

Dothan, Alabama

*By Sheila Johnson*

This past summer, I was able to scratch one more thing off of my bucket list. But it was more than a scratch. My dear friend Lee moved to Alabama three years ago, and fell in love with the small town of Dothan. She's lived many places, including Denver, Colorado and became an avid Bronco fan. She loves the sports pulse of this city and the enthusiasm of its fans. She likes the variety of the restaurants, the semi-Southwest culture, and the diversity of the people. None of this, in my friend's eyes, compares to living in Dothan.

My itch can be described as a yearning, a desire, a thirst, even a lust to travel to and experience the southern cultures of this nation. For many people, especially Black people, my itch may seem absurd. But the south holds a very deep history of hate and hope, trials and triumphs, death and birth, hatred and redemption. I wanted to see what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. saw, lived, preached, and wrote about. I wanted to breathe in the humid air that still carries a fragrance of blood, sweat, and tears. I wanted to meet the people – black and white – who still believe that racial justice is possible. I just needed to look into the eyes of intergenerational peoples who have stories for the rest of the world.

And so it was. I flew from Denver to Montgomery, and onto Dothan by bus. I was so excited! I packed journals, mosquito repellent, sun block, and sandals. I didn't want to miss anything. I sat next to and talked to someone who was returning to Montgomery and then onto Denver after visiting with his 100-year-old mother in Tennessee. He was delightful, and twenty minutes into the conversation, we both discovered that I knew his wife and two of their children.

Once in Montgomery, I boarded a bus for the three-hour ride to Dothan. I sat next to a great grandmother who missed her plane, and nearly in tears because her cell phone was out of power. She needed to call her relatives who were waiting for her. I offered my phone, she made the one call that calmed her anxiety, and the stories that followed enriched my life tremendously.

Once in Dothan, my itch slowly began to subside. My dear friend Lee lives in a condo that backs up to a lake where I fed the ducks bread every morning for a week! We went to an old-fashioned baseball game. We drove to Montgomery and visited historical buildings including the residences of freedom fighters, and the old neighborhood and home of Dr. King and his family. I sat and held hands with the woman, Mrs. Davis, who babysat Dr. King's children. Lee and I ate barbeque and other southern delicacies. The humidity was great for my skin! We talked and sang and skipped as though we were teenagers. What a gift. What a joy. What a time well spent.