

USA: From the East Coast to the Great Plains

Englischer Filmkommentar

Atlantic Coast and New York City

(3:20 min)

We begin our journey on the East Coast of the United States, on the **Atlantic** Ocean, on the beaches of Long Island. The climate here is very **humid**. The yearly precipitation levels are 30 to 50 percent higher than in Germany. Even when it's cloudy the summers get warm enough to allow swimming in the sea.

We are located at approximately the same geographic latitude as Central Italy. One of the most famous and most important cities in the world is located on the East Coast of the United States – **New York City**.

Since the founding of the city in the **17th century**, New York was a port of call for **immigrants**. Today about 20 million people live in the metropolitan area of New York City. They are from all over the world, including Europe, Africa and Asia. New York is just “the place to be”.

Caroll Neubauer, Salesman:

“New York is a city where everybody meets. If you're a banker, if you are an industrialist, if you're a businessman, if you're a banker, if you're a lawyer, if you're an artist, if you're a singer, if you are on Broadway shows, if you are rich or if you are poor, everybody meets in New York. It's a melting pot of all occupations, of all people, of all races, of everything that the world has. It's a truly global city.”

New York City is one of the most important centers for business worldwide, many companies from around the world have a branch here. Additionally New York is a major **financial center**. The Stock Exchange is one of the most important in the world. Everyday shares worth billions of dollars are traded on Wall Street. Crucial for the development of New York was the harbor, which currently ranks third in the U.S., behind Long Beach and Los Angeles.

Culturally New York offers a lot, too. For example the **Metropolitan Museum** – one of the largest and most important museums in the world. Musical trends have their roots in New York City as well. In Harlem and the Bronx hip-hop culture emerged in the 1970s. Today young musicians still try to make it and start promoting themselves where everything began – on the street.

Richard, Street Rapper:

“I grew up in foster care. I grew up very poor, my mother wasn't in my life. I prayed to god, I found Jesus Christ, and then everything happened, I got discovered as a model, discovered as an actor. I did two years in college.”

I did a lot of stuff prior to music, so it's easier now to do it, because you have to learn how to produce. Even if you have the best album you got to learn how to sell it, you have to learn how to communicate. It just could be the best album in the world, but you won't know if I can't tell you how it is. So I learned all this and then it was time to get this chicken."

Washington

(2:10 min)

We leave New York and head towards the capital of the United States. Only about four hours away lies **Washington**. The added letters **D.C.**, which are often used, stand for "**District of Columbia**".

The **White House** is the political center of the United States. The most important decisions for the American People are made here every day. Not only is it the president's office, but also his home. The **Capitol** is not far away. It is the meeting place of the Senate and of House of Representatives. This is where all the laws are passed. Various ministries have their main office close by, for example the Department of Agriculture. One of the most visited places in Washington – next to the Capitol and the White House – is the **Lincoln Memorial**. Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery and was the first U.S. president who was assassinated.

Not only murdered presidents are remembered in Washington, but also fallen soldiers. The **World War II Memorial** commemorates the American soldiers who never returned from the Second World War. The **Arlington National Cemetery** is located on the outskirts of Washington. Every president and every soldier who was honorably discharged from service, has the right to be buried here. Right next to it: the Pentagon – the Department of Defence.

Appalachians: Landscape and Agriculture

(3:50 min)

We leave the major metropolitan areas on the East Coast behind – between Boston and Washington – and drive into the hinterland. The first foothills of the **Appalachian Mountains** are easily reached from Washington.

Only about 100 miles away from the capital, the mountain range rises gradually. The Appalachian Mountains stretch over 1,500 miles from Quebec in Canada in the North-East to Alabama in the South-West.

Parts of the Central Appalachians are called **Blue Ridge Mountains** – because of their bluish color. They are more than 6000 feet high. They date back about 400 million years and are therefore among the oldest mountain ranges on Earth.

It rains a lot in the Appalachians. Every year about 60 to 80 inches of precipitation falls here. Clouds coming from the nearby Atlantic Ocean get caught in the mountains and release their water.

The high amount of rain affects the **vegetation**, of course. In the lower altitudes of the Appalachian Mountains deciduous trees thrive. Particularly common are beech, birch and oak trees. Humans are taking advantage of the climate and vegetation in this region of North America.

The range of hills are mainly used for cattle breeding. Grassland farming provides food for the cattle.

Wayne Snap, Farmer:

“We are primarily larger into hay than we are into the row crops, mainly because our soil isn't as good as some of the soil in the Midwest. And so we have a strong hay market back here, so we grow hay for the horse industry as well as some cattle.”

The northern part of the Appalachian Mountains is part of the so called **Dairy Belt**. The focus here lies on dairy farming. There is more than enough feed, the temperatures are moderate and ideal for dairy farming, and there is a third reason why the Dairy Belt developed here.

The major markets such as Boston, New York and Washington are close by. In the past, milk could not be transported as far as today. Refrigerated trucks did not exist back then. To date, the Dairy Belt is one of the most modern and productive dairy farming areas in the world. An American dairy farm can not be compared to a German one.

Earl Martic, Dairy farmer:

“We have about 1,400 milk cows, about 1,200 milkin' most of the time and a couple of hundred dry cows. We have to have a permit to have this many cows. And it's proofed by the EPA, and we milk 'em three times a day at the average of 28,000 thousand pounds per cow a year.”

In order for the cows to remain healthy, the udders are disinfected before milking. Only after that the milking machine is attached. If the milked amount reaches a certain quantity the machine disconnects automatically.

There are about 65,000 dairy farms in the U.S. today. But because of a fall in prices the number is shrinking.

Appalachian Mountains – Mining

(2:10 min)

More than just agriculture happens in the Appalachians. A very important source of income for states like West Virginia is the **mining industry**.

Directly on the Earth's surface, often only a few inches below the soil layer, huge coal reserves can be found. No wonder that the Appalachian Mountains are one of the largest coal mining regions of the U.S..

The coal is partly used for **energy production** and is burned in **coal-fired power plants**. A large part is exported. This generates a yearly income of over seven billion dollars. The coal reserves will probably last another 50 years.

Nonetheless West Virginia is one of the poorest states in the U.S.. People often live in poverty. The reason: Due to new production methods many jobs in the mining industry have been lost. Many people have moved away to other states and given up their homes.

Coal production also has serious consequences for the environment. To get to the coal, whole mountain tops are blasted off: This process is called **Mountain Top Removal Mining**.

In recent decades over 500 mountain peaks have disappeared like this in the Appalachian Mountains. And where does all the rubble go?

Elise Keaton, Environmentalist:

“The debris is pushed into the valley to create what they call valley fills. So you can imagine the top of the mountain being removed and pushed over into the valley to create a flat area, that's where most of the debris goes. When you add up all that land it's basically a four lane highway across the United States and back. That's the amount of land that's been impacted.”

At some places measures to restore parts of the landscape have been taken after the mining was finished. However so far with rather limited success.

Manufacturing Belt: Pittsburgh

(2:20 min)

The coal from the Appalachians was the foundation for the **steel industry** of Pittsburgh. The coke made from the coal was used to operate dozens of furnaces. In the middle of the 19th century the city was the center of American heavy industry and provided the basis for the industrialization of the country – here in the Manufacturing Belt of the USA.

Today Pittsburgh is a symbol of the Rust Belt. In the 1970s, the steel industry virtually collapsed. Many of the former steel works have been demolished and brownfield sites emerged. Nothing is left but a few blades of grass.

Due to the steel crisis Pittsburgh has lost about half of its inhabitants. Today only around 300,000 people still live here. But the city is not as badly decayed as others.

Ron Barraf, Director of Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area:

“If you look at Detroit, if you look at Cleveland and a lot of these Rust Belt cities, they’re still trying to find footing. Pittsburgh survived because it was able to adapt. And it’s really the story of this region, going back two hundred plus years. In the vanguard the high tech of the early 20th century was this. But now Pittsburgh’s known for biomedical engineering, for robotics, for the medical industry, for universities – some of the finest universities in the country if not the world are based here. And that helped it survive, that helped it come through this de-industrialization.”

Besides biomedicine and the chemical industry, there is another sector, which is very successful from all over the world: The ketchup production. The corporation first founded in 1869. Today the company has about 30,000 employees worldwide. The yearly revenue is about ten billion dollars. The brand was sold in 2013, for an impressive 28 billion dollars. More than 1,300 jobs were lost in the process.

Manufacturing Belt: Detroit

(2:40 min)

We now leave Pittsburgh and head towards **the Great Lakes**.

After about four hours we reach **Detroit**. The city is located on the border to Canada and is known for its automotive industry. Like Pittsburgh, Detroit is part of the Manufacturing Belt. Until today Ford, Chrysler and General Motors have set up their corporate headquarters here.

Detroit used to be the world capital of automobile manufacturing – also known as "**Motown**". No other city in the world produced more cars. The wealth of the city increased greatly in a short amount of time and attracted many migrant workers to move to Detroit. There were lots of jobs. In the 1960s nearly two million people lived here.

But the golden days are long gone. The city has lost more than half its population and is in a state of decay. The main reason for this is the economic situation of the American automobile companies. Their response to the competitors from Asia and Europe came too late.

Fewer cars were sold and 700,000 workers were let go. Detroit rapidly declined – an ongoing trend to this day.

Many industrial buildings in the city are empty and completely neglected. Homeless people often dwell here. The city declines economically, structurally and socially. Many no longer know what they are supposed to live on and governmental support is often entirely absent.

Beverly, Homeless:

"I'm not getting anything at the moment and it's hard. You know, I'm trying to survive. You know life is hard when you're homeless. You have to beg and ask people to help you."

Soup kitchens have been set up to help the poorest. Here the homeless can at least get a hot meal. In 2013 the city officially declared for bankruptcy. The future is uncertain ...

Chicago and the Great Lakes

(2:20 min)

We make our way from Detroit to Chicago. The distance is about 300 miles.

Chicago is located in the state of **Illinois**. The metropolitan area has a population of about ten million. This makes Chicago the **third largest city** in the USA – after New York City and Los Angeles.

Like Detroit, the city is located on the Great Lakes. More specifically on **Lake Michigan**.

The Great Lakes are one of the largest freshwater reservoirs on Earth. In total the surface area is approximately the size of Great Britain. They are tongue-shaped basin lakes, formed during the last major ice age. The shoreline of all lakes together is about 11,000 miles long.

One reason for the rise of Chicago in the second half of the 19th Century was its location. Chicago was an important railroad hub between the East and West Coasts. Many raw materials were handled here and the colonists started their journey to the West. Until today Chicago is still a transport hub.

Chicago also had the reputation as the world's largest slaughterhouse. The majority of cattle from the United States was processed into canned meat here. But those days are long gone.

Today Chicago is above all a financial and service center. In the city center, the Central Business District, the Chicago Board of Trade is located. It is the oldest commodity futures exchange in the world. The Bank of America has a branch here as does the Federal Reserve Bank. There are also numerous insurance companies and branches of transnational corporations.

Corn Belt and St. Louis

(2:50 min)

We now leave the Chicago metropolitan area and make our way towards **St. Louis**.

Along the way we drive directly through the **Corn Belt**.

The Corn Belt has its name for a reason. Between Ohio and Nebraska corn is grown as far as the eye can see. Overall the United States is responsible for about **35 percent** of the global corn production. Half of the U.S. production is grown in the Corn Belt.

Not only corn is cultivated in the Corn Belt, but also soybeans. The yields are so large that the region is now called **the Corn-Soy Belt**. Corn and soy are mainly used in the fattening of cattle and pigs.

In St. Louis, two of the largest rivers in the United States join each other – the **Missouri** and the **Mississippi River**.

The Mississippi River is about 2,300 miles long. The river area originally was a natural wetland area. During floods, the alluvial forests was flooded regularly. Characteristic are the deciduous trees. Today the Mississippi is mostly canalized and regulated by levees.

About three million people live within the metropolitan area of St. Louis. The city was once an important port of call for the development of the West.

St. Louis is home to one of the world's largest breweries. However, it is now foreign-owned. A few years ago it was sold to a Belgium company for over 50 billion dollars.

St. Louis is also the home of Jazz. The bar district **Soulard** is not only entertainment district, but also talent pool for jazz musicians. Many popular musicians had their first appearances here – including the famous **Miles Davis**.

Great Plains

(3:40 min)

One last time we look back at the Mississippi and then move towards the Great Plains.

The **Great Plains** are part of the "**Midwest**" covering great parts of the states **Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska**, and **South** and **North Dakota**.

For Europeans, the Great Plains are the classic Wild West. The original prairie landscape west of the Mississippi, seized by the European settlers in the 19th century.

Prairie is the name for the North American steppe. Grass is the original vegetation.

This correlates with the amount of precipitation. West of the 100th meridian, it rains less than 20 inches per year. In places, it is so dry that humus can barely form and the plants grow on sandy soil.

After large-scale clearings of grasslands and years of drought, dramatic soil erosion occurred in the 1930s. Devastating dust storms destroyed the crops. Farms were covered up by sand. The affected areas were called the **Dust Bowl**. Many farmers had to leave their land and settle elsewhere.

Today large ranches are characteristic for the drier areas of the Great Plains. They often cover several thousand acres of productive land, which is used for livestock breeding and pasture management. Only with the help of irrigation intensive farming can be made profitable here.

In the Great Plains vast wheat fields stretch for miles in areas with higher precipitation. The region is labelled **Wheat Belt** – the breadbasket of the United States. Fields here are so big that sometimes multiple harvesters have to be used simultaneously to harvest the huge space.

Approximately ten percent of the world's wheat production comes from the United States. During harvest, farms employ professional harvesters. The machines are their property and they have specialized in the wheat harvest. During harvest time the threshers are in use night and day, because time is money. Professional harvesters work their way through the Wheat Belt in the same order every year.

Greg Allensdorf, Custom harvester:

“The wheat ripens in the south, in Texas, the harvesters are working north clear up into Canada. Harvest and all the way up through the Midwest. Some of the work we get is the smaller farmers a lot of them don't wanna buy a new machine, the cost of a new machine, so for a few acres because they only use it a little bit out of the year, so they don't want to tie it up.”

After threshing, the straw is bundled into bales. As soon as the straw bales have been dispatched, the fields are lit on fire. This results in an extensive blaze within seconds. This destroys parasites and enriches the soil with nutrients. The wheat is then stored in huge, several hundred foot long silos.

We have now travelled around 1,500 miles through the U.S.:

From the Atlantic Ocean and New York to Washington, over the Appalachians, to the Great Lakes unto the Great Plains.

But we have the same distance still ahead of us – until we reach the Pacific on our way through the Land of Opportunity.