America: Coast to Coast

This summer an expedition fund grant from Queen Mary University contributed to me and a friend travelling from Los Angeles to New York City over the space of twenty five days. Throughout our travels we would pass through sixteen states and travel over 4,000 miles by road but to begin with we had to get across the Atlantic. A five and a half hour coach journey from our home in deepest darkest Devon was followed up by a six hour wait in the almost cathedral like surroundings of the newly built Terminal 5 at Heathrow Airport before we were finally on our way. The flight to Los Angeles was going to take 11 hours and we’d already been awake since midnight the night before so we were hoping not to get stuck sitting next to a strange person or a businessman on his phone for the entire journey. Fortunately we ended up sitting next to an American lady returning home to Los Angeles who proceeded to give us so much advice on the unbearably long journey (highlights included being told that we should drink water instead of soda because soda was bad for your teeth…really?); that we ended up nicknaming her our ‘American mother’.

We finally arrived in Los Angeles at about 3pm local time even though we’d left London at mid-day and after saying goodbye to our newly found surrogate mother we began to attempt to find our way to our hotel where we’d be meeting the rest of our tour group early the next morning. After about half an hour we’d found our way there but the jetlag and the effects of nearly twenty hours awake was really beginning to hit home. Even stranger was the fact that Los Angeles was gray and gloomy and colder than when we’d left England; sun, sea and surf indeed. After a brief foray across the street to get something to eat, I say across the street but this was some four lanes of traffic each way – bigger than a British motorway, and nearly getting run over a number of times we abandoned any idea of checking out LA that evening and collapsed into bed at the impressive time of 9pm.

We awoke early the next day and met our tour leader/van driver/repository of all things Americana and the rest of the tour group. The company who we’d be travelling with is called ‘Trek America’ and they organise small group tours across the States where 10/11 people all share a minivan and a tour guide and travel together for the duration of the holiday. After saying our hellos to everyone we jumped aboard the minivan for the first time and set off for our first destination, Las Vegas.

The weather completely changed as we left Southern California and drove into the Mojave Desert; from being overcast and cloudy we were driving straight into 40c plus temperatures and strong winds that made you feel like you were in a tumble drier. Las Vegas itself was incredible, it looms out of the desert almost like a mirage or a crashed alien spaceship and never ceases to surprise during your entire stay. While there we saw all the famous casinos such as the MGM Grand and Caesar’s Palace, saw a show and dabbled in some gambling. Amazingly I managed to leave Vegas over $100 up, small change but proof that the house doesn’t always win (just 99% of the time). However the highlight of our two days in Vegas was going to a local shooting club where I got to fire a Glock 19 handgun after just walking in off the street, something unthinkable in the United Kingdom. The United States’ obsession
with firearms is I feel one of the biggest cultural differences between our two countries but having had the chance to fire one, I can understand the fascination a little more.

After Las Vegas we spent the next week or so travelling through the South-West visiting the states of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. While in this region we got to take in the incredible natural monuments of the Grand Canyon and Zion National Park in Utah and to visit Santa Fe, New Mexico, one of the oldest cities in North America and home to unique colonial Spanish architecture. After the South-West we passed through Texas, where it’s true what they say, everything definitely is bigger, especially the food portions!

We then headed onto New Orleans where we had a fun two nights partying and seeing the sights of the old French Quarter, which was especially interesting for me as a History student. While in New Orleans we also drove through the Ninth Ward, which was heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina and it’s amazing how little has been done to repair the damage. It still looks incredibly run down and it’s amazing that such poverty exists just next door to the tourist based glitz of the French Quarter. Following New Orleans we headed deep into the American South, which contrary to stereotypical Hollywood depictions was probably the friendliest part of the States that we visited; aside from the fact that the locals seem unable to recognise a British accent, I got asked if I was Australian or Irish in the space of two days.

Having camped and driven through Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Virginia and gone white water rafting in Eastern Tennessee, we arrived in Washington D.C just in time for the 4th July celebrations. Decked head to toe in American flags and other cheesy regalia, we couldn’t have look any more like tourists but apparently we fooled a number of people; as throughout the day we were constantly asked for photos by people as varied as an elderly Mexican lady and a group of Korean girls. A photographer from the National Archives also took a picture of me and one of the guys on our tour. I still think it’s pretty funny that somewhere in the National Archives will be a picture of me with the caption ‘Patriotic American Celebrating Independence Day’...if only they knew the truth. After enjoying the incredible 4th July fireworks display over the Lincoln Memorial it was time to move on again. The next day we travelled through Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey and onto our final destination, New York City.

After saying goodbye to a number of our tour group who were flying back home instead of heading into New York City, we jumped into a taxi with possibly the craziest taxi driver I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting and entered NYC. While there we did all the usual touristy things such as the Empire State Building, Central Park, Times Square and the Statue of Liberty. We also visited the site of the Battle of Brooklyn Heights, an important historical event related to my dissertation subject this year, although sadly it had been largely built over but it was still interesting to visit. Later that day we also visited Ground Zero and the 9/11 memorial which was incredibly interesting as the 9/11 attacks are one of my strongest memories of childhood and it proved to be more emotionally affecting than I would have thought.
Due to the long duration of our stay and the incredibly varied amount of incredible places we visited this report has been very condensed and limited in what it’s been able to discuss but I feel that I gained a great deal from my expedition. I got to visit an amazingly varied collection of states ranging from California to the desert states of the South-West to the urban East Coast. During our expedition we went from camping in towns with less than 1,000 people to staying in hotels in the middle of massive cities of over 10 million people and I witnessed firsthand the incredible diversity in both people and geographic features that the United States contains. I feel this has really increased my knowledge of the United States and will directly benefit my dissertation research and writing this academic year.