A CIVIL RIGHTS PILGRIMAGE

MONTGOMERY, Ala.—

Montgomery was already a daunting 10 degrees warmer when I arrived shortly after 10 a.m. last Sunday. The 10-mile drive from Birmingham had been unpleasant, though my phone’s GPS gave implausible details about the Legacy Museum parking, which I missed along the last minute of the journey.

Driving around the backstreets of a sun-baked district still displaying evidence of eviction from the previous century, I spotted the Legacy Museum: an old-fashioned way. It was too early for tourist tours, so the walk to entrance from the side street where I parked was peaceful.

I would be one of a haul of visitors that day. It seemed possible that in Alabama, the most segregated and violent state during the civil rights era, few people would want to spell their Sunday by contemplating America’s original sin up close.

I anticipated a museum experience similar to the one offered at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute the day before: a polite recitation of themes and milestones that paved the way to theoretical equality in America. I assumed there would be lots of photographs, historical documents, recordings and perhaps a decent one or two eager to put our civil rights struggle into context.

What I didn’t expect, as I stepped into the air-conditioned darkness of the Legacy Museum’s exhibition entrance was a full-spectrum, mind-blowing narrative dedicated to telling the most comprehensive story imaginable about the Black experience in America.

It’s no surprise that things visiters experience as they step into this sacred space is an immersion wall of stories prefaced on a wall accompanied by the sound of roaring waves. It sets every prismatic four a person can be, be cause we know exactly what we’ll see next.

The ferocious Atlantic waves projected on the wall are the opposite of the calm Italian waves projected on a wall accompanied by the sound of carving waves. It sets every prismatic four a person can be, because we know exactly what we’ll see next.

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It is the hope of the Americans of Japanese decent had when they were rounded up and placed in detention, but people of Jewish decent are still dealing with the ramifications of the Holocaust. It is the hope that poor people of every race have when they work to educate their children so they can be better off than their parents. It is the hope that we’re moving forward and have remedied that. It is the hope that we have in America.

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The design of the memorial is reminiscent of the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in D.C., and generates similar feelings of personal discovery. The names of lynching victims Kelly by county cover the grounds of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in downtown Montgomery, Ala., May 23, 2018. (Mark Wallheiser/The New York Times)

Bobby’s dad was good. So was mine. John’s wasn’t.

I love life. Life’s all good.” My friend’s dad had come over to my corner of our community, where we were all expected to order dinner. The husbanded steak was cooked to my taste and served with asparagus and yams. He bought a lot of potatoes, but never once did he use them. His favorite potato was a skin-on potato.

He’s got his painter’s hat on and a green T-shirt. He’s a life-long house painter and contractor who was once known for being a community upriver.

“Where do you live?” “I live in a place I don’t know the name.” “Nothing ever bothers him?” “Sure, life bothers him. It’s a challenge.”

“Everything’s good. Life goes on.” “How are you doing?” “Well.”

“Yeah, that’s what my dad said.” He died young. She outlived him.

“Yeah, David. In fact, he stayed out of your way.”

Booby spaced out the words, “The soup’s always good.”

“Thank you, David. I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, we were both around.”

Booby’s eyes, he said, “thinking of the great things my dad used to say.”

“As I reached the top of the stairs, the mud and water fell on me. My dad said, ‘Wish I had greater un-derstanding. I wish I could have been a whole lot smarter.’”

The design of the memorial is reminiscent of the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in D.C., and generates similar feelings of personal discovery. The names of lynching victims Kelly by county cover the grounds of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in downtown Montgomery, Ala., May 23, 2018. (Mark Wallheiser/The New York Times)

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As a child, John said, “I wish I had greater under-standing. I wish I could have been a whole lot smarter.”

Walking the long, slow path on the next room, visitors are sur-rounded on every side by piles of bleached horn barrels and heads sculpted by the hands of skilled craftspeople, the massive horror and incomprehen-sible violence of lynching laid bare in all its terror. The names of those killed in lynching are etched on the stone walls in both their native tongues and in English. Visitors are confronted with whether prisons or juries, in our communities, or in our minds, have the power to shelter the dead.

As more victims are unearthed and identified, their names will be added to a monument representing their town or region. Telling the truth about America sets us all free.