



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

# RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



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Punxsutawney PA



Groundhog Day, recognized (though hopefully not observed) nationwide on February 2<sup>nd</sup> every year, has to be the most bizarre non-religious ritual in our country. Based in obscure central European traditions, the ceremony plays out in freezing cold, pre-dawn hours, before thousands upon thousands of spectators, almost none of whom have a shred of belief in the premise.

OK, so a groundhog stirs from his winter-long slumber, takes a peek out into the frigid Pennsylvania countryside, and whether the sun's out or it's not (cutting to the chase of that "seeing his shadow" bushwa) determines either the early arrival of spring, or the lingering-on of winter till mid-March. Right.



The vernal equinox happens about six weeks after 2/2, so that could maybe have something to do with it too, ya think?

But here at Gobbler's Knob, as middle-of-nowhere as most people would ever care to be, this plays out to the delight or fascination or amusement of – by most recent counts – 52,000 people. Gates open at 3 AM for the 7:45 gathering of top-hatted, long-





coated dignitaries who ascend the stairs to a stage in a natural amphitheater, and with great pomp, open the doors of a fake burrow (basically a trash can with a side cut out, and filled with straw), haul out a half-asleep rodent, hold it aloft, and proclaim the Yay or Nay of shadow sighting.

And there is great rejoicing.

I knew of the tradition long before the Bill Murray movie came out. As a young boy, the date had significance to me because my dad was born on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, so we had plenty of jokes about the consecutive occasions. I thought it was a load of hooley back then, and I obviously still do, but, hey, people seemed to be having a good time, so no harm done, right?

But when I was scouting the maps for this northerly leg of RoadMode25, and I saw the small-font name “Punxsutawney” off in the middle of Pennsylvania’s western nowhere, I jumped on it. “Phil,” I proclaimed, “Blue Maxx and I are coming for YOU!”

Like every other day since I left Florida, the ride would have been better if the sun was out. I’m tired of writing that, but, come on, it’s been a full week now!

But it was a nice ride. In this part of the state, every road qualifies as a “back road.” GooGirl had it as “three hours”, but it was closer to four.







There was a late-20's woman named Hannah working solo at the Gobbler's Knob Visitor Center today. I can only imagine what her day is like. She was well-suited to the task, though, remaining cheerful and seeming to enjoy telling passers-by the ins-and-outs of this outrageous charade.

She dealt with the skepticism with an amiable *duh you figured it out* demeanor while remaining whole-heartedly invested in the fable. Most of the town does, from what she said. And why not? We may be tourons, but we bring in piles o' cash.

The top-hatted dignitaries, well, they are members of a private club – The Punxsutawney Groundhog Club Inner Circle – who all either hold high-level executive positions that allow for free time, or are rich and retired, and spend much of their year planning and working towards the 2<sup>nd</sup> of next February. I'm sure it's mostly on autopilot by now.

I speculated that they sounded like a Chamber of Commerce or a Town Council, but Hannah assured me that Punxsutawney has both of those, and these guys ain't them. The club has been in existence for generations, and you can't join; you need to be selected. Even legacies are not guaranteed selection.

Hannah gave me a color chart of their head shots (in top hat, of course), with all their PGCIC nicknames (photo below, L to R, T to B):

Shingle Shaker, Moonshine, Big Chill, Frostbite, Rainmaker ("His Handler")  
Iceman, Fair Weatherman, Chief Healthman, Thunder Conductor, O-Zone  
Daybreaker, Downpour, Head Huntsman, Storm Builder, and Overcast.



Quite a group. I have to admit, I wonder what I would look like in a top hat and bowtie. I am pretty sure I will never know, and I'm OK with that. Truly.

My first question to Hannah stemmed from the four hours it took me to drive here: "How do these two-lane country roads, and this small town infrastructure, handle the ridiculous overdose of visitors? Traffic must back up for ten miles or more!"

It was probably her weakest answer: "It just does, I don't know how." She said locals rent out their houses, rent out their driveways and yards and parking areas,





and make enough money to buy groceries for months. The shoulders of the roads are lined with cars, and people walk for miles to get to the Knob.



So, of course, I wanted to see Phil. The signs boasted that Gobbler's Knob was his home, after all, so where was the furry beast that caused all this kerfuffle?

"Oh, he doesn't live here," Hannah said, grudgingly admitting the misleading nature of the signs, and suggesting that they referred to "this general area" as home to the GOAG (Greatest of All Groundhogs). "He lives at the library downtown."

The library? Libraries house livestock now? And she said it so matter-of-factly, as if saying, "Well, where does *your* town's groundhog live?"

So, I had to go see this.

Downtown Punxsutawney was bigger than I expected, but it's still your classic small town. It's about 1/2-mile as the crow flies from Gobbler's Knob, but close to a mile as the van drives.



The library was easy to find. I walked inside, through the lobby and into the main room. Before I had to ask anyone, I saw three people down and to my right who were looking at something through a pane of glass. I walked down the three steps, and, sure enough, there was Phil's urban burrow, and, even better, the GOAG himself.

The "burrow" is, well, rather lame. If I were a famous groundhog, I'd ask for better digs. It's maybe 10' x 10' with painted walls, a bunch of rocks, a probably-fake tree trunk, and a pile of woodchips at the opening of what is apparently the curl-up-and-sleep area.

And Phil has company! There are four groundhogs sharing that space. Hannah had been a bit vague about who these other rodents were, but she seemed to indicate they were his male offspring, but that does not jive with the signage at his burrow.



I walked outside to get a better photo angle. There was another large plate glass window out there so people could visit Phil 24/7.













# **FUN PHIL FACTS**

**MOST GROUNDHOGS LIVE ABOUT 6-8 YEARS ...  
PUNXSYPHIL GETS A DRINK OF MAGIC  
ELIXIR EACH YEAR THAT GIVES HIM  
7 MORE YEARS - HE IS OVER 100!**

**PUNXSYPHIL'S FAVORITE MEAL IS  
DANDELION LEAVES IN EARLY SPRING.**

**A BABY GROUNDHOG IS CALLED A "KIT."  
PUNXSYPHIL HAS NO KNOWN OFFSPRING.**

**PUNXSYPHIL WEIGHS ABOUT 18 LBS. IN  
THE FALL AND IS 22 INCHES LONG.**



So, yeah, The Elixir of Life. In the display case at the visitor center, there was a small wooden keg, not much bigger than a can of Foster's beer, that had the words "Elixir of Life" hand-painted on it.

Hannah went on to describe a second – and much less heralded – event that takes place on the second Saturday of September every year. Attendance is limited to 300, and a large barbecue and picnic are held on the grounds of the Knob. Phil comes – to much less fanfare, of course – and after the attendees have had a few hours of food and revelry, Phil receives his ceremonial quaff from the cask of Elixir.

He gets seven years added to his life for each drink. Hannah said he is 138 years old. Well, frost my flakes, jingle my bells, and pluck my petunias. Phil is 138.

OK, *if* (big **IF**) you still had me going along with it through all the other inane and insane claims, you finally lost me on that one. It became a long string of *If they believe that, tell 'em this...* and it's pretty hilarious. I was outwardly laughing at it while she was telling it to me, but I also know that Punxsutawney was laughing even harder at me for driving four hours through nothing to get here. A classic WE GOTCHA!



I felt the same way when I detoured 40 miles off of I-10 in New Mexico to check out Roswell, the tiny town outside of which an alien craft allegedly crashed in 1947. You



chuckle your way around town, but you can hear the town chuckling back, “Yeah, but we got **you** here, didn’t we?”

One thing that Hannah stressed was that alcohol is NOT allowed at Phil’s events, and security about that is very tight. So, you’re telling me that 52,000 people want to stand outdoors, in the peak of winter, before sunrise, to *maybe* get a glimpse of a big chubby rodent as a weather predictor – and they are doing this **sober???**

OK, now I really don’t get it.

