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Friends and families gather on Sunday morning at Pho Hoa in Oklahoma City, Okla.

Good Morning, Vietnam ... er, Oklahoma

By MATT GROSS
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AMERICANS do not like vegetables. At least, it seems that way after almost two months on the road, during which I've eaten at countless country cafes and rarely ever encountered anything fresh and green. When I have, it's been iceberg salads with toupees of flavorless yellow cheese, battered and deep-fried string beans and, inevitably, cole slaw.

Not that the food hasn't been delicious — like the pulled pork at Blue Mist in Asheboro, N.C., or the patty melt at Spice Water Cafe in Lime Springs, Iowa. But a diet of meat, starch and fat is not what you want when you spend hours a day sitting in a car. Often, as I digested the latest gut bomb, I would wonder if my budget was keeping me away from greener, healthier restaurants. But, no. I rarely glimpsed such places outside big cities and a few hip towns.

And so, with Oklahoma City in my sights, I headed south as fast as I could. I had one thing on my mind: Vietnamese food.

It may come as a surprise that Oklahoma's capital has a significant Vietnamese population — around 20,000, according to the Vietnamese American Community organization — but such ethnic enclaves are a new American reality. Hmong live in large numbers in Minnesota, for example, while Columbus, Ohio, is home to some 30,000 Somalis. And in each case, the immigrants bring their own cuisines, which often are tasty, full of veggies and inexpensive.

Oklahoma City, however, lay a long way from Nebraska, where I'd just visited Carhenge (www.carhenge.com). From there, I drove through Kansas, stopping at Greensburg to witness the aftermath of the May 4 tornado. Then I had to drop the car off in Wichita, at Gorges & Company Volvo (3211 North Webb Road, 316-630-0689, www.volvobygorges.com), for much-needed repairs; 6,000 miles' worth of leaks and electrical problems cost a disheartening $855.

It was late on Saturday evening when I finally drove into Oklahoma City and checked into the first place that looked clean, had Wi-Fi and was cheap. The Hospitality Inn (3709 NW 39th Street, 405-942-7730) is a simple motel — two stories arranged around a swimming pool — but it is on the fabled Route 66 and less sketchy than some of the older motels, and the proprietor knocked the price down from $62 a night to $51.25 when I said I'd be staying three days.

There was a lot to see, but the real plan was to eat as much Vietnamese food as possible. I knew this would take discipline, so as soon as I woke up Sunday morning, I went jogging. The motel is on a highway, but a few blocks south is Will Rogers Park, several acres of grass, trees and ponds. Ducks and geese and hares had to scurry as I bounded over bridges, through the rose garden and

around the arboretum for about 30 minutes. On my way back, I took note of the park's tennis center and wondered if I could find a partner there later in the day.

Now, however, it was time for breakfast, so I drove through the city, past numerous barbecue joints and root beer stands for the more balanced delights awaiting me in the city's Asian District, a modest neighborhood of strip malls and slightly run-down houses lining North Classen Boulevard.

I knew exactly what I'd be eating: pho, the beef noodle soup that is considered the national dish of Vietnam. It may seem a strange breakfast, but all over Southeast Asia, it's common to begin the day with noodle soup.

And that's how I began at Pho Hoa (901 NW 23rd Street, 405-521-8087), recommended by an Oklahoma-born friend. In the brightly lit room, surrounded by Vietnamese families, I ordered a small bowl. The first bite was heaven, as if my taste buds had been in suspended animation all these weeks. The noodles were thin but firm, the broth redolent of star anise, topped with thin slices of rare flank steak and well-cooked brisket. I garnished it with bean sprouts, basil and ngo gai, a long, lemony leaf known as sawtooth or culantro, then squeezed in some lime juice and mixed it all together. The bean sprouts crunched, and the herbs provided a fresh counterpoint to the hot soup.

When I dipped a slice of flank steak in a little dish of Sriracha chili sauce, I could tell it had been a long time since I'd eaten like this — my tongue, usually able to withstand any assault, from habaneros to bird's eyes, was on fire. I cooled down with a salted-lime soda, then walked out the door with an iced coffee enriched with condensed milk, having paid only $11.53 for a taste not just of Vietnam but of home. (I lived in Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon, in 1996 and 1997.)

My stomach temporarily full, I drove downtown to the Oklahoma City National Memorial, a park dedicated to the victims of Timothy McVeigh's 1995 terrorist attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Two stone arches bracket a reflecting pool, bearing the times "9:01" (before the bombing) and "9:03" (after), and 168 chairs sit in a field of grass to represent those who died.

As I walked in, I heard a teenager ask his mother why McVeigh did it.

"Well, he had something against the government, I guess," she answered, and they walked out.

If they'd stuck around, they could've learned more from Rick Thomas, the National Park Service employee who gave a free orientation under the Survivor Tree, a century-old elm. In the span of 15 minutes, he covered everything from the details of the attack to the ways the memorial tries to address the emotions of everyone affected by the bombing. I left hoping my own city's 9/11 memorial winds up being, as Doug Kamholz, a reader, wrote of this one, "a worthy balm to the heart."

After a brief stroll through the area, I returned to the Asian District around 11:30 a.m. in search of banh mi, or Vietnamese sandwiches. And in Oklahoma City, the signal for banh mi is an enormous milk bottle sitting atop a tiny shack on Classen Boulevard. Once, this place sold Braum's ice cream; now it's Banh Mi Ba Le (2426 North Classen Boulevard, 405-524-2660), famous as much for its outsize sign as for its warm mini-baguettes stuffed with roast pork, pâté, cha lua (a Vietnamese mortadella), lightly pickled daikon and carrot, cilantro and green chilies. I love them — especially when they cost $1.85. It's ridiculous how much you get for so little.

It was sort of the opposite at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum (1700 NE 63rd Street, 405-478-2250, www.nationalcowboymuseum.org; entry, $8.50), which readers suggested I visit. It was quite large, with rooms full of saddles, guns, clothing and cowboy art, but it seemed geared toward 10-year-old boys, more interested in perpetuating the romantic myth of the cowboy than in understanding how that myth came to be and what it means for American culture. It was almost as if "Deadwood" and "Unforgiven" never existed.

As I drove away from the museum, I passed yet another barbecue joint, right next door, and wondered if I was missing something in my single-minded devotion to Vietnamese cuisine.

Then I arrived at Banh Cuon Tay Ho (Little Saigon Shopping Center, 2524 North Military Avenue, 405-528-7700) for a midafternoon snack and forgot all about hickory-smoked slabs of meat. The signature dish, banh cuon, is a kind of northern Vietnamese ravioli — warm, thick, soft rice noodles filled with ground pork and mushrooms, and topped with bean sprouts, sliced cucumbers, cha lua and shredded mint. Here it was served with a fried cake of sweet potato and shrimp that was simultaneously salty and sweet, crunchy and creamy. In fact, I think the whole plate contained every known texture and flavor — and for a mere $6.

By now, I needed to work off three meals, so I returned to the park, hoping to find a pick-up tennis partner. I didn't. (Who but the Frugal Traveler goes to a tennis court alone?) Instead, I swam laps in the Hospitality Inn pool, napped briefly and emerged from the motel — ready to eat again.

Golden Phoenix (2728 North Classen Boulevard, 405-524-3988), recommended by the proprietor of Banh Mi Ba Le, was bustling with families and college students, and with the help of my waitress, who giggled at my poor Vietnamese, I put together a standard southern Vietnamese dinner — the kind of meal I ate every day a decade ago. First, a deep-fried soft-shell crab that dribbled its bubbling green juices into my rice bowl with every bite. Then water spinach stir-fried with garlic, fresh from the wok, the tubular stems crunchy, the leafy bits lush and juicy. A clay pot showed up full of caramelized braised fish, and finally goi ngo sen, a salad of cucumber and young lotus shoots threaded through with rau ram, a diamond-shaped leaf that tastes like cilantro but is spicier and soapier.

I ate — and ate and ate. Soon, I knew, I'd be off to Texas and day after day of beautiful barbecue (mm, burnt ends!), but for now I was crunching through fresh veggies, searing my mouth with chilies and drowning myself in fish sauce — deliriously happy in the heartland of America.

By the time I finished, I'd spent $48 (including a beer, dessert and tip) and barely touched the lotus-shoot salad — it was just too much food. Instead, I had it boxed up to take back to the motel. It wasn't quite pho, but it would do for breakfast.