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## Crossroads

# Poking around Breezewood, America's pit stop

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

The adventure began last August when my boyfriend, James, and I drove to Colorado. We passed through Breezewood, as do so many drivers passing through Pennsylvania.

"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' 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



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The 1788 Inn in Breezewood, Pennsylvania, was once a stagecoach stop. Today, it's one of the few places in town to sit down for a good breakfast, served in the former tavern room, looking out to Lincoln Highway.

Breezewood strip, U.S. 30, to better understand this town people love to hate.

During our stroll down the strip, where 18-wheelers often outnumber four-wheelers, James and I counted close to a dozen vacant buildings. 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.

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 taxidermied 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 as though 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 hill-top motel, I found a walking path to the truck-service station, which was lit up like a ballfield. 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. Con-

## IF YOU GO

### Breezewood

#### Where to eat

**Mother Trucker's Cafe:** 167 Posthouse Road, Breezewood; 814-735-4076; mothertruckerscafe.com.

Housed in the Flying J Travel Plaza, Mother Trucker's is one of the few non-fast-food 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 potpie and pork sauerkraut, cost \$9.43.

**Horn O Plenty:** 220 Wolfsburg Road, 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. Closed Mondays.

**The 1788 Inn:** 16200 Lincoln Highway, Breezewood; 814-626-1788; the1788inn.com.

Call ahead for a la carte breakfast, \$25 for two. The Federal-style 1788 Inn is run by delightful hosts who care deeply about renovation and history. Rooms from \$125, including full breakfast.

**Information on things to do:** visitbedford-county.com.

densation 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.

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 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 American flag 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 de-clawed bear — and watched trucks across the median speeding toward a momentary stop in a strange yet utterly American town.