwick Landing State Park in Tennessee:
Not every bridge leads to somewhere
but each and every one deserves a look.

on farm roads, waving to Mennonite farmers, and inching my way as I pass over the main road every few miles. It seems impractical to keep this up just to stay on dirt. I decide, instead, on a short diversion north to Liberal, KS, to say hi to Dorothy Gale from The Wizard of Oz at the Dorothy's House & Land of Oz museum on behalf of my daughter, Nya.

Day 8: Perseverance Pays Off

After waking up in Guymon, OK, I soon reach New Mexico where the Santa Fe Trail crosses over from Oklahoma. A confusing array of signs stating "Private Property" makes it unclear how to proceed. I don't want to trespass, but I also don't want to skirt around this short, scenic section of the TAT. So, I proceed cautiously hoping to find someone to ask. As I'm navigating scattered rocks in sand, I discover my second optimistic sign of the trip, "Motorcycles this way!" I turn left as the sign suggests and find myself in Branson, CO. Two hours and three hail storms later I enter La Veta, CO. Any day at the La Veta Inn is a good day, but arriving on National Tequila Day is an extra special way to celebrate the halfway point of the TAT!

To be continued . . . **RR**

The Trans-America Trail: One Less Ride on the Bucket List!



In my experience, there are three things most motorcycle riders have in common: a sense of adventure, a keen awareness of their surroundings, and a bucket to hold a wish list of rides. If you are a dirt or dual sport rider, than your bucket will inevitably contain the mecca of U.S. Cross Continental off-road travel, the Trans-America Trail, better known as the TAT.

Sam Corroero, who conceived the TAT, was simply out to fulfill a personal dream of charting out a coast-to-coast off-pavement motorcycle adventure. What he did was spark the dreams and sense of adventure in riders from all over the world! Years later, hundreds of riders have completed their route either in a zealous turn-by-turn approach or by merely using it as a guide. Some ride it in sections, over years, while others ride it straight through.

As a dual sport rider, I have chosen to use the route as a guide to allow for personal detours and exploration. My plan is to travel continuously with a brief respite at home in Colorado, where I will also pick up a riding partner, Luke Swab, before traversing to the Pacific Coast. In the end, I hope to add my name to the list of riders who have crossed the U.S. on the Trans-America Trail.

Facts & Information



Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

In General

Tennessee is known for some treacherous water crossings—not so much for the depth, but they can be slippery. The rest of the trail toward Colorado offers a handful of moderate sand challenges but minimal technical sections. Mostly manageable, it includes wide forest trails and farm roads. If traveling during the optimal time of late June – September, be prepared for intense heat and bucketing rains.

Conditions of the course often change, so follow the online communities in addition to studying the roll charts and GPS files. Pack light but bring the right tools and extra parts. Do not count on finding them on the road.

How to Get There

An ongoing debate exists on how to get to the starting point at Tellico Plains, TN, and then home. Trailer? Ship? Ride? If you are shipping and flying in, then Knoxville, TN, is the closest airport, which is about an hour from Tellico Plains.

Roads & Biking

The dangers of the Tennessee water crossings cannot be overemphasized enough. Beyond that, the rest of the trail to Colorado is fairly easy. It's suitable for any size and any type of adventure bike, as long as you are moderately comfortable off-road.

Food & Lodging

While many choose to camp, the trail was designed for stopping in towns each night. If you don't plan on camping, be warned; in the Midwest, oil companies often book all available rooms. There are many places to grab groceries, and gas stations serve up

some surprisingly great catfish and ribs. Lastly, the La Veta Inn is the culinary highlight and unofficial halfway point of the full TAT. They offer beautiful rooms, uniquely painted by native artists, and always serve distinctive local dishes with a full bar.

Books & Maps

The number one source for roll charts and GPS files is www.trans-amtrail.com.

Secondary local maps, picked up en route, are an invaluable resource for creating alternate routes as you go.

Resources

- Riders sharing their experience in real time via Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/45838518814
- Official TAT Facebook page with updates for travelers and discounts for businesses along the TAT: www.facebook.com/TransAmTrail
- Dual Sport Touring (retail/parts store and shipping/receiving services, if you are shipping your bike), 2887 W Lamar Alexander Parkway, Friendsville, TN, (865) 995-9505, webstore.dualsporttouring.com

Motorcycle & Gear

2008 Kawasaki KLR 650

- Helmet: Shoei J-Cruise
Jacket: Firstgear Teton Textile
Pants: Joe Rocket Phoenix 2.0
Boots: Sidi Canyon GORE-TEX
Gloves: Held STEVE and AIR, Scorpion Cool Hand
Comm System: Sena SMH10