

Riders on the *STORM*

Each spring, America's Mid-West sees some of nature's most dramatic weather displays – attracting weather enthusiasts on storm chase tours. Peter Ellegard joined a group of UK chasers in search of elusive tornadoes, and found more than he bargained for...

As I crossed the road in the small south-west Kansas town of Greensburg, two ladies were staring at what looked like a giant construction site. After we exchanged pleasantries, one sat on a low stone wall, rested on her walking stick and scooped up some porcelain fragments from the ground. She studied the coloured fragments. Behind her what had seemed like a pile of masonry was a substantial flight of stone steps, beyond which was a rubble-strewn hole in the ground. Similar scenes stretched for block after block in every direction; not so much construction site as nuclear holocaust aftermath.

"This used to be a two-storey church but they couldn't keep it going so they turned it into a beautiful antiques store," she reminisced, her voice

All photos: Peter Ellegard



■ Weatherman Michael Fish and supercell storm



■ Liberal, Kansas



■ Greensburg tornado damage



■ Storm chasers



■ Watching the storms grow near Fredonia, Kansas

quavering with emotion. “It was my favourite place to come with my friend when she visited from California,” gesturing to the other lady. “But now it’s gone; everything’s gone...and this is all that’s left.” She dropped the pottery pieces and looked around, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I felt decidedly uncomfortable. Like an interloper at a funeral, or a rubbernecker at the scene of a gory accident.

The truth was even worse. I was on a storm chasing trip around the notorious Tornado Alley area of America’s Mid-West, with nine other weather enthusiasts from Britain and Ireland – including legendary weather forecaster Michael Fish. We were on the first of three trips organised by UK weather forum website Netweather, and we had come in hopes of seeing the very weather phenomenon that had wrought such unimaginable destruction on this little town almost a year to the day earlier.

On May 4, 2007, Greensburg was virtually wiped out by an EF5 tornado – the strongest to have hit North America for eight years and one of the most powerful on record. The night-time twister was a massive wedge tornado, measuring 1.7 miles across at one point. It passed right over the town and literally tore its heart out, destroying nearly 1,000 homes and businesses and leaving 11 dead in its wake.

A year on, the centre of town was still almost devoid of structures, save for a few shattered buildings including its bank, the skeletal remains of trees and a new water tower – proudly proclaiming Greensburg’s name and replacing one which stood over its previous claim to fame, the world’s largest hand-dug well.

Spirit

It symbolised the spirit of Greensburg’s townsfolk to rebuild, evident from the piles of new wooden porches and steps waiting to adorn new homes, and the construction crews and machinery working on several sites. TV crews were everywhere, too; in town to cover an impending visit and speech by President George W Bush to mark the sombre anniversary.

Such terrifying and tragic storms are thankfully rare, yet the people who live in this part of America live with the ever-present threat of tornadoes each spring – albeit that the chance of your house being hit by a violent tornado in any given year is just one in 10 million.

Although from a nearby town, my new acquaintance shared the pain, and hopes, of the locals. She revealed her mother had given birth to her as she sheltered from a tornado which flattened their farm – and which

almost killed her father.

In subdued mood, my fellow chasers and I headed on to nearby Pratt, a frontier-like town of wide streets and decorative, square-fronted buildings, probably similar to how Greensburg had been. Like the rest of the area, its citizens had rallied round to help their stricken neighbours. We stopped to buy commemorative books about the twister, the proceeds of which were going to Greensburg’s rebuilding fund, and chatted to locals when we went for a drink in Woody’s sports bar. After the moving experience of Greensburg, I found it uplifting to hear about the area’s strong community spirit.

I was also amazed at the reception we received everywhere during our 12-day trip, during which we chased our quarry for over 3,600 miles backwards and forwards across Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. Far from being vilified, we were warmly welcomed everywhere. “What are y’all doing over



■ Background image: wall cloud, Oklahoma supercell. Left: Texas supercell



■ Storm tracks

here?” was the common question as we ordered food in smalltown Subways, KFCs and the like in distinctly un-American accents. And never with “You ain’t from round these parts, are you?” menace, either.

When we explained our mission, it was always met with a smile and “hey, that’s great – wish I could do that” or similar.

Supercells

Tornadoes are generally spun off by supercell storms, and the area they can strike is so vast and little-populated that extra eyes watching out for them are a welcome addition to the early warning system.

The day after visiting Greensburg, we finally experienced our first supercells, in south-east Kansas.

Having watched them grow from innocuous fluffy white cotton wool puffs, we positioned our two hulking Chevy Tahoe SUVs in a likely spot using a mix of projections

from official sources and other online chasers, experience (tour co-leader and fellow Essex chaser Paul Sherman was on his fifth storm chasing season), gut feel, high-tech kit in the form of Barons radar tracking and GPS navigation, plus good old-fashioned forecasting – cue Michael Fish and some of the amateur storm sleuths.

The clouds developed at frightening speed. In little more than half an hour they went from towering hopefuls whose tops were being sheared off by strong winds to menacing thunderheads, and we set off towards the nearest one. The chase was finally on, four days after we had flown into Dallas.

Watching from a safe-ish distance, Mother Nature put on a spectacular pyrotechnic show of forked CG (cloud to ground) bolts, anvil crawlers (cloud to cloud lightning) and lashing rain and hail, from ink-black clouds of Armageddon propor-



Blue sky days

Storm chasing is not all high-octane thrills. We chased on four of our 12 days. On blue sky days, when the clouds melt away, a good option is sightseeing. That provided some of my most memorable moments.



One was when I wanted ground-level pictures of a derelict farmhouse we visited – and discovered I was laying on a fire ants nest when they started biting. During a roadside “comfort break” in northern Texas, I almost stood on a rattlesnake while stepping back to get a group photo. I froze on hearing its warning rattle and looked down to see it slithering away just three inches from my heel, its raised tail still rattling.

We visited the Kansas home of The Little



House on the Prairie author Laura Ingalls Wilder as well as two Yellow Brick Roads, in Sedan and Liberal, Kansas. Liberal claims to be the home town of fictional

Oz heroine Dorothy Gale. An old farmstead was moved there and opened as her house, complete with a museum and Yellow Brick Road with signatures (below left).

We drove along part of the historic Route 66 in Texas, visiting Shamrock, with its period Conoco gas station, and Amarillo for Western-themed restaurant The Big Texan, complete with mock frontier-town (actually a motel where we stayed overnight) and limos sporting huge cowhorns. It offers a huge 72oz steak free – if you can eat it all in under an hour. One fellow chaser tried valiantly but failed, while another diner succeeded...and promptly threw up.

My most fascinating highlight was a guided tour of the National Weather Centre in Oklahoma City, which houses the US tornado prediction centre. Besides all the high-tech gadgetry, including storm chase trucks bristling with gizmos, I loved the humorous touch of its Flying Cow Café, a take on the disaster movie Twister; and props from the film including its mechanical star, Dorothy, a scientific instrument which released tiny probes into tornadoes.



■ Green hail core cloud



■ Not a tornado but a wall cloud, near Hooker, Oklahoma

tions. But no tornadoes, despite near-perfect conditions and tornado warnings shrieking from our alert radios.

Holing up overnight in the town of Independence – strangely prophetic given the classic supercell we saw in the Texas Panhandle a few days later, resembling spaceships from movie Independence Day – we watched more spectacular lightning, and

sat tight amid more tornado warnings as a front raced past at 2am. That dropped nearly 50 tornadoes east of us.

Hail core

Kansas and northern Oklahoma provided more supercell excitement on following days. Near the Oklahoma town of Hooker, we witnessed a wall cloud which lowered in

heart-stopping fashion. The same storm gave close-up views of amazing, bottle-green hail-core clouds – which can produce softball-sized chunks of ice. We also had clouds rotating right above our heads; the Barons system sounding like Robbie the Robot on steroids, following up audible warnings that we getting close to a dangerous storm with near-maniac “warning, approaching twisting storm” forebodings.

Yet our prey eluded us. The closest we had got was a funnel cloud on our final storm which did not touch down.

Our experience underlined how fickle the weather can be, especially as 2008 was a near-record tornado season with close to 600 during May alone.

Yet the chasers on the third Netweather tour, in late May, saw an incredible 15 tornadoes. Five were on the same day, one of them a half-mile wedge tornado which hit a petrol station where they took refuge. And all of it caught on high definition video by an ITV cameraman, for an episode of ITV 1’s Storm Riders series being broadcast soon.

Despite my disappointment at not seeing a tornado, the experience was amazing. I will never forget the awesome spectacle of the storms, or the carnage they can leave behind. For me, though, the real stars of my trip were the people we met during the adventure. TL



■ Reflecting chasers

Tornado facts

Tornado Alley

Tornadoes can occur anywhere but Tornado Alley is America’s hotspot. It stretches from the Texas Panhandle to South Dakota, encompassing Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska, clipping states to the east and west. Cold, dry air streaming over the Rocky Mountains clashes with warm, moist Gulf of Mexico air over the vast plains, the unstable air creating supercells – huge, rotating spaceship-like storms which can spin off devastating twisters.



Season

America’s tornado season lasts for about two months from mid-April. The 1,600-plus tornadoes in 2008 made it the second most active year after 2004, which had 1,817. This year is predicted to be as active because of El Nino.

Wind speeds

The Enhanced Fujita scale estimates wind speeds based on damage and is used to rate tornadoes. EF5 tornadoes have gusts over 200mph.

Tours

Three 10-day tours are being run by UK weather website Netweather (www.netweather.tv) during April and May, 2009, starting and ending in Dallas, Texas. The £1,800 cost includes hotels but not flights or food.

Tourist information

For more information on Texas, visit the Texas Tourism website, www.TravelTex.com; for Kansas, visit the Kansas Travel & Tourism site, www.TravelKS.com; and for Oklahoma, visit Oklahoma Travel and Recreation’s site, at www.TravelOK.com