Travel and Adventure: On the American Whiskey Trail

by John Blanchette

This was a dream assignment, following the sweet, burnt-caramel aromas that waft through the hills and valleys of America's Whiskey Trail.

Jimmy Russell, bourbon legend and creator of Wild Turkey 101, greets visitors to the Wild Turkey distillery in Barton, Ky. Photo by John Blanchette. You'll find a whole slew of rollicking live-music clubs, record shops, Western-wear stores, barbecue joints, and more along Honky-tonk Row in Nashville, Tenn. Photo by John Blanchette. The serene rural road leading into the hollow where Makers Mark distills its bourbon is typical of the quiet rural beauty on the historic American Whiskey Trail. Photo by John Blanchette. Driving between Kentucky and Tennessee, heading deep into the hollows, we reached the gleaming copper kettles that produce America's intoxicating "water of life" as we journeyed into American history and tradition.

I have always been a bourbon lover. It is my drink of choice. However, until I followed the American Whiskey Trail I didn't understand how patriotic a decision it was.

Bourbon is the spirit of America.

The U.S. Congress declared it so in 1964. It is our contribution to the world of liquor. Unlike scotch, which is made mostly from malted barely, good Bourbon is generally between 70 percent and 80 percent corn, with some rye or wheat and barely. Bourbon is aged at least two years in charred, new American white oak barrels. It has a bold, smooth and distinctive flavor that is immediately recognizable.

I couldn't wait to hit the trail.

The tour began at Mount Vernon, Va., just outside of Washington, D.C. George Washington slept there and so did I. You can make reservations for visiting and dining through the organization that restored and preserves the property, www.mountvernon.org.

A must see is the museum and the star attraction, George's dentures. They are made of animal and human teeth fashioned in a wire frame and held in place with lead, which is probably what killed him.

More importantly, Washington was one of the country's first commercial whiskey distillers. A Scotsman who was managing the 300 employees and 35 separate crops that grew on the wide-ranging farm, told him that the fields had the grains and he had the knowledge to produce a nice whiskey, so they did.

In 1797, they opened the distillery and gristmill, which held five pot stills. When George died two years later, it was one of his biggest profit makers, earning The Father of Our Country 60 cents a gallon.

From Mount Vernon, I flew to Louisville, to begin our tour of central Kentucky, the Mecca of bourbon. Louisville is a beautiful city situated on the Ohio River, with the largest Victorian neighborhood of any city in America. The downtown historic center is second only to New York City's Soho district in the number of iron-front buildings, and it is the only city in America that has a four-story Louisville slugger baseball bat

pitched against the side of a factory.

I stayed at 21 C, a museum hotel that is full of whimsy and unusual contemporary art. The men's room is a must see, and the restaurant, Proof, pays homage to Kentucky's favorite drink.

The next day we departed for Jim Beam, the first of seven bourbon distilleries open to the public on the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. It is the world's largest Bourbon distiller and the maker of Knob Creek.

About 25 miles south of Louisville, it stockpiles an impressive reservoir of spirits. You can also visit the Jacob Beam House and the Outpost, where you can view a film that details the Beam family's growth into a distilling dynasty.

Almost all the distilleries I visited are located in isolated, rural areas, usually at the end of long, winding, single lane-roads through forests and hills, lying at the bottom of a hollow. You need a map to find your way and you could still get lost, as I did.

I have a theory. Early distilling was probably best done away form the sight of tax collectors (revenuers) and the law, although most will insist that it is the pure limestone waters of the unspoiled rural hillsides that moonshiners sought. Anyway, you find these gigantic stills and storage facilities ranging over acres of property hidden in the middle of nowhere. Make your own decision.

Bardstown is home to Barton Distillery, which will be opening a new state-of-the-art visitors center in 2009, and the Oscar Getz Whiskey Museum. It was there that I learned the origin of the term booze. In 1840, Philadelphia shopkeeper E. G. Booz started putting his own label on whiskey. Soon after, folks started asking for a bottle of "Booz."

The Maker's Mark distillery dates to 1805 and has been named a Historic National Monument. The wood-framed buildings lie along Hardin's Creek near the town of Loretto, Ky. You get to dip your own bottle in the signature red wax when you make a purchase.

Located in spectacular bluegrass and thoroughbred horse country near Versailles, Ky., is Woodford Reserve Distillery. On the label it still bears its earlier name, Labrot & Graham. It's been fully restored to its 1800s splendor and is also a National Landmark. Unlike most distilleries, it triple distills its whiskey for extra smoothness and it is the only distillery that charges for the tour ($5).

I took in the horse races at nearby Keeneland, a great place to see the 2-year-olds make their first appearances. You can also bet on their talents if you like their appearance.

In Lawrenceburg, Ky., I visited Hunter S. Thompson's favorite distillery, Wild Turkey. Sitting on a crest overlooking the Kentucky River I met the legendary Master Distiller, Jimmy Russell, the man responsible for the Wild Turkey 101 brand, and he personally took me on a tour of the facility.

Later that day I dined at the beautiful Holly Hill Inn in the Victorian town of Midway. Owners Chris and Quita Michael are both graduates of the Culinary institute of America. Before dinner we were served a Manhattan, the traditional Bourbon cocktail, and after dinner Wild Turkey's American Honey liquor provided a sweet ending to my last day in Kentucky.

It was off to Tennessee and the sipping whiskeys of George Dickel and Jack Daniels.

Much like the Hatfields and McCoys, there's a bit of rivalry between Kentucky and Tennessee. The actual difference between the two is that in Tennessee the final process is gently filtering the whiskey through 10-foot-tall vats of freshly burned sugar maple charcoal chips, before aging in the barrel.

I have to admit a preference for Tennessee Whiskey, especially the single barrel Jack Daniels, my favorite of all on the American Whiskey Trail.

Located outside of Nashville, these are the only Tennessee distilleries on the American Whisky Trail open to the public. And they are both in the middle of nowhere. Keep your map handy.

Dickel is in Cascade Hollow, Tenn. (I saw wild turkeys in the field above the distillery and wondered if the feud was on).

Jack Daniels is in Lynchburg, Tenn., which has no apparent population, although they claim 361 residents. It's the oldest registered distillery in the United States.

IF YOU GO:

The Distilled Spirits Council of the United States has detailed information on the American Whiskey Trail, with tours running April through October, including maps, pamphlets and brochures, with contact information for historic sights, distilleries and guided tours, www.distilledspirits.org, (202) 682-8840.

When you're in the South, try the cheese grits, corn pudding and fried green tomatoes. I enjoyed them at Proof, Kreso's Restaurant in Barton, Ky., a popular local hangout, and at the Griffin Gate Resort and Spa in Lexington, Ky.

In Nashville, Tenn., I stayed at the beautifully restored Hermitage Hotel and dined at one of the best restaurants in town, Sunset Grill. Here I enjoyed the only mint julep on the tour, made with George Dickel whisky (in the Scotish tradition there's no "e" in his whisky).

When you're in "Music City," you must visit the historic Ryman Auditorium, original home of the Grand Ole

Opry, and feel the presence of the past. The great Bill Monroe introduced Bluegrass music here, and the Carter Family, Uncle Dave Macon, Hank Williams and Roy Acuff, among many others, entertained millions when WMF Radio boomed out its signal across the country on Saturday night.

Just down the street is the Country Music Hall of Fame, a few hundred yards from Honky Tonk Alley and the bars, restaurants and clubs that made the city famous. For the best pulled-pork shoulder sandwich in Nashville, walk into Jack's Barbecue.

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