Oklahoma and Texas

THE

Comanche

TRAIL
A single dust plume trails behind us like an earthbound jet stream. Narrow leaving the rear tire, it eventually fills our mirrors as I glance back at Susan, riding pillion on our BMW R 1200 GS Adventure. We’ve covered hundreds of miles of dirt here in this vast emptiness, seeking the spirits of the Lords of the South Plains in the remote reaches of the Llano Estacado.

“They called themselves Numunu, or ‘The People.’ Their presence is among us as we follow the trail of the Comanche.”

- Bill Dragoo
We stop and hike to the flat summit of a butte, taking shelter from the stiff south wind in the lee of a stand of cedars, and look west into Texas. Time rewinds 150 years and we are hunters, sentinels of the Antelope Hills. Then, the moving mass of a bison herd would have darkened the horizon, dust obscuring the sky as the animals thundered across the ancient plain. The day when this land was ruled by the Comanches seems close at hand as we look out upon its open prairie and fiery sunsets.

In 1706, the Comanches were a small tribe of hunter-gatherers living on the northern frontier of New Mexico. They launched an explosive expansion, plundering horses and reinventing themselves as ferocious mounted warriors. Forcing their way onto the southern plains, they carved out a vast territory larger than the entire European-controlled area north of the Rio Grande at the time. Although they successfully forestalled white settlement there for many years, the Comanche empire would ultimately diminish, culminating in surrender at Fort Sill in June 1875. Their transition into a new way of life was led by Chief Quanah Parker.

**Canyons, Creeks, and Grasslands**

With thunderheads 10 miles high and canyons appearing from nowhere, this is Comancheria, a place of visual infinity centered on the Texas Panhandle and extending into several adjoining states. We are here to experience those canyons, creeks, and grasslands. From our home in Norman, OK, we’re heading west to string together a trail through the Comancheria of western Oklahoma and Texas. That trail begins in the Wichita Mountains, an ancient range sculpted through the ages by climatic forces into the knobs and domes of today. The Wichitas offered the tribe hiding places, hunting grounds, and encampment. On their eastern edge, within Fort Sill, jut the Medicine Bluffs, a site sacred to the Comanches and an appropriate starting point for our journey. We stop in the shade along...
the cool, clear waters of Medicine Creek, flowing beneath the 320-foot bluff. Large Comanche encampments once filled this valley full of legends.

From Fort Sill we ride west through the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, where bison and longhorns graze on the open range. The park’s roads offer a smooth, twisting ride with mountain views and multiple stopping points for hiking and picnicking. The foot trail to the summit of Elk Mountain is one of the refuge’s most popular and yields access to caves and “rock rooms” perfect for a day of exploring. A motorized ride up the winding road to the top of Mount Scott to watch the sunset over the Oklahoma Plains is a bonus.

South of the refuge is the Star House, final home of Quanah Parker. It was built around 1890 for the Comanche leader with the help of Texas cattlemen, and is a testament to the respect he commanded. Quanah was the son of Cynthia Ann Parker, who was captured by Comanches in the 1830s, and Comanche leader Peta Nocona. He balanced his role as leader of his people with his function as an emissary to white culture. Quanah entertained notables as diverse as Geronimo and British Ambassador Lord Bryce at the long dining room table still present in the deteriorating structure.

A tour of the house requires an appointment and a visit to a trading post on a lonesome highway intersection, where we are led into the ghost town of Eagle Park, an abandoned amusement park where the Star House was moved in the mid-20th century. We walk through and photograph the parlor, dining room, and bedrooms on the first floor, but the upper story is inaccessible, and likely dangerous because of the building’s poor condition. The roof and walls are sagging, but the building retains a haunting beauty, crouched in the deep green grass canopied by cottonwoods.

**Crossing the Old Red River**

Heading west on Highway 62, we turn south into Texas, crossing the Red River and the state border just north of Quanah, a community established in the 1880s as a railroad stop and named for the Indian chief. We visit the Quanah, Acme and Pacific Railway Depot Museum, built in 1908, before making a side trip on Farm Road 1167 east of town to see the Medicine Mounds, four rounded hills that were camps and ceremonial sites of the Comanches. Our attempt to take a closer look at the mounds leads to a close encounter with some deep, nasty mud. Once we extract the motorcycle, we decide it’s best to view the elevations (on private property) from afar.

Back in Quanah, we stop for dinner at Dutch’s Restaurant. The curator of the local museum had mentioned the cafe is owned by someone from Nepal, and that is what draws us there, having recently visited that region of the Himalayas. When we meet the owner, it’s almost like a reunion as we reminisce about our experiences in her homeland. We find a strange irony in our interactions with one another; she, a foreigner in west Texas, welcoming us, virtually natives, and our common bond is a place halfway around the world. Not so long ago the white man was the foreigner here and the Comanches were not quite so welcoming.
Twelve miles south of Quanah is Copper Breaks State Park and our home for the evening. Copper Breaks takes its name from the gray-green streaks of raw copper that band its many rust-colored canyons and arroyos. Near the park is the Pease River Battle Site where Quanah’s mother was recaptured from her Comanche band in 1860. We camp near one of the “breaks” in this remote spot notable for its dark skies, perfect for star gazing. We take advantage with an evening walk along the canyon’s edge, illuminated by our headlamps, of course.

**A Desert Oasis in Texas**

In the morning we continue south and west, looking for a place called Roaring Springs, a lush oasis in the west Texas desert. The site served as a Comanche camp in 1860 and was named for the sound of its rushing waters. Stopping in the town of Roaring Springs for information, we are welcomed by the local coffee club at the Travelers Inn Bed and Breakfast and ultimately escorted by the sheriff to the springs, now within the private Roaring Springs Ranch Club. Locals enjoy the swimming hole created by the springs, which rush from the ground, spilling over a small waterfall into a pool lined with greenery decidedly not what you expect to see in these parts. A highlight of our tour is a large and deeply worn grinding stone on the hillside overlooking the springs. It was used by the Comanches during their encampments.

Soon we turn north and west toward Caprock Canyons State Park. During the Comanche reign, New Mexican bison hunters and traders were frequent visitors to this area. The park is home to the Official Bison Herd of the State of Texas and offers hiking and camping in its scenic red canyons.

**El Llano Estacado**

Winding dirt roads take us farther northwest through ranch lands and over cattle guards. We now ride atop the Llano Estacado, or Staked Plains, a high mesa sloping toward the southeast and one of the largest tablelands on the continent. Larger than New England, the Llano is bounded on the north by the southern escarpment of the Canadian River valley and on the east by the deeply incised Caprock escarpment.

The Llano was first described by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in a letter to the king of Spain in 1541: “I reached some plains so vast, that I did not find their limit anywhere I went, although I traveled over them for more than 300 leagues … with no more landmarks than if we had been swallowed up by the sea … there was not a stone, nor bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a shrub, nor anything to go by.”

**The Other Grand Canyon**

On the Llano’s eastern escarpment just south of Amarillo, Palo Duro Canyon is one of the most spectacular landscapes in Texas. Here we see the intense oranges, reds, and yellows of the Caprock ridge carved into pinnacles, buttes, and mesas by the headwaters of the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River. We camp in Palo Duro and hike early the next morning to the Lighthouse, a 310-foot pedestal rock, before continuing our journey.

North of Amarillo is Lake Meredith and the Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument, where Plains Indians dug flint by hand for tools and weapons from 13,000 years ago to about 1870. Tools made from Alibates flint have been found in far-flung places across the Great Plains and the Southwest, and National Park Service rangers lead hikes into the ancient quarries.

Leaving Alibates we head east on long, dusty roads that sometimes become nothing but ruts along fence lines. Vestiges of abandoned homesteads appear in the form of rock foundations, rusted iron farm implements, and rickety windmills.

**Battlefields of the Plains Indian Wars**

We make our way to Adobe Walls, TX, once a trading post near the Canadian River, and the site of two significant battles. The first, in 1864, saw Colonel Christopher “Kit” Carson leading 335 soldiers and 72 Indian scouts against a force of more than 1,000 Comanches, Kiowas, and Plains Apaches. Ten years later, the Second Battle of Adobe Walls was fought between Comanche forces led by Quanah Parker and medicine man Isa-tai, and a group of 28 U.S. bison hunters who successfully defended the settlement.
The colorful scenery in Palo Duro Canyon from a perch near the Lighthouse formation is the perfect spot for a photo op.

Easy dirt roads can become impassable after a rain.
The history of this place is rich and the stories fascinating, but all that remains are two granite markers honoring the opposing forces who fought and died here.

The River Road takes us on dirt along the Canadian River, crossing the stream on a historic bridge near the town of Canadian, TX. To the east, just inside the Oklahoma border, lie the Antelope Hills. These buttes marked the hundredth meridian and were landmarks for early travelers. They are perhaps best known as the site of an 1858 battle in which Texas Rangers attacked a Comanche village on nearby Little Robe Creek, inflicting a decisive defeat. The Antelope Hills are accessible by vehicle on an unpaved county road.

South of the Antelope Hills, we approach the Black Kettle National Grassland, near Cheyenne, OK. Here is the site of the Battle of the Washita, where, in 1868, Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer led the Seventh U.S. Cavalry on a surprise early morning attack against the Southern Cheyenne village of Peace Chief Black Kettle. Custer was in a hurry to execute the attack and get away because Comanches and Kiowas were also camped in the area and were coming to reinforce the Cheyennes. In Custer’s haste he left behind some of his soldiers, who were massacred. It is said that the hatred for Custer harbored by his subordinates over this incident was a major factor in their failure to go to his aid at Little Bighorn. The excellent visitor center at the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site should not be missed.

The Grassland also preserves a significant remnant of the mixed-grass prairie so important to the Comanches, providing food for the bison herds. An unpaved road leads us through the area. We stop to explore a ruin of red stone and climb atop a nearby outcropping for a view across the plain, northwesterly toward the Antelope Hills we just left behind.

Our last stop is Sandy Sanders Wildlife Management Area, southwest of Sayre. It’s another example of pristine prairie and copper breaks. The approach from the north presents a broad valley punctuated with pyramidal formations of red shale and gypsum, best viewed at sunset. The preserve is a stunning contrast to the seemingly featureless landscape seen from Interstate 40, which we eventually use for our three-hour ride home.

Comancheria is more than a place. It is an era when fierce men and strong women wove their lives into nature. It was a brief time, really, when the Comanche took their turn as Lords of the South Plains and carved their heritage forever into the pages of history. Today’s traveler can still go there and commune with their spirits, in the heart of Comancheria. RR

Cattle guards and the occasional ranch gate may be encountered on some of the two-track sections of the route.

How many generations have come and gone in the abandoned houses found along the trail through Comancheria?

GPS files are available for download in each digital issue purchased or included in your subscription. Log in at www.roadrunner.travel.
**Facts & Information**

**In General**
This ride is centered on western Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle, a mostly rural area best traveled in spring or fall, though mild winters can also offer pleasant riding in this region. The tour can be done in three to four days or, for a more leisurely trip, several days more. Factor in side trips to points of interest and distances from your starting point. We recommend approaching it with gazetteers in hand for both Oklahoma and Texas, finding the best dirt roads where possible.

**How to Get There**
Starting in Oklahoma’s Wichita Mountains, the ride ends at Sandy Sanders Wildlife Management Area near the Texas border. The Wichitas are easily accessed from I-44 in southwestern Oklahoma near Lawton. Airports served by major airlines are also available in Oklahoma City (OKC) and Amarillo, TX (AMA).

**Food & Lodging**
Those looking to camp will have ample opportunity, including Copper Breaks State Park, Caprock Canyons State Park, and Palo Duro Canyon State Park, all in Texas. Plenty of lodging is also available in Lawton, OK, Canyon TX, and Amarillo. Be sure to stop at Meers General Store on the edge of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. It’s an experience everyone should have at least once, and one of their huge Meers Burgers is big enough for two.

**Roads & Biking**
Most roads are secondary pavement or graded dirt and gravel. There are a few instances where unimproved two-track connects the route or leads into more remote regions. A dual-sport motorcycle and some dirt experience are helpful here.

**Books & Maps**

**Resources**
- AdMo Motorcycle Rentals, Carrollton, TX, www.rental-motorcycle.com/america/usa/texas/dallas_rental.html
- Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge www.fws.gov/refuge/wichita_mountains
- Washita Battlefield National Historic Site www.nps.gov/waba/index.htm
- Medicine Mounds, Farm Rd 1167, Medicine Mound, TX, www.quanahnet.com/history/medicinemounds.htm
- Texas State Parks, tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks
- Black Kettle National Grassland Cheyenne, OK, (580) 497-2143
- Travelers Inn Bed and Breakfast Roaring Springs, TX, (806) 348-7304
- Krehbielhaus Wichita Mountains, Roosevelt, OK, www.airbnb.com/rooms/5929246
- Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

**Motorcycle & Gear:**
2011 BMW R 1200 GS Adventure
Helmets: Shoei Hornet, Arai XD-4
Jackets: KLIM Badlands Pro, Spidi Venture H2OUT
Pants: KLIM Badlands Pro, Spidi Glance
Gloves: KLIM Mojave Pro, Tour Master
Boots: SIDI Adventure GORE-TEX, BMW Santiago
Luggage: Touratech Zega Pro Panniers, Enduristan Typhoon waterproof duffel