

Happy Contrails to You

It was closing in on noon and we had not yet even gotten as far as Front Royal. Traffic was creeping along a detour from Interstate 66 to avoid an accident involving an overturned gasoline tanker truck. Bristol was still hundreds of miles away. I looked at the long line of cars and trucks ahead of us, and then at the completely empty lane heading back toward Washington. Nicki turned toward me and I could tell she was thinking the same thing as I was: Should we bail?

But we did not, and once we finally got to Front Royal we were rewarded for our stamina by discovering an alternate way south that avoided all the traffic back-up. It took us through the picturesque Page Valley of Virginia, following the meandering South Fork of the Shenandoah River to Luray, then up and over Massanutten Mountain to the Shenandoah Valley and Interstate 81. By the time we finally reached Bristol the weather had deteriorated to where there were late afternoon thunderstorms and one of them produced a spectacular double rainbow over the parking lot of the convention hotel. Inside was the gold at the end of the rainbow and what we had come to Bristol for – Contrails, the 52nd annual DeepSouthCon.

Back in the day, when Nicki and I were living in Tennessee, the DeepSouthCon was an annual event for us. It's the premiere event for science fiction fandom of the southern states, and it does not have a permanent home – the right to hold the DeepSouthCon is decided by vote, and DSCs have been hosted by fan groups as far west as Dallas, as far south as New Orleans, and as far north as Louisville. Most of them take place in Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, which are now too far off the beaten path for us to attend – Nicki and I had only been to four of them since we moved to Maryland at the end of 1988. So it was an easy decision for us to add Contrails to our calendar when Bristol was selected as host site for the 2014 DSC. It's the first time a DSC has ever been held in Virginia (but not by much!) and the closest a DSC has ever been to where we now live.

It turned out to be an enjoyable but very small DSC. For whatever reason – spotty publicity, lack of a large fan group in the area, and many other even higher-profile conventions the very next weekend – there were only about 60 people in attendance. Not good for the convention chair, who told us he sustained a four-figure loss on the event, but it did make the evening room parties much less claustrophobic. There was a reasonable amount of programming – two full tracks with one focused on 'sercon' aspects such as writing and book publishing, and the other a more fan-oriented track including things like the "50 Years of Southern Fandom" panel. For that, the six participants could trace their activity from starting in the 1960s (Rick Norwood) to starting in the 2000s (Grace Molloy), and it was entertaining to hear (and in some cases, re-hear) tales of conventions and fan gatherings that happened decades ago. Now *that's* timebinding!



double rainbow over Bristol



"50 Years of Southern Fandom" panelists

We had been interested in coming to Bristol for more than just the DSC. Bristol claims the honor as the 'Birthplace of Country Music' and is the place where, in 1927, one of America's greatest songwriters, A.P. Carter, brought his family to record a series of songs inspired by the traditional folk music of the southern Appalachian region. But

all that happened over on the Tennessee side of the border.

Bristol is actually two cities in one – twins separated by the state line which runs right down the middle of State Street. There are several music venues along State Street along with the occasional historical plaque, but the downtown area seemed mostly to be cafes and curio shops. The most active place, on the Saturday morning we were there, was the farmers market.



building mural in downtown Bristol

There's way more to see and do in Bristol and the rest of southwestern Virginia than what we had time for, of course. I'm not willing to put up with all the crowds and chaos to experience a NASCAR race at the Bristol Motor Speedway, but Virginia's 300-mile long heritage music trail, The Crooked



state line marker in middle of State Street

Road, passes through Bristol and along its length there are various festivals throughout the year. That alone will be enough to bring us back in a few years, when retirement will provide me unlimited time for such things. Until then, it's probably going to be "Happy Trails to You, Until We Meet Again" for this part of the country. But for *this* particular occasion, it's "Happy Contrails to You". We had a good time. ☀