

The truck stops here

A Pa. crossroads town, Breezewood, isn't known for long stays or luxe accommodations. But it's more inviting than it looks.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

I expected to live my entire life without price-shopping for truck-stop showers. Then I spent the night in Breezewood.

The adventure began last August when my main squeeze James and I drove to Colorado. We passed through Breezewood, Pa., as do many drivers heading to the Rust Belt and beyond.

"What do you think about vacationing here for a week," James asked. I laughed loudly and dismissed the idea.

If you've been there, you understand why. Breezewood has been a travel hub for centuries. It was a stagecoach stop in the late 1700s and then became a stop on the Lincoln Highway, America's first cross-country road. The Pennsylvania Turnpike opened in 1940, and thousands of World War II veterans exited at Breezewood, stopping at what now is the Gateway Travel Plaza to trade their unit patches for meals. Today, Motorists driving between I-70 and the turnpike are forced off the highway and onto a congested half-mile stretch of expensive gas stations, fast-food joints, truck stops and motels. That's what people do in Breezewood, I thought. Get a quick caffeine fix, then refuel and get back on the road. They don't sleep there.

"I'm game," I said last summer, accepting James's challenge. "But only for one night."

By the time we finally rolled into town last month, I was excited about our adventure.

I had learned about Pike 2 Bike, a graffiti-covered, crumbling section of the original four-lane turnpike that was abandoned 50 years ago after the two-lane tunnels became bottlenecks. We packed bike shorts and were ready to explore. But on our first day, I was determined to walk up and down the Breezewood strip, U.S. Route 30, to better understand this town people love to hate.

In the shadow of prominently placed no-pedestrian signs, we set off single file, along the shoulder — looking like hobos — and scuttled across intersections between groaning semis.

During our stroll down the strip, where 18-wheelers often outnumber four-wheelers, James and I counted close to a dozen vacant buildings, including a former Wendy's and KFC. We wandered around an empty, weed-filled motel lot; inside a chain-link fence sat a pool filled with brown water. Several businesses pleaded for workers. Taco Bell's sign made me smile: "Need a job? Come taco bout it."

Among the newest properties was the Holiday Inn Express, which sold in its lobby Hungry Man frozen dinners, build-your-own six packs of beer and a snow globe of Pennsylvania covered bridges. The busiest place (and our lunch spot) was Sheetz, in front of the touch-screen kiosks that facilitate made-to-order food.

At the Gateway — where you can see displays of the soldiers' patches — we popped into the gift shop, and I bought a miniature license plate with my name on it, skipping "The Complete Venison Cookbook." Upstairs, we found a laundromat and arcade, and a quiet lounge for truckers that offered complimentary Bibles in Spanish.

Having passed Crawford's Museum many times, I was hopeful about finding some culture in town. Alas, we discovered that the museum sign is simply a leftover from the building's days of exhibiting taxidermed animals. Today, it's a sports souvenir shop — offering a frenzy of Pittsburgh Steelers tchotchkes. Some of the animal displays remain, cohabitating in this odd space. A Kodiak bear stands on his hind legs in the sale section; some of his claws were plucked out over the years. An elephant's head rests on the back wall, its ears splayed, tusks stretching out over the baseball caps.

Before dinner, we left town, driving past farms and orchards, and slowing for bunnies scampering across the road. We stopped at a half-dozen covered bridges just long enough for selfies and found Gravity Hill, an optical illusion that makes cars look like they're rolling uphill. (It was underwhelming to one of us and delightful to the other.)

That night at the Quality Inn Breeze Manor, a tidy hilltop motel, I found a walking path to the truck-service station, which was lit up like a ballfield. One truck carried 10 colorful Mini Coopers, another logs, another FedEx packages. Standing on a knoll, I watched the endless parade of trucks and was enthralled while listening to their strange noises until bed beckoned.

The next morning, we enjoyed a large and healthy breakfast at the 1788 Inn, a newly renovated bed-and-breakfast just beyond the strip — but not far enough away to



escape the constant din of rumbling trucks. Fueled up for biking, we drove to the start of the Pike 2 Bike trail and met Murray Schrotenboer, a gray-bearded entrepreneur who runs Grouseland Tours and has been riding the abandoned section of turnpike for nearly 20 years.

Under overcast skies, our small group set off. We pedaled at a comfortable pace, with gentle climbs and descents, and Schrotenboer narrated a history of the route starting with William Vanderbilt and a failed railroad project. In the old turnpike median, weeds grew to shoulder height and butterflies darted around wildflowers. Nature was repossessing its land. Locals describe it as post-apocalyptic.

We rode single file through two tunnels — dank, foggy, pitch black stretches, one more than a mile long. Condensation made the interior drippy, in some places like a waterfall. Our headlights shone cones of visibility through the dark droplets of water.

"We're 400 feet underground," Schrotenboer said, reminding us that we were under a mountain. We pulled over in an empty asphalt lot and he pointed to some trees. "This was once a Howard Johnson and Esso Station."

On the return, we passed a dozen other cyclists, including a family of six driving between York and Pittsburgh. Schrotenboer, who stopped us often for stories, pointed out the spots where parts of movies "The Road" and "Zombie eXs" were shot. At one of the tunnel entrances, he unlocked a door and led us to the former control, boiler and ventilation rooms for the tunnel. This surreal steampunk hideaway is accessible only on Schrotenboer's tour (although trespassers have found a way in), and I considered that alone worth the price. We walked by a fan the size of a jet engine, covered in bright graffiti, and continued about 150 feet into the gritty plenum, or attic, of the tunnel. Echoes bounced eerily back to the entrance.

After our five-hour, 17-mile tour, we were mud-splattered and



FROM TOP: The Pike 2 Bike trail runs along an abandoned section of the Pennsylvania Turnpike in Breezewood. Examples of taxidermed animals are remnants of Crawford's Museum's earlier incarnation. It now sells sports memorabilia. Gateway Travel Plaza, open 24 hours, is part of a city that has been a travel hub since the 18th century. The crossroads town is especially friendly to truckers.

sweaty. Inconveniently, we had checked out of our motel that morning. The previous day, we had learned that showers at the Gateway cost \$14. ("Pricey," I had muttered.) I suggested that we check out the less-spiffy Flying J across the street. Sure enough, that saved us \$2. I bought a shower pass from the cashier, walked to the basement and keyed in a code at the assigned room. Easy as pie.

With that, our Breezewood adventure was over. Driving out of town, I saw Bob Evans, Shell, Best Western and a fluttering Stars and

Stripes in my rearview mirror. In less than a mile, we were driving through green, rolling hills. I thought about the world we'd made — the crumbling facades, the abandoned highway, the declawed bear — and watched trucks across the median speeding toward a momentary stop in a strange yet utterly American town.

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If you go

WHERE TO STAY

The 1788 Inn
16200 Lincoln Hwy., Breezewood
814-626-1788
the1788inn.com

The Federal-style 1788 Inn is run by delightful hosts who care deeply about renovation and history. Each room has a fireplace and private bath with heated floor. Rooms from \$125, including full breakfast; call ahead for a la carte breakfast at \$25 for two.

Quality Inn Breeze Manor

16621 Lincoln Hwy., Breezewood
814-735-4311
choicehotels.com

Located on the Breezewood strip, the motel is a quarter-mile from the Pike 2 Bike trail. The Quality Inn has basic rooms, a clean outdoor pool, free continental breakfast, a view of the truck-service plaza and a black Labrador greeter named Sadie. Rooms from \$119.

WHERE TO EAT

Mother Trucker's Cafe

167 Posthouse Rd., Breezewood
814-735-4076
mothertruckerscafe.com

Located in the Flying J Travel Plaza, Mother Trucker's is one of the few non-fast options in Breezewood, although fast it is. Cafeteria-style sides start at \$2.36, including mac and cheese, cabbage and blueberry cobbler. Dinner plates, including with ham pot pie and pork sauerkraut, cost \$9.43.

Horn O Plenty

220 Wolfsburg Rd., Bedford
814-623-0522
myhornoplenty.com

A short detour from the covered-bridge tour, this farm-to-table restaurant is the antithesis of the Breezewood strip — a beautiful, natural setting with organically grown ingredients. Homemade sourdough and condiments, wood-fired pizza and entrees such as quinoa cakes and stuffed peppers, starting at \$16. Open 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday-Saturday and 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Sunday. Closed Mondays.

WHAT TO DO

Pike 2 Bike Behind the Scenes Guided Tours

Lincoln Highway (U.S. Route 30)
814-784-5000
pike2bike.com

Murray Schrotenboer's Grouseland offers 17-mile bike tours along the abandoned highway and through its tunnels, as well as otherwise inaccessible parts of the turnpike, such as the control room. Ride and



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tour last three to five hours, or add on for a deluxe tour with a hike. One rider, \$95; two, \$110; three or more, \$45 per person. Rental Cannondale bikes are available. If you venture out on your own, make sure to bring lights and water.

Covered Bridges of Bedford County Tour

Bedford County Visitors Bureau
814-623-1771

visitbedfordcounty.com/coveredbridges

Download a copy of this 100-minute driving tour or call for a brochure and map. The county has 14 century-old, hand-built covered bridges, nine of which are on the loop. Be sure to visit nearby Gravity Hill, an optical illusion where your car appears to roll uphill.

Bedford County Bike Loops

Bedford County Visitors Bureau
814-623-1771

visitbedfordcounty.com/biking

The county website has five printable maps of bike loops with lengths of 16 to 42 miles. Loops are generally rolling hills with light traffic and some good climbs. The rides pass farms, orchards and covered bridges.

End of the Road Marathon and Half Marathon

Forbes Road High School
159 Red Bird Dr., Waterfall
pike2bike.com/event

Bring your flashlight or headlamp for this race. Held Oct. 29, the marathon route follows the abandoned turnpike, with water stop volunteers dressed in apocalypse-themed attire. Be prepared for rough patches, potholes and several miles inside the abandoned tunnels.

INFORMATION

visitbedfordcounty.com

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