

# In Search of the American Dream

Andrew Kerr is an Oxfordshire photographer whose work has previously been exhibited at Photo London, the UK's biggest photography event, held annually in Somerset House in London. The show brings together the best contemporary photography from around the world.



**D**uring Oxfordshire Artweeks, a series of Kerr's work – Americana – will be on show in the heart of the pretty town of Watlington, along with work from other members of the Watlington Photographers Collective. It's a long way from the wilds of the USA but step inside the Watlington Social Club and you'll find yourself on a whistlestop motorbike tour of the length and breadth of 21st century America.

"I've always had a camera and a motorbike, and over the years the bikes got bigger and the cameras smaller. A few years ago a friend was keen to ride across America and I didn't take much persuading. I had a friend there who was an ex-motorcycle cop and with his help we bought two motorbikes on eBay. We started in New Hampshire heading down the East Coast, from Boston to New York and Washington,

then on through the Appalachian Mountains down to Georgia and on to the Mississippi.

I found America to be a place of extraordinary contrasts. Just an hour from Washington where senators dine in classy restaurants, we found very small, poor towns where we felt as if we'd stepped back in time 100 years. There were enormous new churches and we wondered where all the people to populate them came from. The mystery was solved when the young woman at the motel explained how everyone went to church on a Sunday morning: if you didn't you'd get a note through your door asking if you were ill, and a visit from the pastor a few days later. Interestingly, as soon as she realised we were from the UK, her Appalachian accent dropped away, and she spoke the most cut-glass English. It turned out she was from Virginia Water in Surrey and had fallen for a local lad.





Because she'd moved to such a conservative community, she'd had elocution lessons so she could blend in.

From Georgia, we headed down Highway 61 to New Orleans, later crossing the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway which is the longest bridge in the United States. It crosses 24 miles of water and from one end you can't see the other: we began the ride across in glorious sunshine and reached the far end in the pouring rain.

One of the places we stopped in Mississippi was a small town called Clarksdale. It's not much bigger than Wallingford and yet the Blues originated there. It's where Robert Johnson was born and raised in the 1920s, and lots of other musicians came from there, including Bessie Smith and Ike Turner. It was also the actor Morgan Freeman's hometown and we saw ▶





him there once. He was telling a story of how he found out that the local High School ran its end of year Prom over two nights – one for white students and one night for Afro-American students. When he queried this, he was told the school hall wasn't big enough to accommodate all the students, hence the two nights (and, of course, the fundamental question he was asking was side stepped). His response was to give them the money to enlarge the hall to accommodate all their final year students.

We stayed in an extraordinary B&B, The Shack Up Inn, which was run by a couple of blues enthusiasts who had, over time, collected together old slave shacks or 'share-cropper shacks' (the post-emancipation term for them) from around the area and moved them to their property to serve as the guest rooms. The big barn was a great music venue.

From Louisiana, we biked across the southern states amid spectacular scenery through New Mexico, Los Alamos in Albuquerque where they developed and tested the atomic bomb and on to Utah. In the vast desert we saw occasional tourist groups on Harley Davidsons accompanied by enormous trailers and back-up mechanics, but we travelled taking just what we could carry. Before you set out you know, rationally, that the distances are huge but nothing can really prepare you for riding for hours where there's just nothing but desert and the mountains in the distance don't seem to get any closer.

Despite our plan, we found many unexpected things. For example, when we reached the Grand Canyon there was a road closure so we took an alternative route via a little-known place called Kanab which was scattered with old

“

over the years the bikes got bigger and the cameras smaller



film sets: it's Utah's 'Little Hollywood' where lots of B movies and TV shows were filmed including the original Lone Ranger series. We were also surprised when heading inland from the Northern California coastline to avoid the 15°C sea mist: just a few miles away inland the temperature was 30°C. There were major forest fires although we couldn't see the flames, but we found ourselves riding through smoke and burnt-out fields. That was just one memorable moment on a tremendous trip which I'm thrilled to be sharing with the visitors to the Watlington Photographers Collective's exhibition during Artweeks (venue 137).



[andrewkerrphotography.org](http://andrewkerrphotography.org)