

Oklahoma: Riders on the storm

Notebook: Recipes

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Oklahoma: Riders on the storm

Most people go on holiday to escape bad weather.

Now you can pay to look for it.

Mark Stratton chases across Oklahoma in search of a twister

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MARY-ANNE SMRCKA leant over the counter of the family diner she'd run for 22 years and presented me with a framed photograph of Spunky the rooster. Mary-Anne's 15 minutes of fame were realised when she provided the chickens for a farmyard scene in Twister.

Smrcka's Diner is in prime tornado country near the north-west Oklahoma panhandle - close to Wakita, where the film was partially shot. "It took 15 takes to get the chicken scene right," Mary-Anne explained. "Spunky kept showing off by diving into the storm shelter." During filming a real twister had passed dangerously close to the film set.

"You oughta heard all those pony-tailed Californians carrying on," she laughed. "The rest of us locals just sat back and hee-hawed."

Everyone has a story to tell about tornadoes, not least my guide, Stephen Eric Levine, who'd run storm-chasing holidays for four years. He was a man given to hyperbole. To him, the Mid-West's storms were "beautiful" and "profound", a fusion of both God's will and the unique meteorological conditions that make Oklahoma so attractive to storm-chasers. "My mission is to do for the skies what Jacques Cousteau did for the seas," he liked to remind me, during our long days together on the road.

Fuelled by backwater diner cuisine and gallons of percolated coffee, this was our own personal road movie, but unlike Thelma and Louise we weren't running from trouble, we were looking for it -the meanest "kick-butt" storms we could find.

Life on the road was simplicity itself: motel rooms, fuel stops, lunches on the run - and all the time hoping for bad weather. We averaged 350 miles per day, the backdrop of russet-brown wheatfields and cerulean sky becoming reassuringly familiar. I quickly learnt to savour every nuance of

change in the landscape. The Cimarron river's caramel-spate waters, and the occasional brick grain silos - resembling martello towers - were cherished rewards for persevering with the infinitely straight roads. It was left to the wild turkeys' cavalier road tendencies to help maintain sharpness behind the wheel.

Stephen was keen to play down the chances of seeing a twister, as they'd been scarce this year in Oklahoma. Most tornadoes are quite weak and touch down for only several minutes. We needed to be in the right place at the right time to witness one. He guaranteed we'd see supercells, the intense thunderstorms that foster tornadoes, but conditions must be perfect for tornadic activity: an amalgam of warm rising air, multi-directional wind shear and enough energy for the storm to punch through an atmospheric cap. In 22 years of chasing, he'd seen just nine tornadoes.

Nevertheless, his blend of meteorology, ham-radio and reliance on divine intervention seemed to be working. The previous evening we'd been sitting in the red-leather alcove of the Silver Spur Diner in Woodward County, eating fried catfish and reflecting on a fruitless day's chasing. A thunderbolt shook the diner.

Outside, the rain sparkled like waterfalls of crystal as cloud-to-ground lightning bolts, with X-ray intensity, bleached the evening sky. We'd splashed back across the freeway to the Oil Inn, our motel, and from the relative dry of the veranda watched the supercharged thunderstorm, cooing at every sonorous thunderclap.

A storm-chaser's day begins with the Weather Channel forecasts of Heather Tesch and Marshall Seese. The previous evening had been wild - grapefruit-sized hail in North Carolina, a Texan town where every window was blown out, and 11 tornadoes - but what about today? Over grits and coffee, we discussed the forecasts and the question of where to intercept the day's storms. Central Kansas and northern Texas looked promising, but the distances between them were too great for us to backtrack if we picked the wrong storm to follow.

On gut instinct, Stephen selected south-west Oklahoma. We left Woodward travelling south on Highway 34, pausing to admire the delightful wooden railway station at the heart of the small town of Camargo. There was time to kill, for the storms weren't predicted until late afternoon. I'd heard that Cloud 9, another storm-chasing outfit, on a recent slack weather day drove their clients several hundred miles to Amarillo in Texas to experience the "Big Texan" restaurant - renowned for its ads for 72in beefsteaks. We settled for a fat-free walk through Boiling Springs State Park; the bottle-green forest of honey-locust and cottonwood trees and the sweet-smelling cedars were refreshing relief from the irascible prairie heat.

The hunt for twisters began shortly after we checked in to a Days Inn, off Interstate 40, near Elk City. When a big storm hits, you can count on never being alone; the shortwave CB radio began to crackle with the

animated conversation of fellow storm-chasers. Hurrying along the grid-like country roads, we were guided by reports of tennis-ball-sized hail and gushing winds. Stephen was optimistic. There was a tumble-drier sky overhead.

Through the wispy lower clouds, we could see the upper cumulus scurrying by in the opposite direction. Cloud shear was occurring, a prerequisite for tornado rotation. It was only with Radio K101's theatrically tense tornado warnings - "Take shelter, abandon mobile homes and leave the area" - that I briefly questioned what on earth I was doing here.

We stopped by the roadside close to the small town of Hobart, as Stephen spotted the supercell causing interest. I stepped out of the car and a clammy wind slithered across my skin. To the west, the sun was creeping beneath the lower cloud base and melting into the expansive plain; a lumbering thundercloud was about to extinguish the remaining daylight. As the supercell drew towards us, towers of convective air were forcing the thundercloud to billow ever upwards until its cauliflower-profile was looking precariously top-heavy.

"Look at the base," shouted Stephen above the now whining winds, "it's starting to rotate." Pure science fiction. This was the wall cloud - the initiation point of a tornado. "Think of it as like the collar of a drill. We're just waiting for the bit to appear," he added.

Dendritic flashes of lightning were skating across the sky and the thundercloud was enveloped with an exquisite pea-green tinge caused by curtains of hail. The wall cloud drooped alarmingly to one side - a funnel cloud had started to form. We looked at each other with a telepathically implied, "This is it". Surely, a twister would form. But one never did. The supercell quickly collapsed on itself, treating us only to a deluge of rain and pea-sized hail as it passed overhead. No tornado, but the experience had been - well - beautiful and profound.

Mark Stratton travelled as a guest of Cellet Travel Services (01564 794999) and America's Heartland (comprising Oklahoma, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska and Missouri). For a free information pack, including map and holiday itinerary suggestions, contact Cellet Travel Services.

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Twister basics

Two companies operate storm-chasing tours from the UK, using American ground operators. American & Worldwide Travel (01892 511894) offers a 13-night twister trip for £1,600 (accommodation only); flights to Oklahoma City from £449, including tax, with Continental. A week with Getaway (020 8313 0550) starts at £1,200, including meals and accommodation; flights from £493 with TWA.

In the US, Stephen Levine's company is Tornado Alley Safari, based in Richardson, Texas (001 972 889 0196; email thundereye@juno.com).

His eight-day tours cost about £615 (not including meals nor accommodation). I paid £75 a day for his services as a guide.

Cloud 9 (001 405 214 0320; email edwards@cloud9tours.com; operates out of Norman, Oklahoma; £1,300 for a two-week, land-only tour, including accommodation. Widespread Weather Services (001 760 776 1744; email wws@widespread.com is California-based; £1,900 for a two-week, land-only tour, including accommodation.

Best places

Oklahoma, Texas and Kansas - "Tornado Alley".

Best time

Mid-April to June.

Chances of success

Slim. No tour company will guarantee a tornado sighting. Most tornadoes are weak and do little damage.