



# FALL IN THE



*A foggy, frigid morning near Huntsville, Arkansas.*



# OZARKS

Story and photos by Tore Groenne



▶ THE ONLY PERSON OUTSIDE the tiny Branson Airport is a man with a solid gut, a thick white beard, and a baseball cap. He's rolling by on a lawn mower. Other than that, it's quiet. Sky is blue. Air is autumn cool. Sun is warm. It's a brilliant October day and I immediately figure out that at least one thing I've heard about the Ozarks is true: The hills are very steep. Before I even start working the pedals, I reach 45 MPH on a downhill flanked by vertical rocks. When I do start pedaling, it takes all my muscle to climb the following hill at four MPH. This is promising. I like hills. They mean views, change, and challenge.

There's not a car on the road, not a person in sight. The air smells of skunk, birds of prey circle above, and I wonder about the other things I've heard before coming to the Ozarks. I've heard that autumn here is beautiful when the leaves turn, setting the hillsides on fire, but even though *National Geographic* features this area in their "Drives of a Lifetime" series, I found very little about bike touring this region. I read that jobs down here are hard to come by, that around 30 percent of kids in some counties are undernourished, and that the area has the highest concentration of meth labs in the entire country. I also read that it's a place of country churches, pickup trucks, and hunters. The other night I watched the portrayal of a cold, bleak land inhabited by hillbillies, drug addicts, and wife beaters in the four-time Academy Award nominated *Winter's Bone*. But I know from experience that what you read and hear is not always what you find when you put your wheels on the ground, start pedaling, and go see for yourself.

## Into Arkansas

I roll through forests, up and down hills, and cross a bridge over one of the blue tentacles of the large, weirdly shaped Table Rock Lake. When I grab a drink at a gas station, two little kids, a brother and sister, come up and ask to borrow some money for food, and I get a call from Larry, one of two Warm Showers hosts in the area. I had sent him an email yesterday asking if I had room in his garden for my tent.

"We'll be back from church around eight tonight. You can just pull around back," he said, giving me directions, and I pedal toward Oak Grove, Arkansas, happy to have a place to stay for the

through Oak Grove. Front porches are deserted. I follow Larry's directions and continue down a small road and on up a footpath with thigh-high, damp grass. A yellowish light casts dim shadows by a dark brick house. There's an old wooden barn too. This must be the place. I sit down and wait.

## Larry's home

Larry and his wife Lajunta soon pull up and immediately invite me to stay in the guest room instead of on the lawn. Larry tells me I'm the first cyclist from Warm Showers to stop by in the year and a half he's been on the site. He's eager to talk and tells me he rode

Bush. Larry is a photographer, and portraits of his five daughters and almost twice as many grandchildren cover the walls. There are a few Bible quotes too.

"My family's been here since three brothers came out from Tennessee in the 1840s. My grandkids are the eighth generation of the family living here in Carroll County. I grew up in this house," Larry told me.

I asked him what first comes to mind if I say "The Ozarks."

"Well, traditionally it's probably people in overalls with straw hats and low education. But it's also rolling hills and great cycling!" he said with a smile.

We talk about bikes, touring, and the good people you meet on the road. I tell him I've met good people in all the countries I've cycled through, even the ones we normally hear bad stuff about. I tell him how I've been invited to stay with fundamentalists in north Pakistan's wild mountains and how villagers in the Iranian desert went out of their way to feed me and put me up for the night. I said that people offered my girlfriend and me shelter when we rode through areas full of land mines in Tajikistan, and told him how a German student I'd never met had given me keys to his apartment so I could let myself in after I rode for days through endless rain. Then there was the time Ecuadorian mountain peasants invited me into their hut made of logs and grass for a meal of llama when I was huddled by my tent in the freezing wind by the highest pass in the country. I tell him how I've stayed with nomads in Kyrgyzstan, policemen in Panama, and winemakers in central California. I've been to 70 countries and met good people in all of them. And now I'm sitting here in the Ozarks, invited into the house of strangers once again.

## In the country

We eat stacks of pancakes in the morning, and Larry insists on meeting me in Eureka Springs later in the day to show me around. Lajunta asks for my address so they can send me a Christmas card later in the year. Soon I ride alone through the hilly countryside. Dew covers grassy fields and



*The Ozarks are as steep as advertised. Much of the time, it's either racing downhill or a slow climb back up.*

night. I cross the state line in sleepy Blue Eye with its taxidermy shop and dusty garage with dirty windows that looks like it closed down years ago. Two beer-bellied motor bikers dressed in leather with long tassels give me a silent nod.

The night is black when I roll

RAGBRAI a couple of times and crossed Arkansas by bike too. On the kitchen wall, there's a newspaper clipping with him dressed in a Santa Claus costume handing out sweets to kids on the street in Berryville on Christmas day. Next to it is a picture of him and Sarah Palin and another of him next to George



The Ozarks' rural roads offer plenty of solitude where the only sounds are tires on the asphalt and leaves rustling in the wind.

hills are shrouded in mist. Cows moo. Manic, barking dogs speed past rusted-out remains of cars, boats that float no more, and metal scraps to get to me, but they are stopped by fences or heavy metal chains around their necks. I see no people, only more empty front porches.

A couple of hours and some steep

hills later, I meet Larry on the outskirts of Eureka Springs. It's an unlikely town out here. Wooden Victorian houses flank curvy streets on tree-covered hillsides. Beautiful historic brick buildings crowd the little downtown. It's like a little hippie retreat in the Ozarks with kind of an artsy feel to it. It wouldn't be a bad place to hang

around for a day, but I am eager to ride the bike so I say goodbye to Larry and thank him (and a few months later, I do receive a Christmas card).

### Hospitality of strangers

A quiet country road leads south through pretty hills covered in trees with leaves starting to turn yellow,

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orange, and red. The sky is light blue, and I just enjoy riding. It's superbly quiet, not much traffic at all. Every few miles there's a country church — Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Presbyterians. There's also a ton of road kill — armadillos, dogs, cats, and snakes. A few houses fly the Confederate flag.

I finish the day climbing a stupidly steep hill in Huntsville where I am invited to stay with Nathan and his wife Sara, who are also on Warm Showers. They live with a bunch of dogs in a yellow house that Nathan's grandfather built with his own hands on the top of a hill.

"Come inside. We have a room for you. It will be cold out here tonight," Nathan said.

Inside it's cozy and warm. One room has a bunch of musical instruments. Another holds a collection of old radio equipment that Nathan still uses. There are bikes being set up for touring, and there's a fine guest room set up for me. I always get so humbled by the hospitality of strangers, but soon I don't feel like a stranger anymore. We drink a beer, chat, Sara comes home and we go for a drive around town. We pass the bright lights that shine on the local football field and its young players. We go past the little square and drive to the top of the hill. At home Sara prepares an amazing dinner, and we have more beer. I eat until I'm almost ashamed of myself, but it's too good to stop.

### **Mysterious morning**

The early morning air is damp, the temperature is just above freezing, and the sun is like a glittering ball behind the fog. Dark trees are emerging from the haze. I can only see 100 yards ahead. It's all very mysterious. The hills are steep, and I dive in and out of the morning mist. A couple of deer elegantly leap in a field like graceful silhouettes. When the sun burns off the fog, I sit down in the roadside to make a cup of hot chocolate on my stove. After a few minutes, a pickup truck passes by, turns around a bit farther down the road and comes back.

"You okay?" an older man with bushy eyebrows asked.

"Yes, thanks! Just enjoying the sun



*A couple of hunters peruse the antiques at the Bargain Lady before heading out for the hunt.*

and some hot chocolate," I said.

"Good! I thought you might have a problem and I would be able to help," he said with a smile and drove on.

A few minutes later, a truck drives by, and that driver stops to make sure I am okay too.

Most of the hills are more than 10 percent so I crawl up and speed down over and over again. The Ozarks stretch from southern Missouri into the north of Arkansas, by far the most extensive highlands between the Appalachians and the Rockies. The highest elevations are only around 2,500 feet, though, so it's not the altitude that makes cycling here a challenge. It's the rugged, steep terrain that I am starting to feel more and more.

### **'Damn Yankees stick around'**

I pass rickety wooden barns and little lakes surrounded by colored hillsides and I am starving by the time I reach Kingston. It's a strange-looking little place; a big, open, empty square is surrounded by square brick houses and wooden buildings. Some of them remind me of old saloons. I grab a burger at the sleepy diner and look through the windows of the The Bargain Lady where they sell old-fashioned barber

chairs, remote-controlled cars, colored cans, Aladdin lamp parts, trinkets, antiques, and what looks like regular junk. A local lady comes out, sees my bike, and starts to talk. She says she loves it here. But things are changing. People are moving down from the North. She doesn't like that.

"They come here and they like it, so they move here. And then they want to change everything to be like up there. I tell them that the road they came in on leads back to where they came from. We don't need their modern crap like a police force and stuff like that," she said.

She chats some more, seems to soften up a bit, smiles and says: "Do you know what the difference between a Yankee and a damn Yankee is?"

I shake my head.

"The damn Yankees stick around," she said with a smile that doesn't quite convince me that she isn't completely serious.

### **By the Buffalo River**

The rest of the day is a pure cycling treat. The hills get bigger, and I ride up a long 12 percent hill. I race downhill and roll through tranquil Boxley Valley, famous for the wild elk that apparently roam here at dusk and

dawn, and I reach tiny Ponca by the Buffalo National River, one of the last free-flowing rivers in the Lower 48. It's only noon, but the area is too pretty to just race through, so after yet another brutal climb and a quick downhill, I stop at the Steel Creek Campground. It's beautifully located near a curve in the river where high limestone bluffs rise dramatically. The sun that pushed away the morning fog has been forced away by looming clouds, and just when I finish pitching my tent on the thick, green grass, the rain starts falling. I retreat to the tent, lie down, open a book, and take one of those afternoon breaks that feel good but can be so hard to find time for at home.

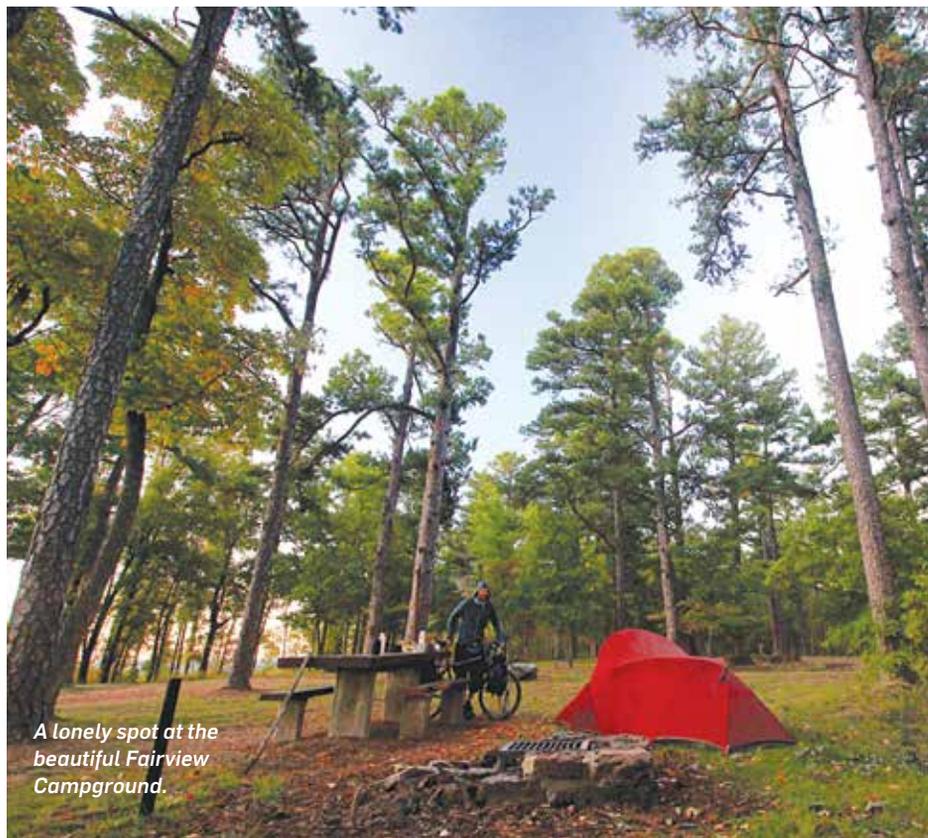
The next morning starts with a series of steep switchbacks through beautiful autumn forest. The sun shines on an open, lush landscape cut up by endless valleys. Not a town in sight and hardly any traffic. I lose myself in the pedaling until I reach little Jasper, have a burger at the apparently famous Ozark Café, and head back to the hills. Ride up and down. Up and down. The hours pass. Soon the sun sits low in the sky, and I reach primitive and absolutely stunning Fairview Campground in the Ozark National Forest where I pitch my tent. The sunset makes the fall colors of the forest glow all around me.

### A bear in a country store

The morning is frigid, and I roll a mile downhill to find Hankins Country Store in Sand Gap. On the walls are old rusty tools; half the shelves are stocked, the other half empty. A wood-burning stove stands in the middle of the store, and John, with his big, white sideburns, shiny black boots, and blue shirt, sits in a chair, hands folded over his belly. I never get the name of his wife who sits in a wooden rocking chair watching TV. They offer me a chair and a chance to warm up so I get some coffee and join them. John tells me he has lived here all his life.

"What changed since you were a boy?" I asked.

"Not much. Used to be more people around. But the old folks died and the young ones moved away. There are no jobs, haven't been for some 35 or 40 years," he said.



A lonely spot at the beautiful Fairview Campground.

## NUTS & BOLTS *The Ozarks*

### WHEN TO GO

The best time to go is in the fall around late October or early November when the colors on the trees are changing. The days at this time of year are often clear and it does get cold at night, but the temperatures never got below freezing. The summers can get uncomfortably warm for cycling.

### MAPS & ROUTES

I flew into Branson Airport in Missouri, and went straight for Arkansas, where my loop took me to Eureka Springs, Huntsville, Ponca, Jasper, Sand Gap (called Pelsor on some maps), Marshall, Buffalo Point, Yellville, Harrison and back to Branson Airport. I spent a week, cycling a total of 350 miles. The free state maps at Branson Airport were fine for the trip.

### ROAD CONDITIONS

Roads are good the entire

way. They do get narrow in a few places but traffic was never a problem. On the busier roads, there are wide shoulders which leave plenty of space for cyclists.

### BIKE & EQUIPMENT

I rode a mountain bike set up for touring with front and back racks. A road or touring bike would be just as good. The terrain gets very steep with many steady climbs over 10 to 12 percent so be sure to have some low gears. There are few bike shops, and your best bet will be in Harrison ([thebicycledoutfitteronline.com](http://thebicycledoutfitteronline.com)), Branson, or the nearby Bentonville area.

### ACCOMMODATIONS

It's a good idea to bring a tent because there's excellent camping in state parks in places like Ponca, Fairview National Forest Campground just north of Sand Gap, and Buffalo Point

Recreation Area. If you prefer a bed for the night, you should be able to make that happen with a little planning ahead. Check [arkansas.com](http://arkansas.com).

### FOOD & WATER

Small towns along the way do have diner food, but don't count on always being able to find something that's open. These areas are quite remote and shops can be closed for no apparent reason, so have some extra snacks and maybe a quick meal or two packed in the panniers. Water is easy to find.

### TRANSPORTATION

Fly into tiny Branson Airport in southern Missouri. Exit the airport and you're in the countryside. I flew Frontier Airlines ([flyfrontier.com](http://flyfrontier.com)) and didn't have to box my bike as long as I signed a damage waiver. The bike was fine.

I look around the store. On one wall are faded pictures of hunters. One stands next to a dead bear.

"Are there many bears around here?" I asked.

"Plenty! Couple of years ago a bear cub walked right into this store and scared the missus," he laughed.

The "missus" rocks on in her chair with a mysterious little smile that somehow seems to turn the corners of her mouth downward.

Two hunters, a father and a son, enter the store. They're wearing camouflage from head to toe and say they came up from their home on the bank of the Mississippi River six hours south. They're hunting deer but haven't had any luck yet.

"A couple of years ago, I shot myself a bear up here," the father said while raising his eyebrows.

"Really?" I said and unsuccessfully tried to imagine shooting a bear.

"Yes, sir!" he exclaimed with a solemn look in his eyes.

"What did you do with the bear after killing it?" I asked.

"I made myself a fine bearskin rug," he says dragging out the word fine for a full two seconds.

### Camouflaged fun

It's warmer outside now. The road is quiet as usual, and my legs feel good. More and more leaves are turning by the day, and it only gets more beautiful. A dozen or so cars are parked outside the church in Ben Hur, but other than that I only see a few hunters on the 25-mile stretch to Witts Springs. Muzzle-loader season

apparently started yesterday. A mile after I pass Cool Place Road, two young boys dressed in camouflage race by on an ATV. A few minutes later, they come back the other way. And five more minutes down the road, they roar by again, now with big grins and the street sign that says "Cool Place Road" loaded on the ATV.

I hope to find lunch in Witts Springs, but it's Sunday and the only store here is closed. The town seems deserted so I continue. There are hills to the horizon, a couple of climbs, and a 45-MPH downhill where I almost hit a little green snake in the middle of the road. 50 miles after I ate breakfast, I reach Marshall, swallow a giant sandwich, and ride on. I enjoy this time of the day so much: legs feeling strong, mind clear, miles and miles behind me. There's such a sense of simple satisfaction to it. As the sun dips below the hills, I descend to the Buffalo National River, climb a hill for a few miles, and roll down to the river once again, this time to the Buffalo Point Campground. It's huge, but I seem to be all alone here. I pick a grassy spot with a view of the river, cook a simple dinner under the stars, and sleep.

### A bigger world

The next morning, I see shy deer wandering peacefully in the roadside as I ride back up to the quiet main road. I stop at a gas station for a warm morning coffee, and soon I'm chatting with a hunter with very few teeth in his mouth. Suddenly, he jumps in the air, waves his arms all around, and looks behind him.

"I thought there was somebody there! A ghost or something," he howled.

After that, the conversation gets kind of weird and I ride on, up and down, and begin to sense the completion of my 350-mile circle in the Ozarks on the horizon.

I love how a place on the map that used to be just that, a place on a map, combined with a bunch of unclear images, vague notions, and fuzzy ideas, has now become a real place in my mind. This place, which was completely unknown to me not so long ago, now exists as a land of deep valleys, fresh rivers, and colored forests in my memory — a place of people inviting a stranger into their homes and into their lives, sharing stories and meals and opinions. An area where people turn their cars around to make sure that a cyclist resting by the roadside is okay. A week ago, I only had rather bleak images of this place from movies and somewhat sad newspaper stories, but it's now real to me. My world has grown larger and now includes this little corner of the world. As I roll along, I don't have to think long or hard about whether I would come back and ride my bike again in the Ozarks. I definitely would. **AC**

*Tore Groenne is a Danish writer and journalist with a weakness for bicycling the back roads of the world's highest mountain ranges. He has pedaled from China to Denmark, through Central and South America (a few times), around North America, the Middle East, and Central Asia but keeps returning to the Himalayas. For more information about Groenne, visit [toregroenne.com](http://toregroenne.com).*



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