

Take Me Home, Country Roads

Beth Kanter

I still think about the three days I spent at the fabled Greenbrier Hotel. The showers ran cold, the elevators were out, and I wound up sitting on the hallway floor eating a soggy salad from a takeout container and drinking red wine from a paper cup. Yet I learned more about hospitality from my stay than I have in all my years of travel. My then 13-year-old son and I gasped when we checked into the historic five-star resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. We walked through the imposing portico ("It's like the entrance to the White House only ten times bigger," my born-and-bred DC boy whispered to me) hours before a remorseless storm hit the area causing flooding that took with it homes, roads, and more than two dozen lives.

Our Greenbrier stay was to be the "fluff" part of a weeklong road trip that had us whitewater rafting, zip lining, and bridge walking at the nearby adrenaline-fueled Adventures on the Gorge. After getting tossed into Class V rapids on the New River, the thought of soft bedding and Crêpes Suzette could not have been more appealing. Along the way I would interview the executive chef for a story, try falconry, and treat myself to a "sulphur soak" at the spa. This gal from Queens who believes all birds are pigeons could do worse.

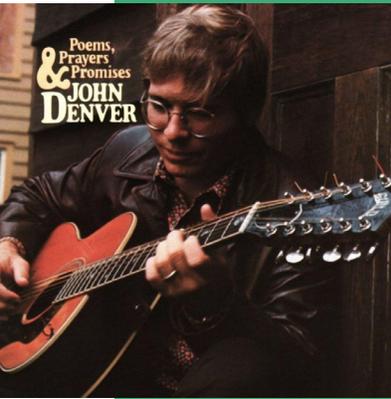
Exhaling in my private pale turquoise soak room, I started to embrace the luxury of the storied hotel that has hosted presidents, starlets, and royalty. Minutes into my treatment, an attendant knocked on the door to tell me I needed to get out of the tub. I thought she was kidding. "No," she said seriously, "too much lightning out there right now, the hotel doesn't want anyone in the pool, baths, even the showers." While I am guessing she grasped the magnitude of the situation at this point, I still did not.

When I heard that no one could enter or leave the spa through the now flooded, long marble corridor that connects it to the hotel, I started to better understand that the downpour leaking inside might be more than a bad summer storm.

It's also when the fourth wall of the theater that is a luxury hotel began to vanish. It's when I started to connect to the place – a resort that just a few decades ago would not have allowed me to make a reservation with my Jewish surname — in a way I never thought possible. It's when I started to understand that the soul and spirit of The Greenbrier is not the grand chandeliers, carefully plated cuisine, or horse-drawn carriage rides but the army of people who work there.

Eventually those of us "stuck" in the spa were taken through the break room to a shuttle that drove to the front entrance of the hotel. The staff apologized that we had to see the employee lounge, a pretty yet functional space done in the same pastel color palette as the spa. They held oversized umbrellas over us as we walked the few steps between the staff exit and the bus stairs.

After checking on my son, I wandered around the hotel shops trying to garner information about what was going on. Among the signatures silk scarves, hand-dipped chocolates, and designer gladiator sandals, I heard a few common refrains: "I can't get in touch with her." "I live alone so I don't know." "I'm on a hill so I am guess I am okay but I can't get over there to check." When I asked the woman in the dress shop near the casino about her home, she told me that everything was lost to the water. "All of our photos, all



John Denver

"Take Me Home, Country Roads"

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our memories but thank God my family is ok," she said. "I suppose we can make new memories if we're still here." I overheard a supervisor making phone calls on behalf of a foreign worker whose rooming house had been washed away along with all of her documentation. I watched hotel staff buy snacks in the gift shop after being asked by management to spend the night rather than risk the roads. Some of them were coming off nightshifts and already had not been home for a long time.

Soon the power went out. Then the gas lines shut off. Harrowing footage of a house in flames rushing down the river that someone with Internet service discovered, showed why. A person stood atop the burning house. Yet with all this horror happening to their hometown, their neighbors, their family, and friends, the staff and the management focused on us—their guests. It felt a bit like dancing in the ballroom after the Titanic hit the iceberg. How could we be eating ice cream cooled by generated power in the middle of a disaster now being referred to as the 1,000-year-flood? It didn't feel right because it wasn't right.

During the next 48 hours I saw the hotel exactly the way it was never intended to be viewed. I witnessed the formal jacket-and-tie-required main dining room serve a buffet of cold cuts and bread on paper plates. I studied the famous Dorothy Draper-designed outrageously colored wall-coverings by the light of glow sticks distributed after power was lost. I sipped a warm Diet Coke for breakfast that a waitress, a very kind woman who lives on high ground and told me she thought her house would be waiting for her, slipped to me after overhearing me covet the can of caffeine another guest had pulled from her purse. And, I marveled at every moment of it.

Through it all I remembered that authentic travel, that so many like myself spend time chasing, happens when a connection is made. Like the weather itself, sometimes the connection cannot be planned or accurately predicted. I know I am not alone in thinking such a bond could not have happened at this historic resort often defined for its blue-blooded clientele, pomp, and strict adherence to the rules of etiquette. I was wrong. What I thought would be a delightful yet somewhat manufactured experience turned out to be an authentic encounter.

As I think about my three days in June at The Greenbrier, I will remember the bleary-eyed gentle staff. I will remember my son and a new friend using a bucket to save fish that were trapped on the 18th hole of the torn up Old White TPC golf course. I will remember the front desk clerk who was about to join his fellow volunteer firefighters to help with search and rescue after he checked me out. I will remember learning that a 4-year-old and 8-year-old were among the dead. I will remember that I got to go home while others did not.

At some point on Thursday night in one of the few parts of the hotel that had electricity, The Greenbrier's Springhouse Entertainers began singing for us. John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" was their last song. By the end, many of us joined in on the chorus.

*Country roads, take me home
To the place I belong
West Virginia, mountain momma
Take me home, country roads*

I hope that dried out and repaired country roads continue to be able to take the resilient and kind folks I met at The Greenbrier back to their homes where they belong. And, selfishly, I hope it's not long before I get to make a return trip to Almost Heaven, West Virginia.