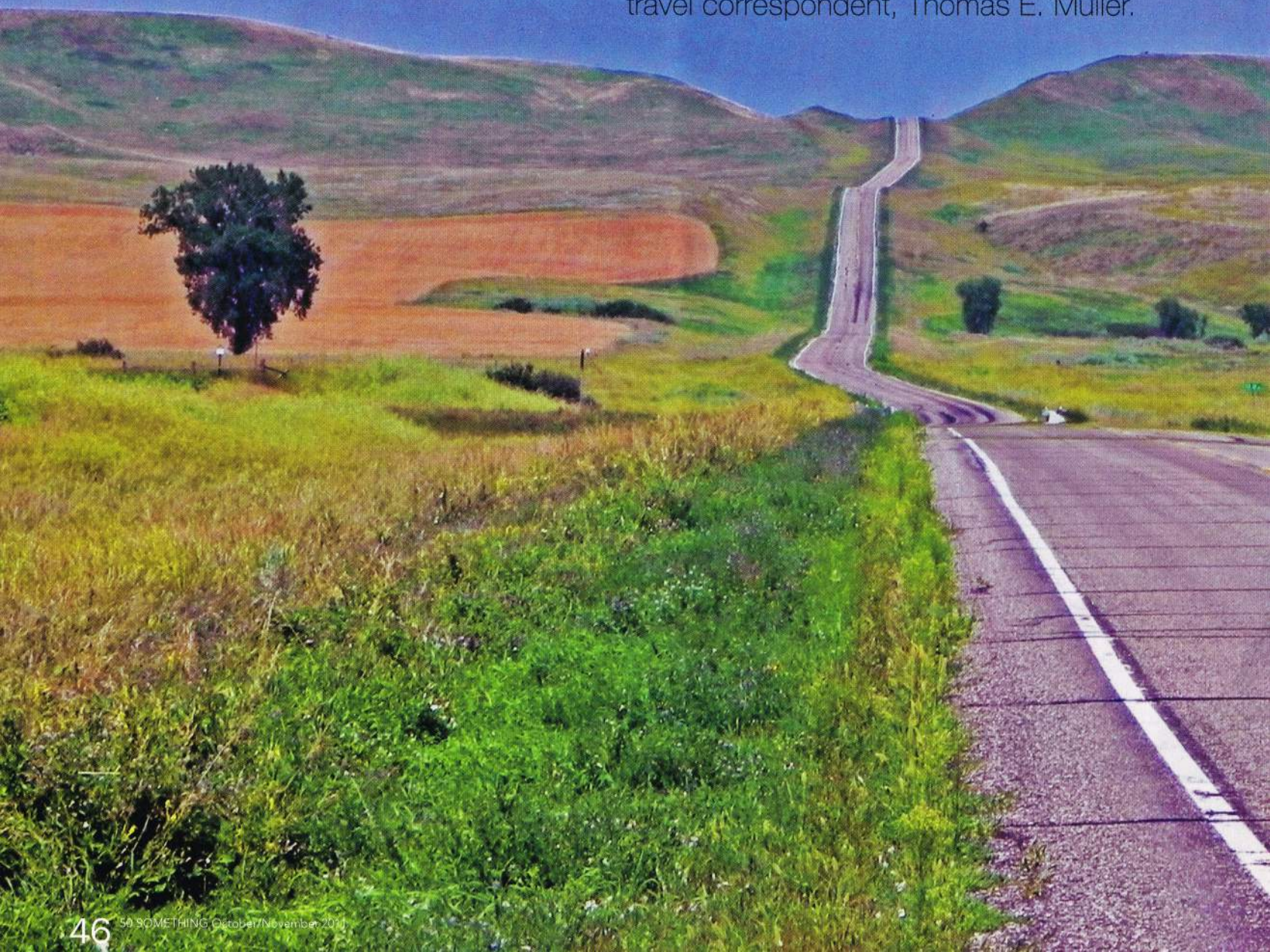


American heartland

America's quirky Bible belt is hardly the spot for a summer holiday. All the more reason to hit those country roads, decides *50 something* travel correspondent, Thomas E. Muller.



Each year, about
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blackened sky
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Central States

Soybeans and corn colour the landscape on both sides of the road. Mile after seemingly endless mile, the rich soil nourishes America's heartland crops. And the road slicing through these interminable fields keeps unfolding straight ahead until it disappears over the horizon. These are excellent secondary roads, perhaps the best-built in the world, yet they are empty. Every now and again, a car passes us in the opposite direction. America has 300 million inhabitants; where is everyone?

They call it fly-over territory. Americans jetting across the continental United States from, say, California to the East Coast hardly spare a thought for the states down below. This is the breadbasket of America – a vast and fertile prairie that yields the nation's wheat and maize (Americans call it corn). It is also the country's Bible belt and conservative stronghold but hardly a place to take the family on holiday. After all, how many travel ads have you seen that trumpet the message, "This summer, come treat your family to an unforgettable vacation in Nebraska!" All the more reason why I was intrigued by the virtually neglected Central States as travel destinations – North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota. With the exception of Wisconsin, these 10 states lie sandwiched between two of America's big travel magnets – the magnificent Rockies and the mighty Mississippi. But the enormous area stretched out in between was just a void on my personal travel map that could no longer be ignored.

This, too, is tornado territory. Each year, about 750 whirling tornados touch down from a blackened sky and rip violently through the Central States, flinging cars, trucks, houses,

farm animals and people into the air like toys made of matchsticks.

I had set myself the goal of driving through ten states in twelve days. A few months of planning generated the route to be taken by car with my Czech-born compatriot and Toronto, Ontario-based fellow traveller, Mike Jellen. He had crafted a road trip that started and ended in Minneapolis, Minnesota, avoided the freeways and interstate highways as much as possible, and stayed on country roads and byways. We would steer clear of the big cities and aim instead for the small towns that characterise life in The Breadbasket. Our plan was to share a daily driving regimen of about 500 kilometres, before stopping for overnight rests.

Day One began by driving south from Minneapolis to the town of New Prague, Minnesota (pop. 4,559). A lunch stop at the Landmark Café revealed a hotbed of Czech culture. Jerry Minar is a third-generation Czech-American who owns the Landmark and dedicates a part of the café as a tiny museum for concertinas, the diminutive cousin of the accordion. He manufactures intricately decorated concertinas, restores old ones and gives lessons.

We headed northwest across Minnesota and into North Dakota. By late-afternoon of the following day we got into Bismarck, the capital of North Dakota, and searched for a cheap motel. Every place to stay was booked solid; was there a global conference in town? It turned out that Minot, North Dakota, some 100 miles to the north, had been flooded by spring melt water and the region's 35,000 residents evacuated to lodgings in other towns. We chanced upon what surely was the last available room in all of Bismarck and rested for the night.



New Prague Jerry Minar plays a Czech tune on his concertina



Hermann Deana Sloan samples the best of her wurst

Crossing into South Dakota, we followed the Lewis and Clark Trail scenic byway. In 1804, these two explorers passed through the state on their epic, 2½-year expedition to reconnoitre and map the great unknown lands west of the Mississippi, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Explore further, and you'll also find the grave of Native American Sioux chief, Sitting Bull, and the Wounded Knee massacre site. Stopping in Pierre (pop. 14,000), the state's capital, we observed that many of the downtown streets were sandbagged in anticipation that the waters of the Missouri River might flood the old buildings.



The Central States were settled by European farmers during the second half of the nineteenth century. Immigrants poured in from Germany, Italy, Central Europe and Scandinavia and left their distinct imprint on the local culture. Driving through this part of the world, you would think you were touring Europe: the countryside is dotted with towns named Hamburg, Stockholm, Milan, Genoa, Lisbon, Verona, Berlin, Cordova, Belgrade, Vienna, Paris, Athens and Sparta. Scandinavians and Finns also left a legacy through their food: smoked ham, smoked fish, smoked cheese, smoked sausage, smoked pork chops, smoked turkey, smoked buffalo – just about everything but smoked beer. And this is definitely beer country; there are lots of micro-breweries and every little pub (saloon, in America) has plenty of choice in draft beer.

Driving onward through Nebraska, we stopped in Greeley to mail post cards. The town's welcome sign reads, "Greeley; 562 Friendly People and a Few Old Crabs." These people have a sense of humour. A slight detour brought us to Dannebrog (pop. 352). In 1871, Danes from the Old Country settled here and, a century later, the state legislature proclaimed Dannebrog as Nebraska's Danish capital. Here, the Danish national flags flying from poles outnumber the Stars and Stripes. These people have a sense of pride.

Kansas was next, as we headed southward into progressively hotter weather. Wichita, the state's second largest city, is a beehive of aircraft manufacturing. Boeing is here; so are Beechcraft, Cessna and Learjet, and it is home to the Kansas Aviation Museum where you can sit in an ejection seat, manipulate cockpit controls, and try out a flight simulator. Outside sits a monstrous, black B-52 bomber, intimidating in size and dwarfing every other static exhibit.

The town's welcome sign reads, "Greeley; 562 Friendly People and a Few Old Crabs"

"Why, on Earth, would you come all the way from Australia to a place like this?"

Oklahoma was the southernmost state on our trip and Tulsa the city where we would stop and take a day off from driving. The mercury had soared to 114°F (45.5°C). Day after searing day, Oklahoma was setting consecutive-day heat records. This was The Great American Heat Wave of 2011. We turned northward and headed through the picturesque northwest corner of Arkansas. Here, you get forests, roads winding through the Ozark Mountains, and lots of lakes.

Everywhere on this road trip, I was struck by the earthy friendliness of the locals. Broad smiles, an easy chattiness, a penchant for being helpful, and an unpretentious air of contentedness seem to permeate their manner. Being stable and at peace with themselves, denizens of The Breadbasket do not initiate social change (the way Californians eagerly do) and are slow to approve it.

"Where you from?" is a frequent question at gas (petrol) stations, bars, diners (restaurants), antique stores and motels. The reply gets an immediate reaction. "Australia; really?! I always wanted to get to Australia! Wow, you're a long way from home!"

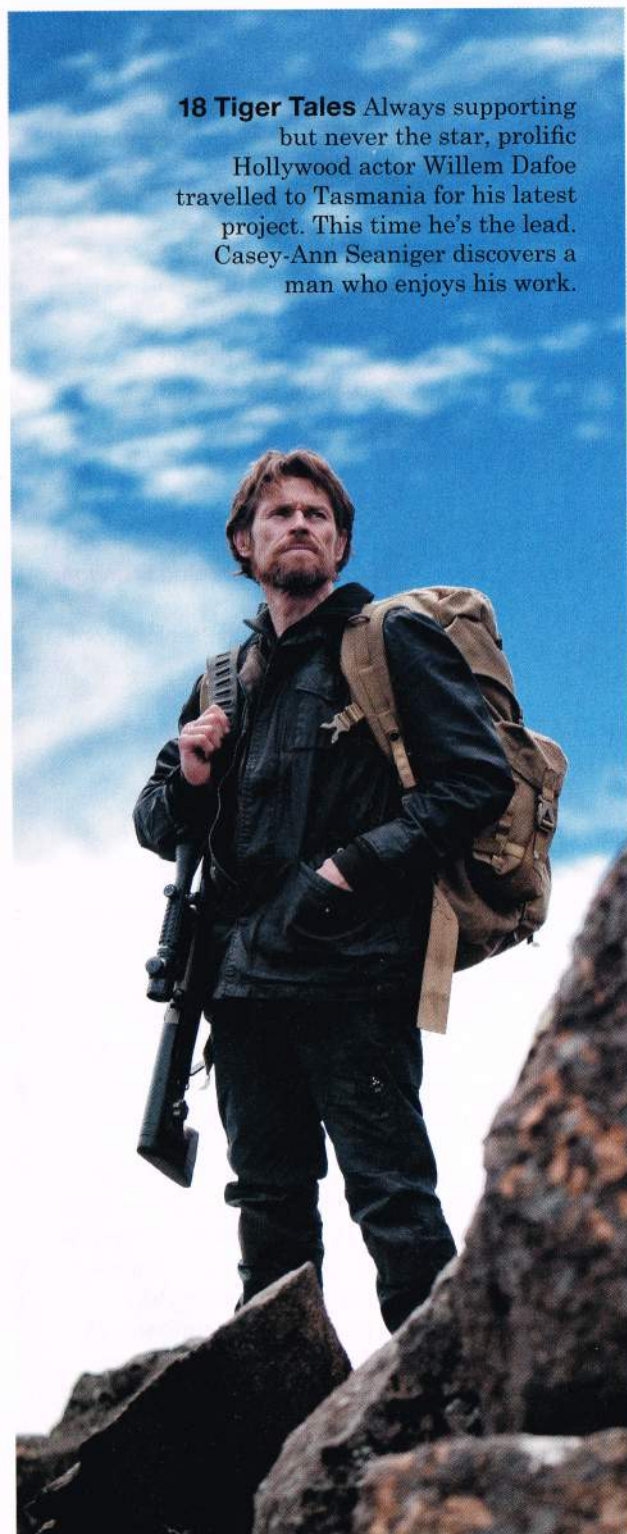
What are you doing here?" perhaps betraying the thought, "Why, on Earth, would you come all the way from Australia to a place like this?" Then curiosity sets in. "Is it true that you have kangaroos everywhere?" I explain that the animals are not exactly wandering onto the streets of Sydney, holding up the traffic.

We enter Missouri and, halfway through the state, stop at Hermann (pop. 2,674), on the Missouri River, close to where it joins the Mississippi on its southward journey to the Gulf of Mexico. This is home to the Swiss Meat & Sausage Co., a third-generation family operation whose specialty is bratwurst ("brat" for short) and sales tag is "The Best of the Wurst." Inside their store, Deana Sloan, the founder's daughter, cut taste samples of a dozen varieties, including blueberry-maple syrup sausage and beer brat.

Iowa and Wisconsin topped off the journey as we headed northward toward our finishing point: big, metropolitan Minneapolis. We had covered 4,800 kilometres on the best secondary roads I have known. America clearly loves its cars and rolls out the red carpet with an enviable network of highways and byways. ■

50something

AUSTRALIA'S WIDEST CIRCULATING OVER-50S MAGAZINE



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Cover: Willem Dafoe at the Toronto Film Festival, Sept 2011.

© Getty/Matt Carr



Besides putting together *50 something*, I'm also responsible for generating media coverage for National Seniors. That entails sniffing out issues, writing press releases, and talking to journalists and members who have stories to tell.

In all of this, the face we present to the world, the one thing that the great man himself, founding chairman Everald Compton, insisted on was that the over-50s never appear as "mendicants" or beggars. It is a sentiment I'm sure most of you would share.

Granted some people do struggle which is why National Seniors fought tooth

and nail for, and won, an historical pension increase two years ago. Now we're fighting to ensure market forces don't ultimately drain the humanity out of aged care (p 27).

But as a demographic, seniors are a huge group and for many of us life is pretty good – just take a look at this magazine. We're chief executives and teachers, doctors and plumbers or, if we're really lucky, we're organising writers' festivals in exotic lands (p 13).

If we're retired we're babysitting grandkids so our children can make a fist of buying their first home, or, more often than not, we're the

volunteers in the local hospital with a gentle smile and a hot cup of tea.

In or out of the labour market, older Australians are the mainstays of society and the foundations of this economy. We've been there, done that and, by George, we'll keep going. As current chairman Judith Sloan says (p 58): Turn off those radios and don't be told anything else.

Sarah Saunders

contributors



Paul Clitheroe is a founding director of financial planning firm ipac, chairman of the government's Financial Literacy Board and *Money Magazine's* chief commentator. His updated book, *Making Money – The keys to financial success* is available at good bookstores. Visit www.paulsmoney.com.au for more information.



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