

NEWS

News



Fifty States: A 32 year running quest

By Nigel Roberts, Proud Purple Pack Plodder

Thirty-two years ago, I was a reasonably good runner. I'd run three sub-three hour marathons, and at that stage of my life I could beat Bernie Portenski in a race (it was a stage of my life that didn't last long!), so when I spent a month in the United States in 1985 while I was on research leave from Victoria University, it's not altogether surprising that I fairly frequently went running.

It was while I was visiting a colleague at the University of Minnesota to put the finishing touches to a book he and I and two others were writing that I went for my first-ever run in the United States. Most people think of the Mississippi River as a southern river, and not many people outside the USA realise that Minnesota (a northern state that borders Canada) is, in fact, the birth-place of the Mississippi. By the time the river reaches Minnesota's Twin Cities – Minneapolis and St Paul – it's already impressively big. The river is a major feature of both cities, and there are a large number of riverside drives, hiking trails, and parks. On 14 May 1985, on a lovely spring morning, I ran down to and along the paths on the east bank of the Mississippi River. Thus it was that Minnesota became the first of the USA's fifty states in which I ran. Because I couldn't look into Shakespeare's "seeds of time", what I didn't know in 1985 was that my son, Evan, who is also a member of Scottish, would many years later do his PhD, meet his wife, accept a job, and end up living in Minnesota. As a result, it's the American state in which I've run far, far more frequently than in any of the other forty-nine states. In 1985, however, I also ran in two other states: Massachusetts and Maine.



Running in Minnesota in winter can be challenging, as this picture taken by Evan of his father shows.

Three years later, while on conference leave and visiting colleagues in Canada and the United States, I added two new states to my tally: Virginia and California. By that stage, although I had only run in one-tenth of the states of the USA, I could at least claim to have run alongside the United States' mightiest river and on both its Atlantic and Pacific shores. During a 1997 climbing trip to the US, I was able to run in two more states. In Oregon I ran along the banks of the Willamette River, and in Alaska I ran beside Cook's Inlet, a northern arm of the Pacific Ocean.

ON THE RUN

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*Nigel running in May 1988 alongside the Pacific Ocean in California – the fifth state he'd run in.*

Late the following year, the final month of a research leave I was on took me back to the United States. I now had the bit between my teeth, and I made sure I squeezed in at least one run in each state I visited – namely, Vermont, Ohio (where I'd lived for a year in 1962-63 as an AFS student and, sad to say and appalling to admit, I hadn't run at all), Indiana, and New Mexico.

During the US summer of 2001 – not long before "9/11" – I went to Illinois on a research fellowship. Not only was I privileged to meet a young Illinois state senator named Barack Obama, but I was also privileged to run in five more states: Illinois; three of its neighbouring states: Missouri, Wisconsin, and Tennessee; and – while on a visit to Washington, DC (where I also ran, of course) – I nipped north to Maryland to add it to my tally, bringing my total to sixteen states. In the sixteen years from 1985 to 2001, I was thus averaging one state a year, and if I continued at that rate, I realised I would be 91 years old before I finished my quest. It wasn't an encouraging statistic ...

The following year, though, I added two states to my score. During a five-hour lay-over at Denver airport, I went outside and – to claim Colorado – ran round and round the airport's dismal parking lots with only tumble-weed, jack-rabbits, and an occasional security guard for company. A few days later, while visiting friends in western California, I drove over the border into Nevada and went on a trail run in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Conference leave in 2003 and research leave in 2004 took me back to the United States, and even though I was slowing down as a runner, the pace at which I "acquired" new states improved considerably. In 2003, a swing through the coastal south enabled me to run in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. In 2004 I was briefly based at the University of Minnesota to study the US Presidential elections, and – running, I am delighted to say, together with Evan – I added three more states to my tally: South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa. In one crucial respect, Iowa was indeed middle America for me. It was the 25th state in which I'd run. I was at the half-way mark in my attempt to run in all fifty states.



*Evan Roberts wore this somewhat provocative t-shirt when he ran with Nigel in South Dakota a few weeks prior to the 2004 US presidential elections. South Dakota was the 23rd state in which Nigel ran.*

My quest took a great leap forward in 2006. While visiting the United States on my last sabbatical leave prior to my retirement, I ran in eight new states – my highest-ever twelve-month total. On a climbing trip to the Rocky Mountains, I added Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. A visit to the north-east enabled me to run in New York, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania, and I ended the year with a meeting with two colleagues in Seattle, which enabled me run in the state of Washington.

My total of 33 states then stalled for more than four years until early 2011, when I again had the pleasure of running in a new state together with Evan. It was tough running on the beautiful big island of Hawaii, but – hey – someone had to do it. In 2012 I also added just one state to my tally when I ran in Arizona (on my so-called "rest" day after an ascent of Humphries Peak, the state's highest mountain).





***On 11 July 2012, the day after he'd climbed Humphreys Peak, the highest mountain in Arizona, Nigel appropriately ended his run in his 35th state in Humphreys Street, Flagstaff, Arizona.***

However, with Evan well ensconced in Minnesota, my wife Heather and I were now visiting the United States on an annual basis, and in 2013 I started making a regular series of fortnight-long road trips pursuing two other interests of mine – the architecture of parliaments and legislatures, and “highpointing” (climbing or visiting the highest peak in each state). In this way, I added North Dakota, Rhode Island, and Connecticut to my tally of states in 2013.

In 2014 I plugged a huge hole in my map of the states in which I'd run: I ran in Texas. What is more, in 2014 I also ran in another five new states – Oklahoma (which brought my total to 40), Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. In late 2014, I also broke my leg in a climbing accident. Twelve months later, however, I was thrilled to have recovered sufficiently well enough to be able to add Kentucky and West Virginia to my running tally.

Last year, I finally made it to Kansas and ran there, but I didn't see Dorothy or Toto. I guess they were still in Oz. I also ran in two states I'd previously visited but not previously run in, namely New Jersey and Delaware. That brought my total to 49 ...

The one state I'd never been to (and, of course, hadn't run in) was Michigan – which is a bit ironic given that I had lived in neighbouring Ohio for a year. This year I finally got to go there. I went to see the state's capitol building in Lansing, to visit the Gerald Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, and to hike to the top of Mt Arvon, the state's highest peak, which is in a remote corner of Michigan's “upper peninsula”.

Naturally, I also went for a run while I was in Michigan. Like the runs I'd been on in the other 49 states, it had to be at least five miles / eight kilometres long. On a pleasant summer's afternoon, on 22 August 2017, I ran for an hour and six minutes in the city of Grand Rapids. It was a highly appropriate way to end my 50-state quest, because – like my very first run in the USA – my run in Michigan was along the banks of a grand river ... so much so that the river's name is the Grand River, and it was indeed a grand way to reach a goal I'd been pursuing for nearly a third of a century.

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*Nigel Roberts*