



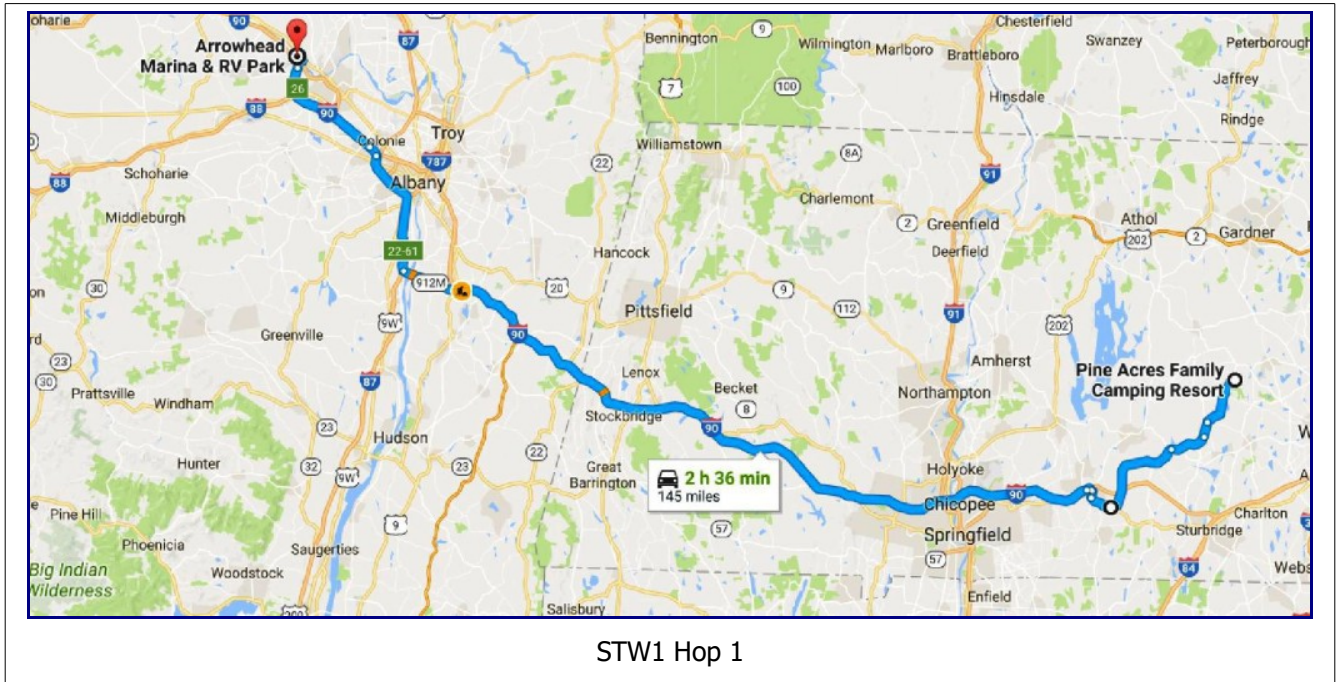
**OurWanderYears
2017 – 2 of 2
STW and STE**

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STW1 Hop 1: Oakham MA to Glenville NY

3 Aug 2017



STW1 Hop 1

145 miles via MA 148, MA 67, MA 19, US 20, I-90, I-890 (near Schenectady) and NY 5. Cumulative tow miles: 145. Truck miles: 145. Cumulative truck miles: 145.

The hard part of this route was the 30-plus miles on local roads before we got to I-90. The roads were fine, but this was August in New England, which meant that every road was undergoing repair. There was even about a quarter-mile of one-lane road on MA 19. Once we got to I-90 the rest of the trip was a breeze. We used the transponder for the entire trip, going through the E-ZPass lanes everywhere. Time will tell whether the tollway authorities had a problem with that.

We were sad to leave Massachusetts. We had a very fine couple of months with family and friends. But we weren't too sad to leave [Pine Acres Family Campground](#), our home for the past 2 weeks. It is a fine place, but probably not the best place for us. The things that make the campground exceptional - the kid activities, the swimming pool, the lake, the ice cream shop, the boat rentals - were things we used very little or not at all. It is a great place for families with younger children. Not nearly as great for us.

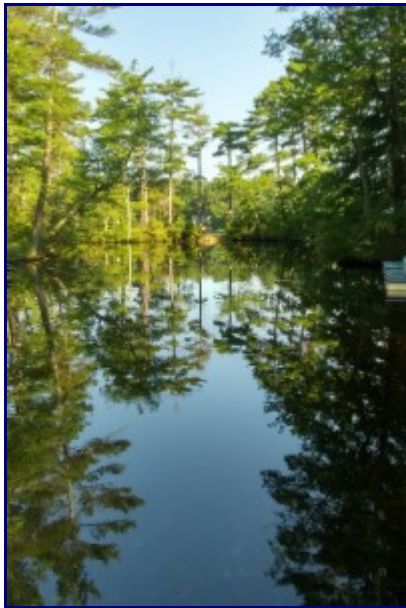
The one thing that defines Pine Acres: kids on bikes. Hundreds of them. Everywhere. They ride around the campground during all daylight hours, some going very fast, others still using training wheels. Drivers do a good job of sharing the road with them, but after two weeks it was a relief to get back on the open road. There is a BMX track for the more adventurous bicyclists, but it is a poor second to Normandy Farms'.

We loved our site. It wasn't exactly level, which created some stability problems for us, but it was tolerable. The site had a wide expanse of green area on the right and woods on the left. Our only neighbors were a seasonal family below us to the left and occasional transient campers behind us. It was very private with plenty of parking space.

Our biggest problem with the place was their visitor policy: \$10 per person and \$5 per car for a visit, regardless of how long. Jett's sisters came by to play some cards and it cost us \$25 to host them for two hours. Ouch! By comparison, the visitor policy for the current campground is \$1 per person.



Boat rentals



Inlet



The lake at Pine Acres



Packing up for the start of the STW

Spare tire

5 Aug 2017

The spare tire on the truck is a form of insurance: you hope you will never need it, but just knowing it is there eases some worries. But, unlike insurance, you also have to make sure it is in shape to be used. This is a lesson that is usually learned the hard way, by getting a flat and discovering that the spare is flat, too. I guess I should be glad that I didn't have to learn my lesson the hard way.

Here is the story: just before leaving Worcester I bought two new tires. I did this because the tire guy told me that my spare was "original equipment", meaning that it was 13 years old. Spare tires that old are not to be trusted, so I told the tire guy to use the undamaged right front tire as a spare and discard the old (and never used) spare tire. It was raining that day, so when I got the truck back I confirmed that there were new tires on the front and that the spare was back in place. Fine.

Until two days later - a day before we were to leave MA - I looked in the bed of the truck and found the tire that was supposed to be the spare sitting there. Angry, I called the tire place. Oh, yeah, they weren't able to get the old spare off, so they just put the extra tire in the bed of the truck. You don't think you should have mentioned that little detail to me? Yes, sir, we should have mentioned that. Then they offered to refund the \$2 disposal fee for the spare tire that they didn't junk.

Thanks, guys.

After getting over the anger, I realized that I may have been driving for 5 years with a spare tire that was possibly bad and in any case was unusable because the cable mechanism holding it under the truck was frozen. We had traveled over 50,000 miles in a truck with no usable spare.

So the first thing I did when I got to Glenville NY was to schedule a trip to [Randy's Tire and Service Center](#), a small tire shop not far from the RV park. I told them that the highest priority was to get the spare mounted, even if he couldn't get it back up under the truck. No problem, he said.

True to his word he had the old spare down (he had to cut the cable) and the good spare mounted on the rim within an hour. He said he could get the part and fix the cable mechanism the next day.

Once again true to his word, he had the part replaced and the spare back under the truck in another hour the next day. He then showed me how to use the spare (something that I suppose I could have learned from the manual, but it was nice getting a demo). He even showed me where the tools were hidden in the truck.

So I now have a usable spare and know how to use it. I should have checked into this long ago. But I am grateful that I didn't have to learn this lesson the hard way.

As angry as I was with the MA tire place, I was equally happy with Randy. So if you need tire work near Schenectady, you know who to see. Randy.

Dining near Worcester

7 Aug 2017

Yeah, we are in NY now, but I wanted to mention some of the places we ate at - both sit-down and takeout - while we were in Oakham. Because we had two exceptionally good meals and one exceptionally bad meal. I want to tell you about the great meals so that you will patronize those establishments. And I want to warn you away from the exceptionally bad place.

Let's start with the bad. We did takeout from [Northeast Pizza](#) in Barre MA. I had a fish and chips dinner. Jett ordered chicken fingers. Both were terrible. The fish was one flat piece of overcooked whitefish, with a side of soggy frozen French fries. The chicken fingers were overcooked to the point of being burnt. Inedible. Jett tried to feed them to the dog but he walked away. Don't ever waste your money on a meal at this place.

The good meals: dinner at the [Castle Restaurant](#) in Leicester and breakfast at [J & J Family Restaurant](#) in Barre. In both cases we had family with us, so this is not just our opinions; everyone who ate at both places raved about the food.

The breakfast meal was the simpler of the two. Everyone had some variation of eggs and/or pancakes, with coffee or tea. Jett opined that the pancakes were the "best ever." My 2-2-2 breakfast (two eggs, two slices of bacon and two pancakes) was exceptionally good, though possibly not the best ever. And the coffee was praised by everyone. Jett takes her coffee very seriously and she usually can't finish her coffee when we go out. She had 3 cups at J & J. And the total tab for a breakfast for 8 was \$72. Very reasonable.

The real surprise, though, was dinner at the Castle. I wasn't expecting much. The building is old and looks the way a castle would look if was built as a ranch. Tacky on the outside while the inside is disorganized and screams "we stopped caring years ago." But they haven't stopped caring about the food. I ordered a haddock special as part of a 3-course dinner for \$23. The fish was flaky, fresh and delicately seasoned and was accompanied by a very nice wild rice. Jett had a filet of beef which she said was "perfect." I ordered chowder for an appetizer and a strawberry rhubarb pie for dessert. The chowder was very good. The pie was also very good, but unbalanced - too much strawberry and not enough rhubarb. But, overall, it was one of the finest meals we have had all year. And the service was superb.

It was sad to see how few people were in the dining room on a Saturday night. This is a place that deserves respect. I think Gordon Ramsay could do wonders with this restaurant because it is already top-notch in both the cuisine and the service. All he would have to do is organize the dining room and figure out a way to market it.



Sis-in-law Kim goofing off



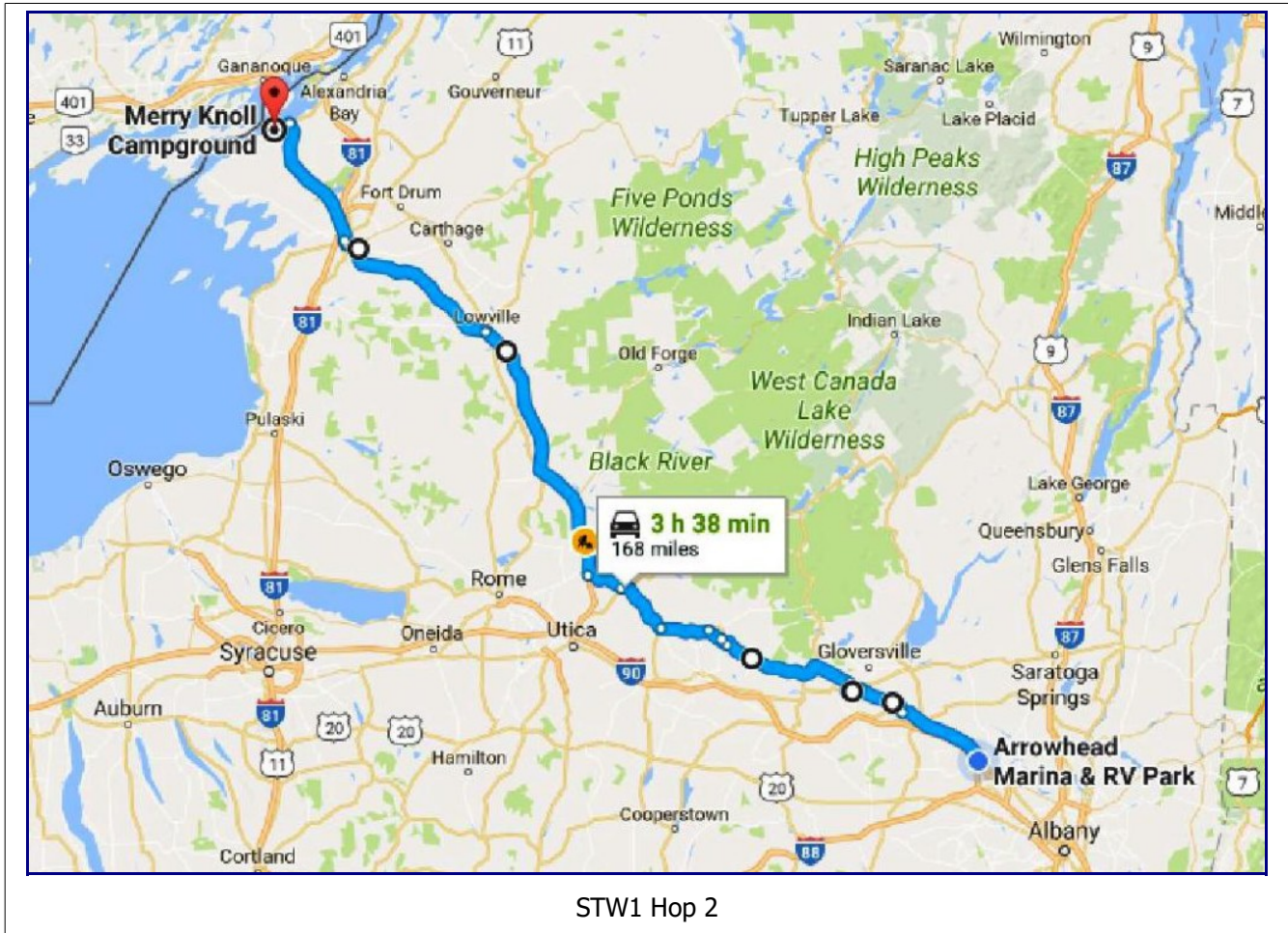
The clan at J&J



Castle haddock

STW1 Hop 2: Glenville NY to Clayton NY

8 Aug 2017



168 miles via NY 5, NY 67, NY 29, NY 28 and NY 12. Cumulative tow miles: 313. Truck miles: 518. Cumulative truck miles: 663.

Jett hated this hop. It was entirely on local roads, most of them with a lot of up-and-down and sharp curves. Every time the GPS said "winding road ahead" she moaned. If all hops were like this one she would just stop traveling.

The route itself was very scenic, if you could get by the nausea. The first 10 miles were along the Mohawk River and we passed through many towns which, while not prosperous, were decrepitly beautiful. One Victorian was twisted and collapsing - it looked like a strong breeze would push it over. But we couldn't stop for a photo - it was a 2-lane road with not much shoulder.

Thankfully, the second half of the trip was flatter, with mostly 4-lane roads. I also assured her that the next two hops would be mostly on interstates.

Our home in Clayton NY was the [Arrowhead Marina and RV Park](#). I chose this campground primarily for its location - it was relatively close to Watervliet where I was planning on doing some genealogical research. I didn't have high hopes for the campground, especially since it billed itself as a marina first and a campground second. I thought it would be cramped. Not so. The site was spacious, with lots of privacy. The park was arranged in a series of loops, with expansive wooded park land separating them. This park may have had the highest ratio of open space to site space of any campground we have seen. And the view of the Mohawk River

from our window... spectacular. Arguably the most beautiful view we have ever had from a campsite.

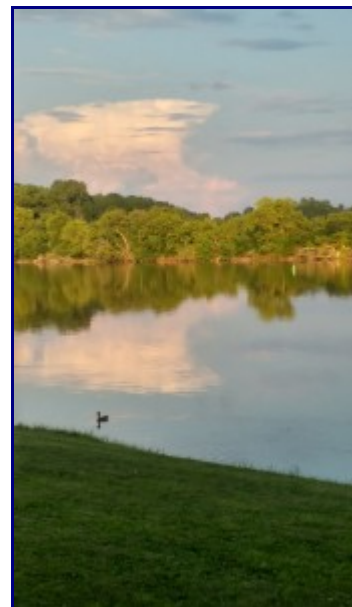


Our site

The Mohawk River is simply beautiful and serene. It is like a real-life "attitude adjustment" painting. The river just screams for someone with a palette of pastels to sit and paint. Lovely, lovely, lovely.

Obviously, we liked this place way more than we expected to.

The campground itself doesn't have much in the way of facilities other than the marina. A nice dog park, public restrooms and showers with a small attached laundry, a tiny playground. Picnic tables scattered about. That's it. No tennis courts, no shuffleboard. Most surprisingly, no swimming pool. There are some busy railroad tracks nearby, but the noise did not annoy us. It was also pretty far from just about any kind of shopping or entertainment. Still, we liked it and would come back again.



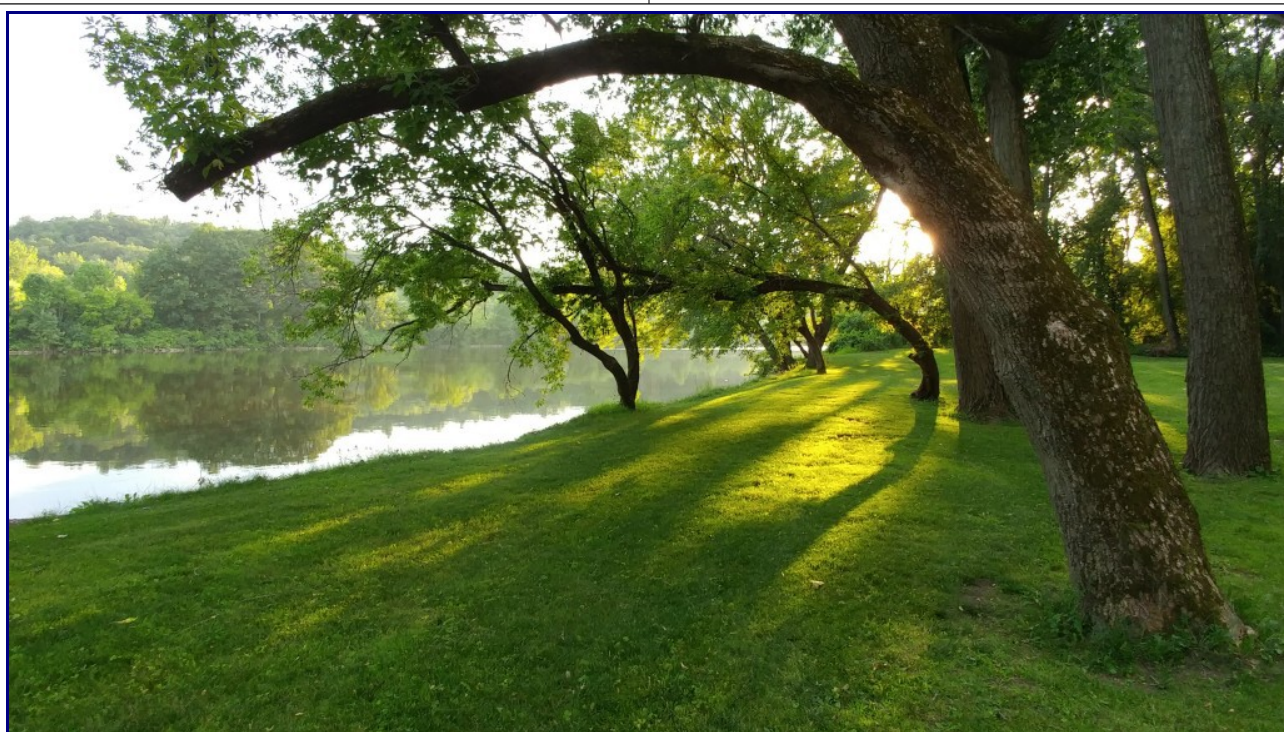
Serenity



View from our campsite



Dog park



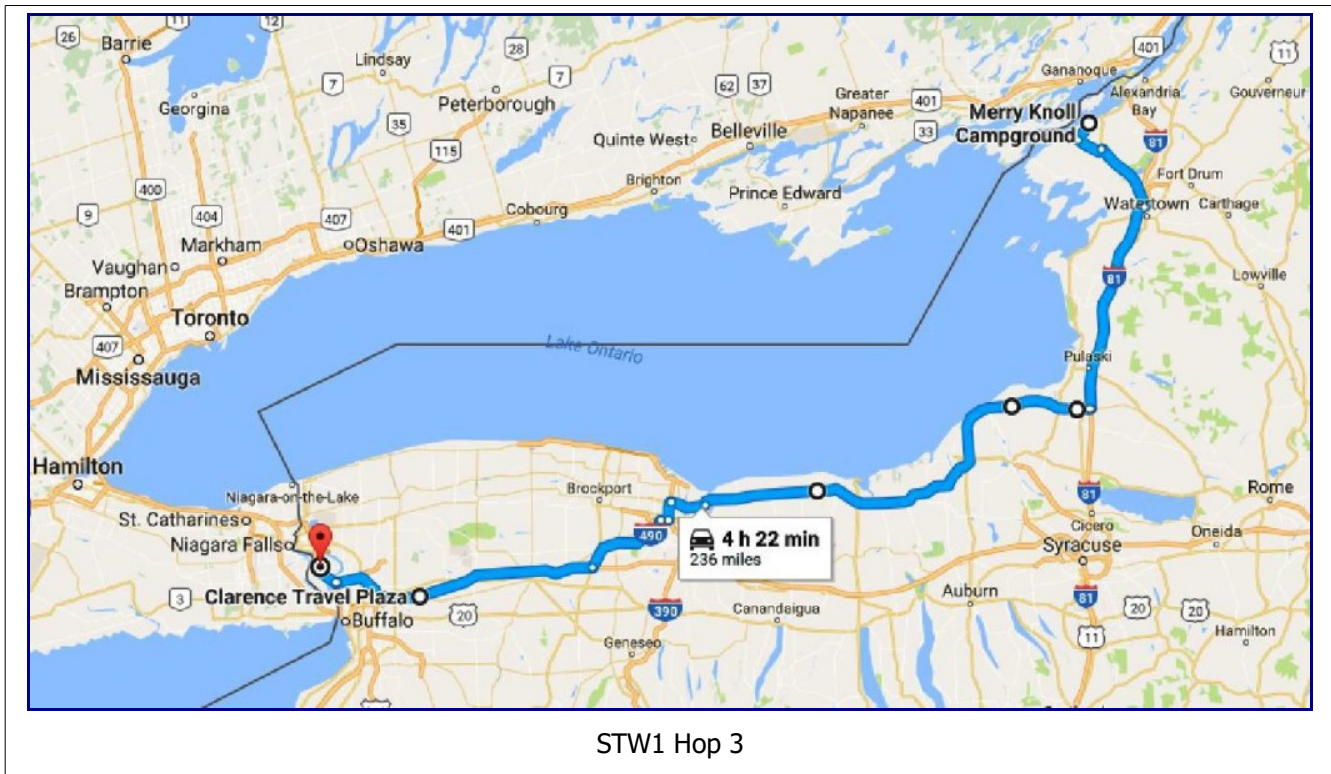
Sunlight through the trees

STW1 Hop 3: Clayton NY to Grand Island NY

10 Aug 2017

238 miles via NY 12, I-81, NY 104, NY 390, I-490 (west of Rochester), I-90, I-290 (around Buffalo) and I-190. Cumulative tow miles: 551. Truck miles: 270. Cumulative truck miles: 933.

This was the longest - both in terms of distance and time (almost 5 hours) - of any hop we have made in the past year. At 238 miles it pushed the limit of how far we can travel on a single tank. We probably could have made it, but rather than stress out we made a fuel stop at a service plaza on I-90 (the NY State Thruway). I



thought this would be the easiest way to get a partial tank, but it turned out to be not so easy because the single diesel pump on the truck side of the plaza was out of service. I guess not many trucks fuel up at these service areas. We decided that, rather than snake our way over to the car pumps, we would use our 5-gallon emergency supply. That was only the second time we have used the emergency supply.

The route would have been even longer if we had taken the fastest route - I-81 to I-90. More expensive, too, as the New York State Thruway is pretty pricey. I avoid tollways when towing because I am never sure what the charges will be, but opted for a compromise this time - about 50 miles of toll road out of 238 total. About half was on expressway. Most of the rest was on NY 104, which mostly wasn't bad - a little up-and-down but not many sharp curves. We did, however, run into a nasty stretch of construction just west of Oswego which included 4 separate one-lane sections with flagmen. Very ugly. Jett hated it, but so did I.

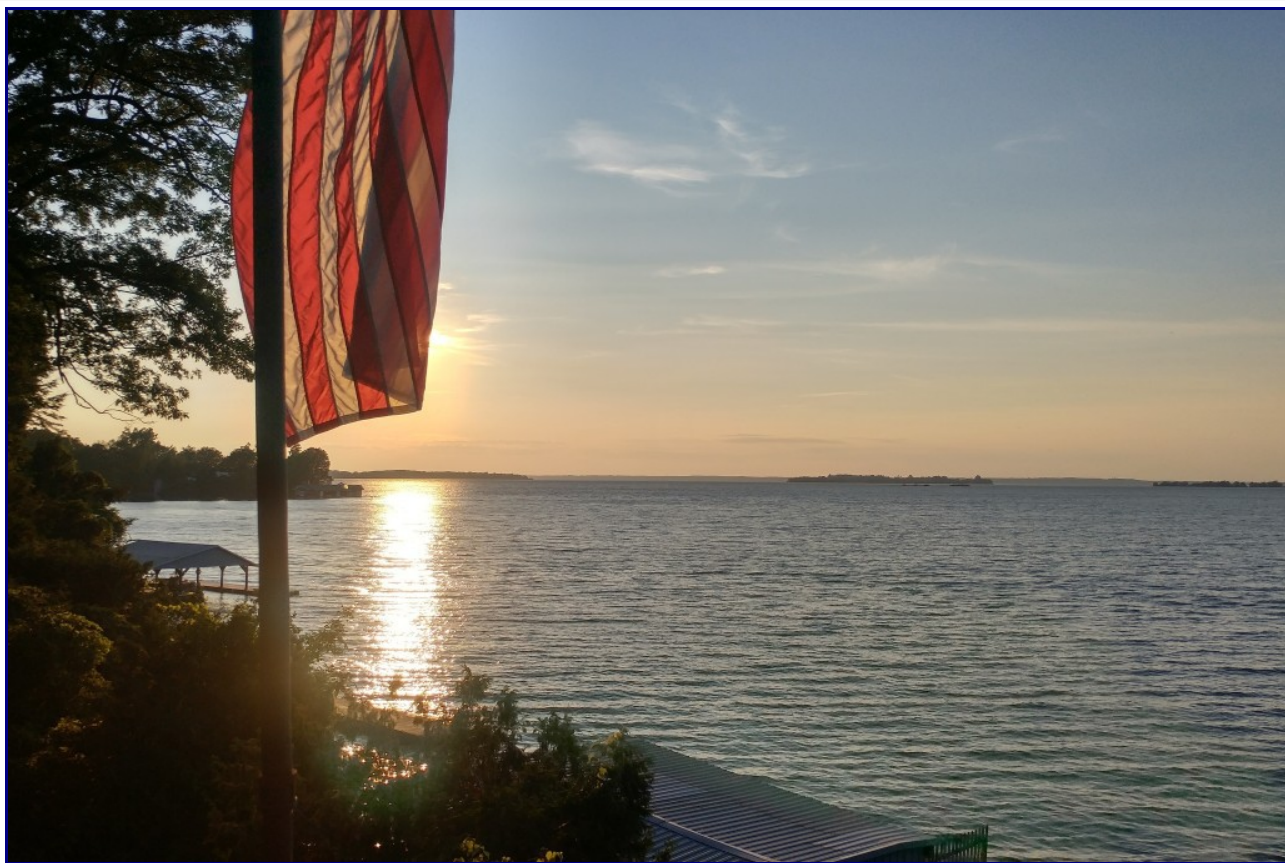
At the final toll plaza I couldn't get over to the "E-ZPass Only" lane, so had to go through a manned booth. I thought I might be asked to pay extra for the RV that I was towing, but the attendant just cheerfully waved me through. It was comforting to know that I wasn't cheating the State of New York.

Our home in Clayton was the [Merry Knoll Campground](#). It was pretty basic - ordinary swimming pool, a minimal bathhouse, a laundry with 2 washers and 2 dryers. Our site was in an open field which ran down to the St Lawrence River. Scenic, but not so scenic as our previous site at Arrowhead. It was a steep walk down to the water, but once there a broader vista was the reward.

Not a great place, but perfectly fine for two nights.



The view from near our site



Approaching sunset on the St Lawrence

Boldt Castle

11 Aug 2017

When I planned our stay in the Thousand Islands it was due to some very old, very vague fond memories of a camping trip to the area. I can't even remember now when I was there; I just recall being struck by the serenity and beauty of the area.

So my plan for our day in Clayton was pretty vague, being best expressed as "see the Thousand Islands." The staff at the campground office suggested a 2-hour boat trip and that seemed like a good idea. But Jett, who was suffering from what was possibly a scratched cornea, didn't want a long boat ride in the open air and bright sun. So I looked for something that would require only a short boat ride and found it in a tour of [Boldt Castle](#). Only a 10-minute boat ride each way and a turn-of-the-century "castle" to view. Sounded like our kind of fun.

It was a beautiful day for anything we wanted to do - low 70's, puffy clouds, bright sunshine. The castle looked great, inside and out. I got some very nice photos.



Welcome arch



Alster Tower

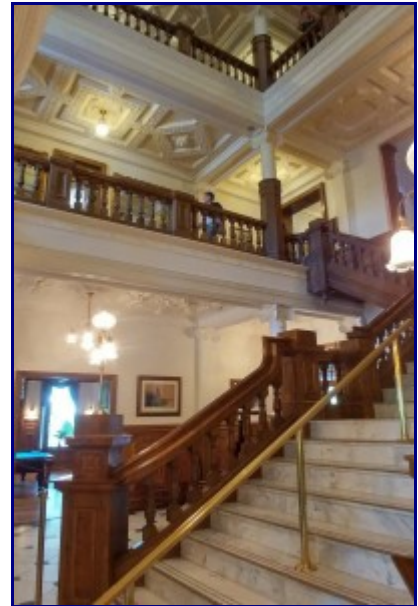
This castle/mansion is different than others I have toured, such as the Biltmore Estate or the Newport mansions. This home was never completed, never lived in. It was built as a summer home for [George Boldt](#) and his family,



Bowling alleys (in progress)



Jett and me with the silver



The central staircase

but after 4 years of construction his wife died suddenly and he immediately terminated construction. He never returned to the island. It was left to rot for over 70 years until it was gifted to the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority who decided to restore it as a tourist attraction. The original intent was simply to restore it to the state it was in when construction was abandoned, but after achieving that goal - and because it was so popular as an attraction - they decided to continue with the restoration with a long-term goal of completing construction. It continues to be a work in progress. Most of the lower two floors have been restored, but 4 more stories remain in an unfinished and deteriorated state. It will be years before construction is completed - if ever.

But what exists is pretty spectacular. Because the finish carpentry is modern and the house has never been inhabited, it has a "new house" feel, with turn-of-the-century architecture and details. It is pretty unique. And fascinating.

And if you catch it on a nice day, like we did, it is supremely photogenic. The house is surrounded by beautifully manicured grounds with two interesting outbuildings - a small castle-like building which was a power plant for the mansion and a medieval tower that was built as a party venue and children's playground. The tower was completed before work on the main building began and includes some interesting features, including a basement with two bowling alleys (now being restored).



George's bedroom



Kitchen

It was a lovely day and a real treat. An unexpected pleasure.



Castle and grounds

STW1 Hop 4: Grand Island NY to Streetsboro OH

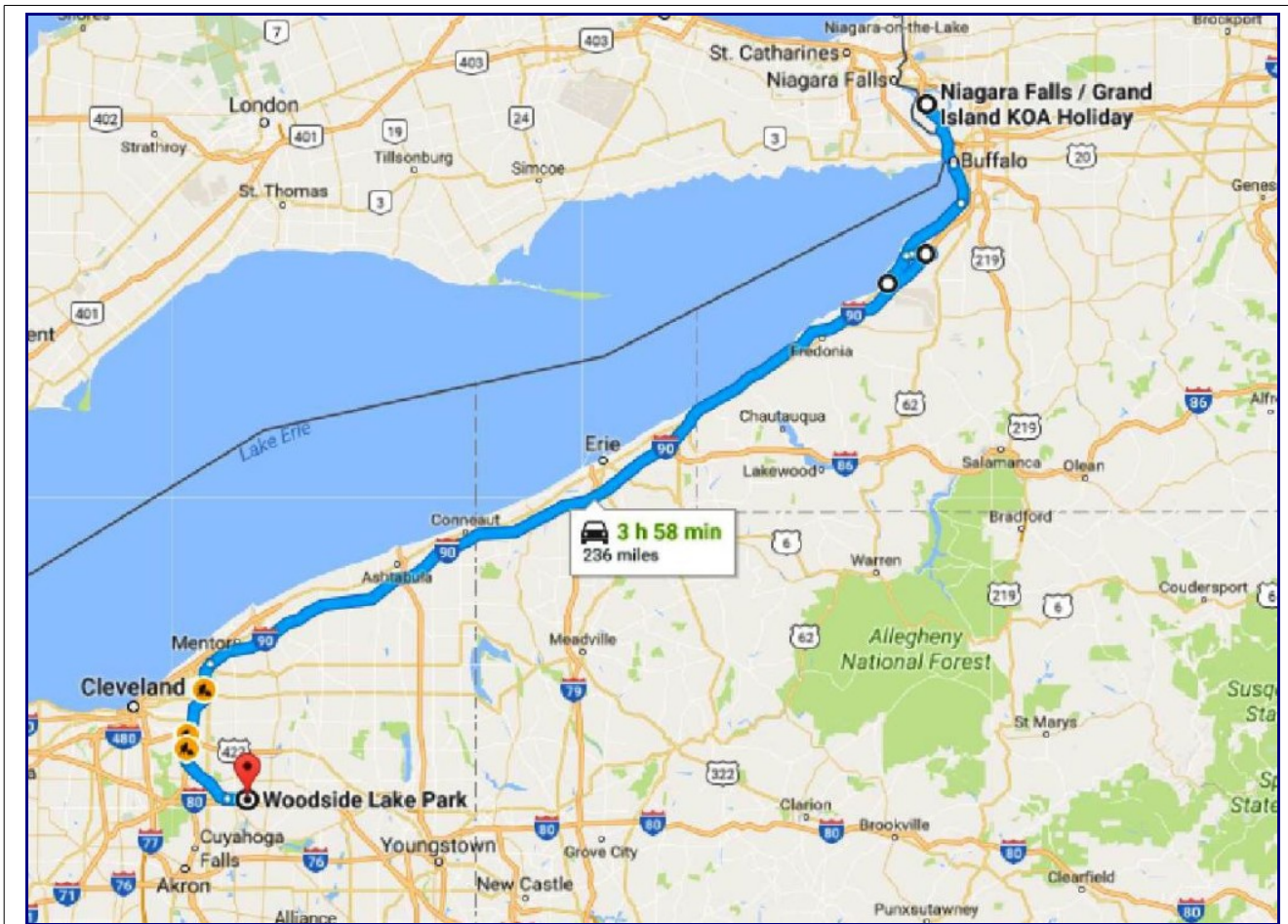
13 Aug 2017

236 miles via I-190 (north of Buffalo), NY 5, I-90, I-271 (west of Cleveland) and I-480 (west of Cleveland).
Cumulative tow miles: 787. Truck miles: 340.
Cumulative truck miles: 1273.

This was supposed to be an easy hop - one almost entirely on interstate highways. But I opted to travel almost 30 miles on NY 5 out of Buffalo instead of I-90. This route had the advantage of being both shorter and cheaper while being only a few minutes longer. And it avoided downtown Buffalo. I dutifully checked for low bridges at least 4 times. Clear. But when we got onto NY 5 the GPS - which is set to avoid low bridges - tried to re-route us at least 25 times in 25 miles. It was



Diesel spill



STW1 Hop 4

amusing at first, but then I began to wonder why it was being so insistent. I learned the reason about 3 miles short of where NY 5 was to join up with I-90: a low bridge (12' 9") stood in our way. Because I had grown wary, I saw the bridge - and the warning sign - in time to turn away. But we had to backtrack nearly 10 miles, creating both a fuel problem and extending the trip by 30 minutes. When we got to a rest area in Ohio I, for the second hop in a row, used the emergency fuel supply.

That didn't turn out very well, either. The can slipped, the top popped off and about a quart of diesel spilled on the pavement. And my clothes. I traveled the last 40 miles smelling like a refinery.



Swimming pool/activity center

For the record: I did not miss the low bridge in my route planning; it just wasn't included in the database of low clearances that I use. That is a first - the database has never been wrong before. That shakes my confidence in my route-planning process. I may have to spend more time going over the entire route using Google Earth, to visually scan for railroad bridges. It is always railroad bridges.

That wasn't the end of the misadventures. When we got to our destination the campground had us booked for 1 night rather than the 2 that has always been in my itinerary. Their mistake, I believe. They were able to find a

site, but it was a back-in rather than a pull-through. But an easy back-in, so no big deal.

Our home in Grand Island (just north of Buffalo and near Niagara Falls) for 3 nights was the [Niagara Falls / Grand Island KOA](#). This was a very large, very nice park with lots of facilities and activities for children. And it was located adjacent to an amusement park ("Fantasy Land"), so the park was swarming with children. But at least there weren't any late night parties.

This campground was very clean, very well managed. But very expensive. I paid extra for the "premium patio" site, which gave me an upscale table and chairs and a concrete pad. Nice, but we really didn't use it. A waste of money. Despite the good things about this campground there is simply no way that it was worth what they were charging. I think others agreed as the park was never more than half full, even after all the Friday night arrivals. We would stay here again, I guess, but no premium patio next time.



Dog park



Ready to depart

Niagara Falls

14 Aug 2017

I first saw Niagara Falls in 1957 when I was 8 years old. It was a rare family vacation outside of Wisconsin and I really appreciated seeing them in real life rather than in a book. My father was not the most adventurous guy, so our activities at the falls consisted of walking along the promenade, taking home movies and, at night, watching the light show. No *Maid of the Mist*, no Cave of the Winds, no tram ride over the whirlpool.

Since 1957 I have been back three or four times, but have never done any of those things. Until now. Jett and I did the *Maid of the Mist* trip. It is just a 20-minute boat ride, but it provides a unique view of the falls from below. I would say it was well worth the \$18 ticket price. It is an experience that won't soon be forgotten.

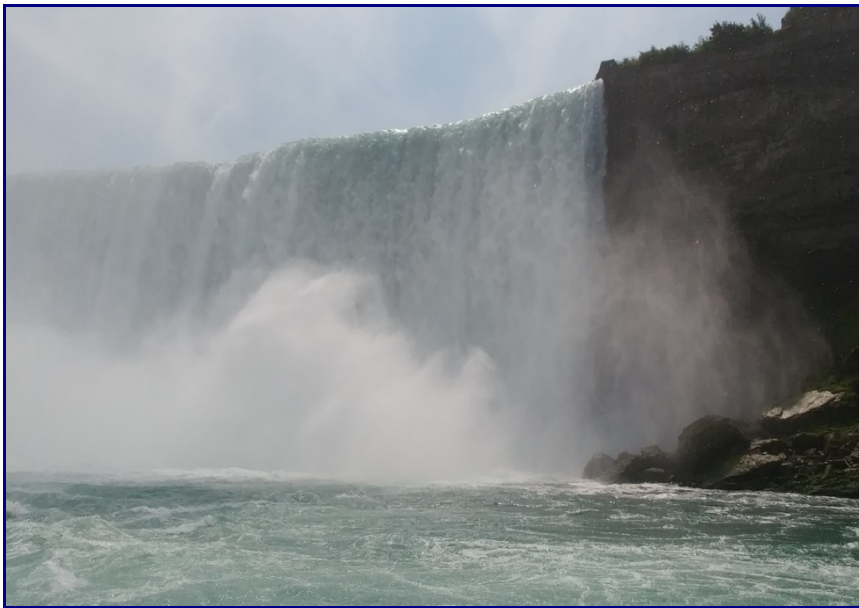
Got some good photos, too. And one of me in my poncho, just to prove that I was really there.



Overview of the falls



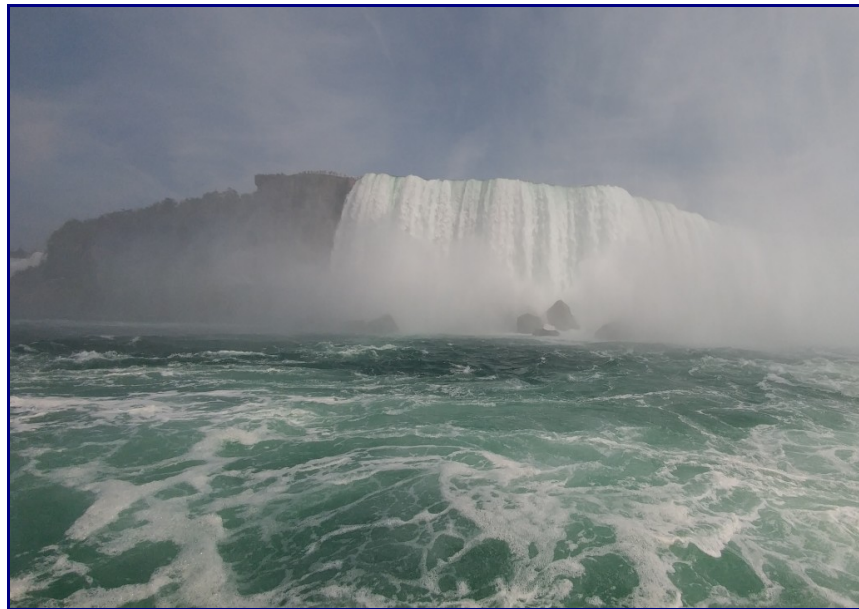
Rainbow Bridge



Canadian falls



Me on *Maid of the Mist*



American falls

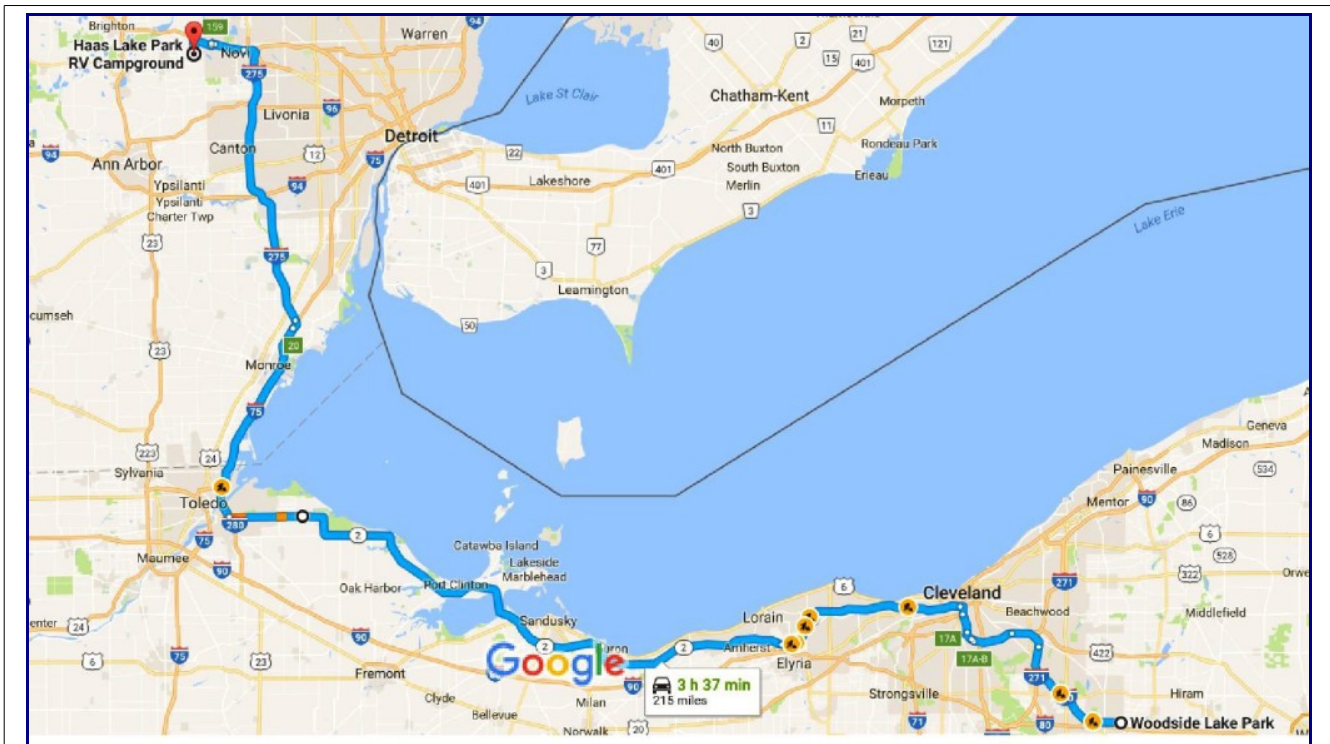


Jett too

STW1 Hop 5: Streetsboro OH to New Hudson MI

15 Aug 2017

216 miles via I-480 (south of Cleveland), OH 176, I-90, OH 2, I-280 (east of Toledo), I-75, I-275 (west of Detroit) and I-96. Cumulative tow miles: 1003. Truck miles: 303. Cumulative truck miles: 1576.



STW1 Hop 5



The swimming area



Halloween hayride

This was a relatively easy hop, aided by flat, mostly divided highway. Door-to-door travel time was just under 4 hours, which is an average of over 50 mph. Pretty good. Even the roads near Cleveland, Toledo and Detroit were relatively free-flowing. There was one accident west of Detroit that delayed us for about 10 minutes but otherwise it was uneventful. And the day was beautiful - mid-80s and sunny.

What positive things can I say about [Woodside Lake Park](#) in Streetsboro OH, our home for two nights? Two things come to mind: the owner was a peach and the swimming pond/lake was great. Kids had a wonderful time in the pond and it was one of the few campground swimming venues that we have seen that had a lifeguard. They seem to provide a variety of other kids activities as well. We were there for "Halloween in August" which featured trick-or-treating and hayrides.

Now the bad. The roads in the campground - and the road approaching the campground - were atrocious. I worried that the rig would shake itself apart just getting into and out of the site. The park had a lot of seasonal

residents and many of the rigs were very old and unsightly. Strangely, very few seemed to be occupied, even on the weekend. There was no cable and no over-the-air reception so we spent two days watching *Downton Abbey* and movies on DVD. We didn't need the restrooms, which was fortunate because in our area of the campground there were only outhouses - a first in our travels. Worst of all was the water, which was arguably the worst we have seen anywhere. It was only marginally drinkable. After our first cups of coffee we used bottled water. Even the toilets got a green stain from this "fresh" water. Yuck. We won't be back.



#33 - OH



Outhouse

But staying in Streetsboro gave us another state on our travel map - our 33rd.

Greenfield Village

18 Aug 2017

Some posts are mostly containers for photos and this is one. [Greenfield Village](#) in Dearborn MI, if you don't already know, is a place that Henry Ford founded to collect historical buildings and, more generally, to capture the serenity of 19th century America. You will find the actual bike shop of the Wright brothers, the home of Noah Webster, the actual early laboratories of Thomas Edison and recreations of the first Ford Motor Company factory and the childhood home of Washington Carver. You will find barbershop quartets strolling the streets, public spaces in which you can practice hoop-rolling and other turn-of-the-century games, or see working farms that use 19th century equipment and practices.

I first visited Greenfield Village in 1957 and had fond memories. Now, 60 years later, I just had to return. It is still a great place to spend a few hours. Much more relaxing (and educational) than Disney World.

The Henry Ford Museum, adjacent to Greenfield Village, also looks very interesting. But I have never been so I can't recommend it. If I ever get back to MI I will take a look.



Mill



Mill stream



Serenity



Train ride



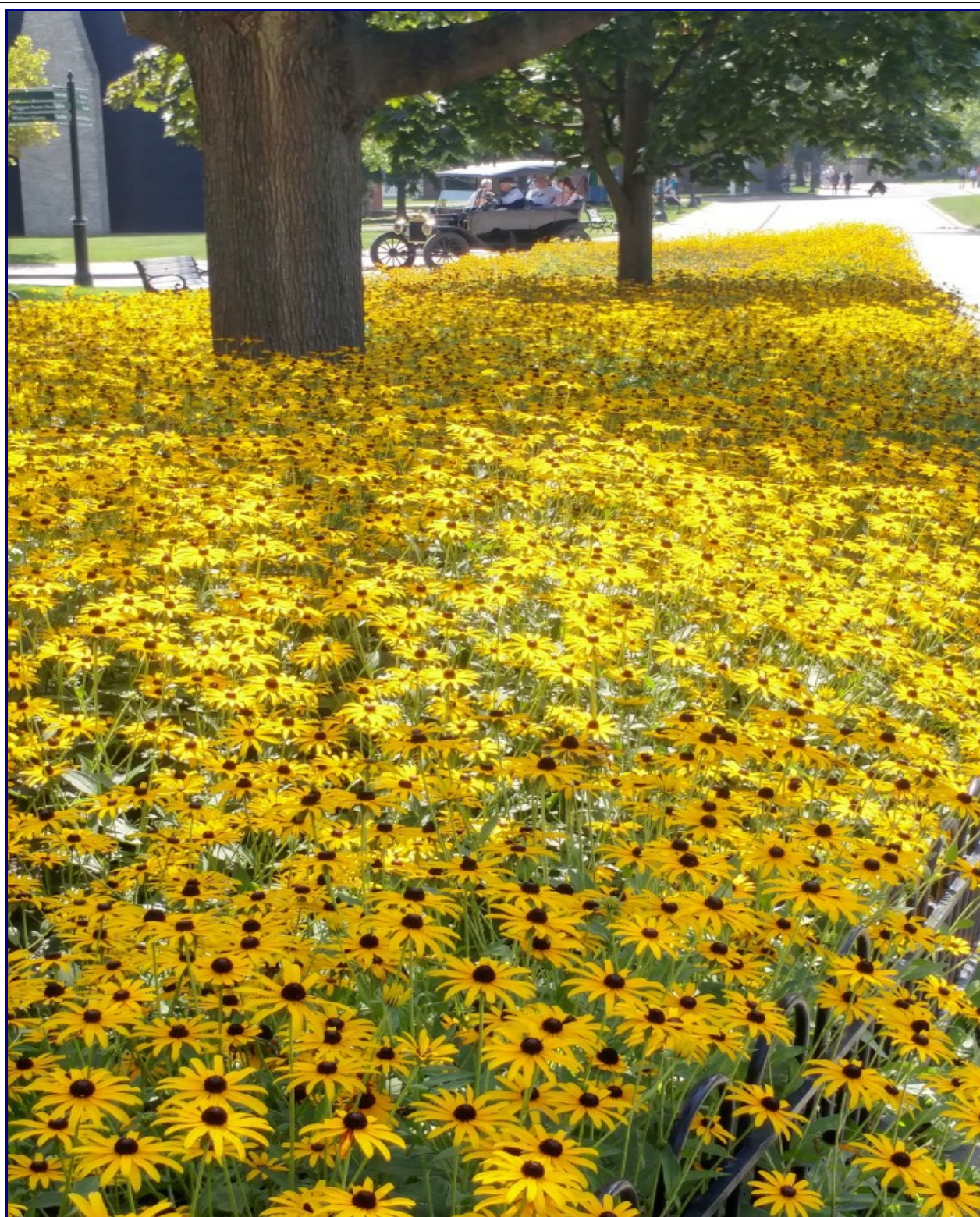
Robert Frost home



Glassblower



Koi pond



Black-eyed susans and Model T



Noah Webster's study



Wright bike shop



Barbershop quartet



Roundhouse



Carousel



Playground

STW1 Hop 6: New Hudson MI to Michigan City IN

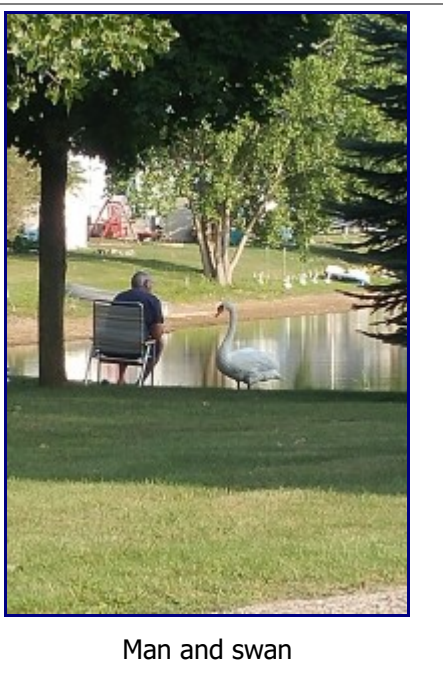
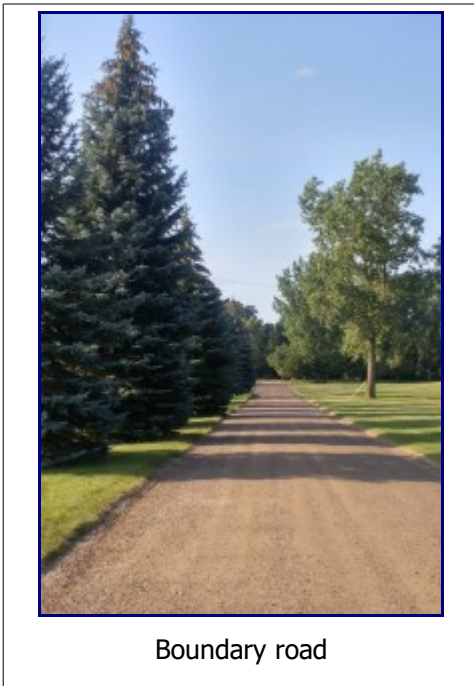
19 Aug 2017



216 miles via I-96, I-69, I-94 and US 421. Cumulative tow miles: 1219. Truck miles: 438. Cumulative truck miles: 2014.

This was a relatively easy hop in terms of navigation - just a few turns. However, there was heavy traffic for almost the entire route and the roads were very rough, as evidenced by one of the shades shaking loose. That is a first for us in 5 years of travel.

Our home in New Hudson was the [Haas Lake Campground](#), a beautiful campground encompassing 4 lakes. It is huge. Our campsite was over a quarter mile from the office. But it was a very spacious pull-through that was a breeze to get into and out of. Our living room view was of pine trees and grass. Very nice.



This campground probably had the highest ratio of open space to campsites of any campground we have seen. There was a huge open field in front of our site and another huge wooded field behind, ending at a pond that



Haas Lake

wasn't included in the count of four lakes. All sites were spacious and the back-in sites on the lakes were absolutely wonderful, each with an unobstructed lake view. There were a lot of seasonal campers here. I can

imagine that this would be a great way to escape Detroit on a weekend.

Each lake had a beach and a swimming area, but I don't think the campground had a pool. There were numerous playgrounds, but I didn't see much else in the way of recreational facilities. They didn't seem to offer a lot of other activities either, for children or adults. Seems like a park where you can hang out and enjoy the quiet. Yes, it was very quiet at night.

We would return.

This campground also gave us a new state, Michigan, on our map. Number 34.



Broken shade



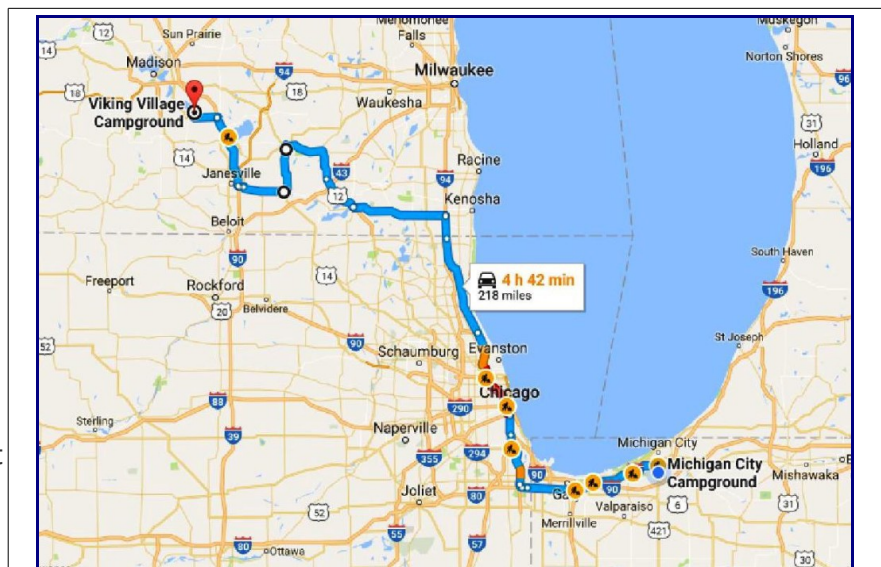
#34 - Michigan

STW1 Hop 7: Michigan City IN to Stoughton WI

21 Aug 2017

220 miles via I-94, US 41, WI 50, US 12, WI 89, US 14 and I-90.
 Cumulative tow miles: 1439. Truck miles: 282. Cumulative truck miles: 2296.

See that U-shaped dip on the Wisconsin portion of the route? I can thank the GPS for that. I was following the map until we got to WI, but then I made the mistake of listening to the GPS telling me to turn left onto WI 89. That was a 20-mile detour, apparently due to the fact that the GPS was set to "avoid small roads" and it regarded the short section of county road - a perfectly fine, flat, nicely paved county road -



STW1 Hop 7

as a small road that had to be avoided. I have since reset the GPS to allow small roads.

I knew that this hop was going to be difficult regardless of the route I took. For months I have been planning a route that took us south of Chicago, then north to the west of Chicago. However, a day before the trip, as I was verifying the route for a final time, I discovered that a critical section of IL 47 was closed for construction. So I had to reconsider the route that Google had been recommending all along - straight through downtown Chicago on I-94. Lacking a good alternative, I bit the bullet and hauled the RV through Chicago. Very slow, very heavy traffic, very unpleasant.

But the slowest and most unpleasant section was the very first 31 miles in Indiana: the final 25 miles of I-94 in Indiana were under construction, with lane reductions and zig-zag lane changes. The result: those 31 miles took an hour to traverse. The total trip, which Google predicted to be 3 hours and 45 minutes, turned out to be 5 hours and 15 minutes - about 30 minutes of that due to the WI 89 detour. Exhausting.

Our home in Indiana was the [Michigan City Campground](#). Besides giving us a day of rest, this stop was near the [Indiana Dunes State Park](#) which struck me as a place worth a visit. I will report on that trip separately. The other activity was a trip to the [Blue Chip Casino](#) where we left \$100 for the local Indians.

The campground was nothing special. We were in a pull-through section near the highway which offered no shade, but was fine for two nights. The road was not noisy. The older section of the park had some nice facilities - a very nice swimming pool, a new playground, a large dog park and a small but very attractive community center. But the sites were very small and cramped with a lot of older rigs. It had a shanty town look.

The best thing about the park was the pond at the front. I took the photo below while walking Rusty shortly after we arrived. That photo alone made the stop worthwhile.

I would return.

And IN is our 35th state.



#35 - IN



Playground



The "shanty town"



The campground pond

Indiana Dunes State Park

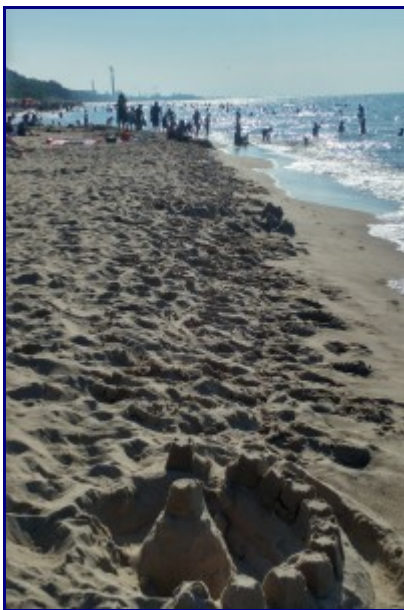
28 Aug 2017

While in Indiana on Saturday I took the opportunity to check out the [Indiana Dunes State Park](#). I was expecting expansive Sahara-style dunes and some great photo ops. Well, not quite. I did get some photo ops, but the dunes were not expansive and they were mostly covered with vegetation. The park is mostly a beach. A very nice beach, to be sure, but a beach. It appears that the biggest draw was the 10 hiking trails. If I had been wearing better hiking gear (I wore sandals) and had more time I would have liked to have tried them.

So... not a waste of time, but somewhat disappointing.



Lifeguard and industry



Beach



Dune



Kids on dunes

STW1 wrapup and STW2 preview

28 Aug 2017

We have completed the first segment of the Second Trip West. Time for a wrapup.

7 hops covering 27 days. 1439 tow miles, 2936 truck miles. Total campground cost: \$1,344.68 (\$49.80 per night). The most expensive stop was at the Niagara Falls KOA where I paid a premium for the not-very-premium premium site - nearly \$100 per night.

The highlights:

- The 50th high school reunion. It was great seeing my old friends, some of whom I have known since kindergarten - over 60 years!
- Two really good graveyard trips, the first to the Ripon WI area where I had a very nice mini-reunion with some of my cousins.
- Two dinners - one sitdown, one takeout - at [Paisan's](#) which is still, in my humble view, the best pizza restaurant in the world.
- My first trip on the [Maid of the Mist](#) at Niagara Falls.
- [Boldt Castle](#) in Alexandria Bay NY.
- [Greenfield Village](#) in Dearborn MI.
- The spectacular campsite on the Mohawk River ([Arrowhead Marina and RV Park](#)).
- Beautiful and spacious [Haas Lake Campground](#) in New Hudson MI.
- [Indiana Dunes State Park](#) in Chesterton MI.
- Adding 4 states to our map: Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Wisconsin.
- Some really good photos.

There weren't any horrible experiences, but there were some disappointments. The lowlights:

- A failure to learn much about Jett's roots in Watervliet NY.
- An inability to find my ancestor's graves in Mayfield OH.
- The very strange and rough-hewn [Woodside Lake Park](#) in Streetsboro OH.
- Getting charged \$1.50 extra to pick sourdough instead of white for a sandwich at the [Koffee Kup](#) in Stoughton WI.
- The miserable nearly 5-hour trip through Chicago.



#36 - WI

The second segment of the trip west - STW2 - will take us from Madison WI to and through Yellowstone National Park. The plan has us traveling almost 1700 miles over 20 days in 9 hops. We will add Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana and Wyoming to our map, raising our state count to 42.

STW2 Hop 1: Stoughton WI to Oelwein IA

28 Aug 2017



180 miles via US 51, US 151, US 20 and IA 150.

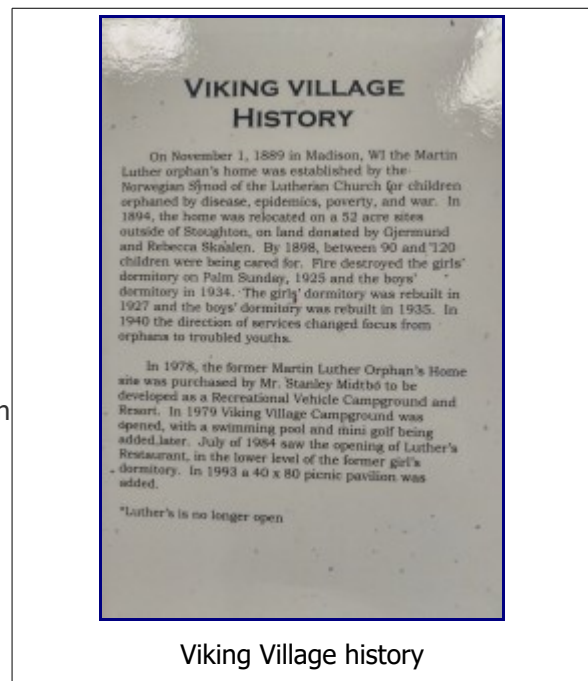
I have been to Dubuque before, but it has probably been over 60 years. Things have changed. The route - primarily US 151 - is a very nice 4-lane road that winds and dips through some beautiful rural countryside. Despite the intermittent rain, we enjoyed the ride very much.

Our home for the 8 days in the Madison area was the [Viking Village Campground](#) in Stoughton WI, about 15 miles from downtown Madison. It is pretty basic, as campgrounds go - it has a pool and a covered picnic area and not much else. But it has expansive grounds nested amid cornfields and some interesting wildlife. We observed prairie dogs, colorful songbirds and Sandhill cranes while we were there - none of which I had ever seen in the 18 years I spent in the area as a child.

Our site was a back-in which was a little cramped getting into, but once situated we had a lot of privacy. Our back window overlooked a large wooded grassy area. The park was less than half full, so for most of the stay we had an unobstructed view down to the huge front lawn.

The park has an interesting history. You can read about it in the photo to the right.

Madison doesn't offer a lot of campgrounds, so their competition is not intense, but we would stay here again.





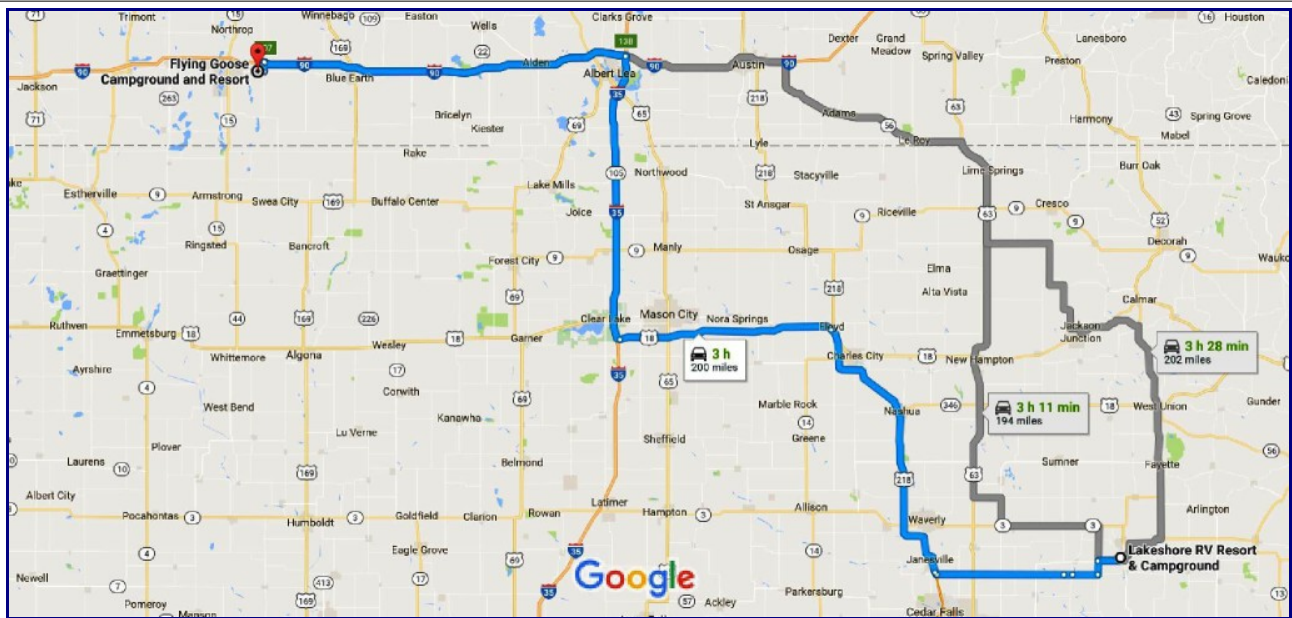
Cornfields beyond the sites



Volleyball and mini-golf

STW2 Hop 2: Oelwein IA to Fairmont MN

31 Aug 2017



STW2 Hop 2

202 miles via IA 281, US 218, US 18, I-35 and I-90. Cumulative tow miles: 382. Truck miles: 341. Cumulative truck miles: 521.

Another easy trip through beautiful farmland, with a couple of Amish buggies at the start. Nice day, flat terrain, a good audio book ([Every 15 Minutes](#) by Lisa Scottoline) to listen to... a good day on the road. Parts of I-90 were pretty rough, but no damage. Just about 3:10 door-to-door.

Our Iowa home was the [Lakeshore RV Resort and Campground](#) in Oelwein MN. This park was surprising in several respects. First, the entrance is a disaster - it looks like you are entering a gravel pit or a auto salvage yard. The roads are narrow (we had to very carefully navigate around a large rock). When we arrived the office was closed (at 2:30 pm!) and I had to call a number. I was given verbal instructions where to park.

Not a great start.

But things got better.

We got set up and I took Rusty for a walk. And then the good surprises started to unfold. The recreational facilities - a beach volleyball court, a playground and a beach with a floating platform - were in great shape and very appealing. Most surprising was the mini-golf course which was very difficult (but not unfair) and a lot of fun. I played about a half dozen times (it was free!) and finally got my score down to 25. No pool and no cable TV, but we pulled in 12 channels over the air. We would definitely stay here again.

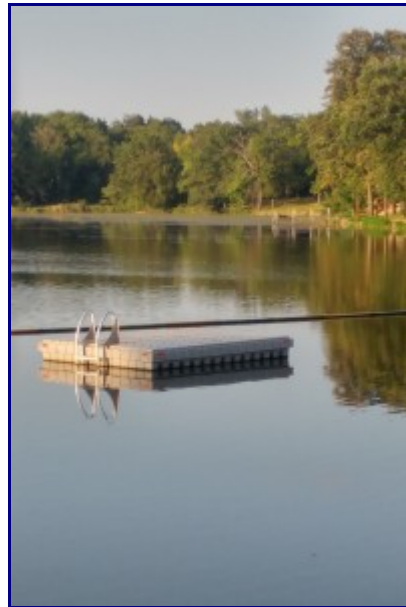


Our site



Mini-golf

We had two adventures during our free day in Oelwein. The planned one was a trip to the [Field of Dreams movie site](#) in Dyersville IA. I was expecting something very commercialized, with an admission. I can't say that I was disappointed to discover that it is free of charge. Yes, there is a souvenir shop, but you are free to wander around the field - or play ball on it - without supervision. I got some nice photos. It was very cool to be on the actual field where Kevin Costner "had a catch" with his dead father. Or to walk into the corn field, just like James Earl Jones. A very high coolness-to-price ratio.



Swim platform



Field of Dreams

The other adventure was dinner. We decided to seek out a sit-down restaurant in downtown Oelwein. There weren't many options but [Valone's Family Restaurant](#) offered breakfast all day which Jett likes, so we gave it a shot. We didn't do breakfast, but the meals we selected - fried chicken for me, pork tenderloin for Jett - turned out to be better than we had any right to expect. My chicken was perfectly deep-fried with a crusty batter that was reminiscent of tempura. Jett's pork tenderloin was breaded and fried, which initially disappointed Jett. Until she tasted it. It was probably the most tender, most finely seasoned pork she has ever had. I had a very nice piece of strawberry rhubarb pie for dessert. Even the coffee - which is generally very weak in diners like Valone's - was very good. Bottom line: an exceptionally fine dinner at a very reasonable price with excellent service

(thanks, Mary!). If you are ever in Oelwein, check out Valone's.

With our two nights in Iowa we were able to add our 37th state to our map.



#37 - IA

High school plus 50

31 Aug 2017

When I graduated from high school at 18 the thought of getting back together 50 years later was like looking into a distant mirror: you couldn't see the image very clearly and, in truth, it seemed illusory. Now, looking back 50 years, the image is very clear and the mirror seems very close. Those 50 years sure went by quickly.

If I had to guess, 50 years ago, what my classmates would look like at 68, I would have guessed that many would be obese, that most would have white hair (or no hair), that walkers would abound and that generally we would look like we had one foot in the grave. I have to say that I was very wrong about that. My classmates looked remarkably fit and generally looked younger than their years. Maybe the ones I imagined stayed home (our turnout was only about one-quarter of the survivors), but the ones that showed up looked great. I think most will make it to our 60th. I hope to be there to find out.



Ray, Roger, Bunny



George



Entertainment



Dinner



Mark, Junko and Alice



Alice and Dick

STW2 Hop 3: Fairmont MN to Mitchell SD

1 Sep 2017



STW2 Hop 3

192 miles via I-90. Cumulative tow miles: 574. Truck miles: 207. Cumulative truck miles: 728.

It doesn't get any simpler than this: get on I-90, go almost 200 miles, get off. A straight shot west. Boring, but very efficient. No stops whatsoever, until we got close to the destination and got lost for about a minute. Easy peasy.

Our one-night stop in MN (which gave us our 38th state) was at the [Flying Goose Campground and Resort](#), a converted chicken farm in Fairmont MN. One of the old chicken coops has been converted into a public building containing showers, a laundromat and a small meeting room. It sounds worse that it was. The whole campground, in fact, was quite nice. Very well maintained. It seemed to have a lot of seasonal campers, most of whom were not there that night. But, overall, we liked the park a lot - especially our HUGE pull-through. And the price (under \$29) was very nice, too. We would come back here.



#38 - MN



Our site



Playground



Lake



Wooded seasonal site

STW2 Hop 4: Mitchell SD to Interior SD

2 Sep 2017

217 miles via I-90, SD 244, SD 370 and SD 44. Cumulative tow miles: 791. Truck miles: 227. Cumulative truck miles: 955.



This hop revealed the full drama of the South Dakota landscape. The first 80 miles, from Mitchell to the Missouri River, was flat and boring. Then, suddenly, a big dip to the river and, once across, the landscape simply bubbled up: sharp hills, a change from corn to wheat and sunflowers. Then an exit off of I-90 and suddenly the jagged, jarring Badlands appeared like a slap in the face.

The hills west of the Missouri really put a dent into our mileage and I got concerned that we would run short of fuel. I decided to make an impromptu refueling stop in Murdo SD. It was expensive (\$2.90 per gallon), but it bought me some peace of mind. As it turned out, that was a good decision. Interior SD (population 67) doesn't have much to offer, including places to get diesel fuel.

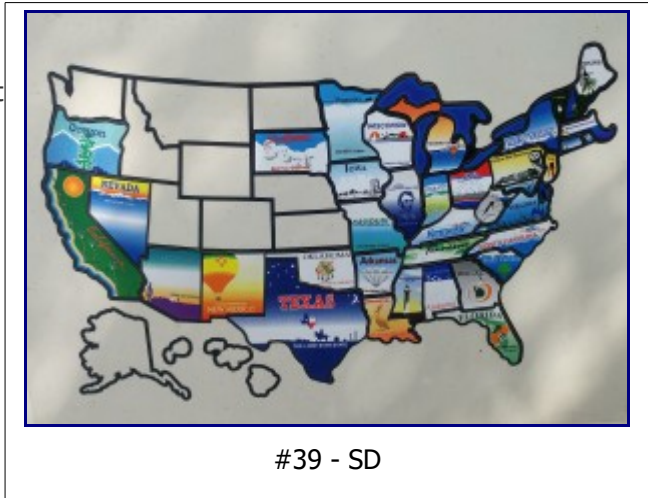
We will be staying near the Badlands for 3 days, so I hope to get some great photos.

Our overnight home in Mitchell was the [Dakota Campground](#). This is a very small (about 55 sites) campground with basic facilities. It was just for a night, so we didn't need much. But we liked it. If we ever find ourselves in Mitchell again we would stay there.

But why go back to Mitchell? The main attraction in Mitchell - and the reason I wanted to stay there - was to see the [Corn Palace](#). I had moderately fond memories of this strange building from when I was 12 and traveled with my parents to Denver, with a stop in Mitchell. This was a building that was covered with corn - cobs of corn, corn husks, corn stalks. Murals made out of corn decorated the interior. Odd, but strangely interesting.

Well, at some point the city fathers of Mitchell decided that the turn-of-the-century (the 20th century, not the 21st) Corn Palace needed to be replaced and thought that they would combine the need for a new Corn Palace with a need for a new sports arena. So now you have this modern building that looks interesting on the outside, but the corn murals on the inside are high above a basketball court and are covered with championship banners. Anyone who actually wanted to see the corn murals would be as disappointed as I was. A huge letdown. If you are thinking of visiting the Corn Palace, my advice is: don't bother.

Our night in Mitchell allowed us to add South Dakota to our map. Our 39th state.





Corn Palace exterior



Corn Palace interior

Things I don't understand, WiFi edition

3 Sep 2017

We are staying in a place (Interior, SD) with almost no Verizon service. It takes minutes to get or send a text message. If a call is received (and Jett's phone did ring once), the call is immediately dropped. I can't use the internet on my phone. My phone's hotspot is 100% dead. So why does my other Verizon hotspot - my old JetPack - work fine? It actually works better here than it did back in IA and MN. Quick page loads, never a dropped connection. I am using it now to post this. I just don't get it. No cell phone service but the hotspot works great. Why?

Wall Drug

4 Sep 2017

If you travel anywhere near South Dakota, you will see signs for [Wall Drug](#) in [Wall SD](#). Lots of signs. As you get within 100 miles the signs appear about every quarter mile. I don't know how many billboards Wall Drug rents, but it must be thousands.

Eventually your curiosity will get the better of you and you just have to go see it. And we did. I was braced for disappointment, like I had experienced just a few days before at the Corn Palace in Mitchell SD. Or like the disappointment we felt last year at [South of the Border](#), a sad relic from a pre-Interstate past.



Wall Drug

But we weren't disappointed in Wall Drug. It occupies a full city block (if a block in a town of 800 can be called a "city block"). It is mostly a souvenir shop but, yes, about 2% of its floor space is still a drug store. It also has amusements for the kids and a huge café (capacity 540) offering "free ice water" (which is how it became a tourist destination) and 5 cent coffee ("not bad" according to Jett). We ate lunch in the café and had excellent open-face roast beef at a very reasonable price. And some delicious donuts for dessert.

Wall Drug is surrounded by other tourist-oriented businesses which were also interesting. Jett bought an authentic handmade arrow at one which we have hung as a decoration in our rig.



Arrow in rig



Jackaloo photo op



Free water park



Flowers at Wall Drug

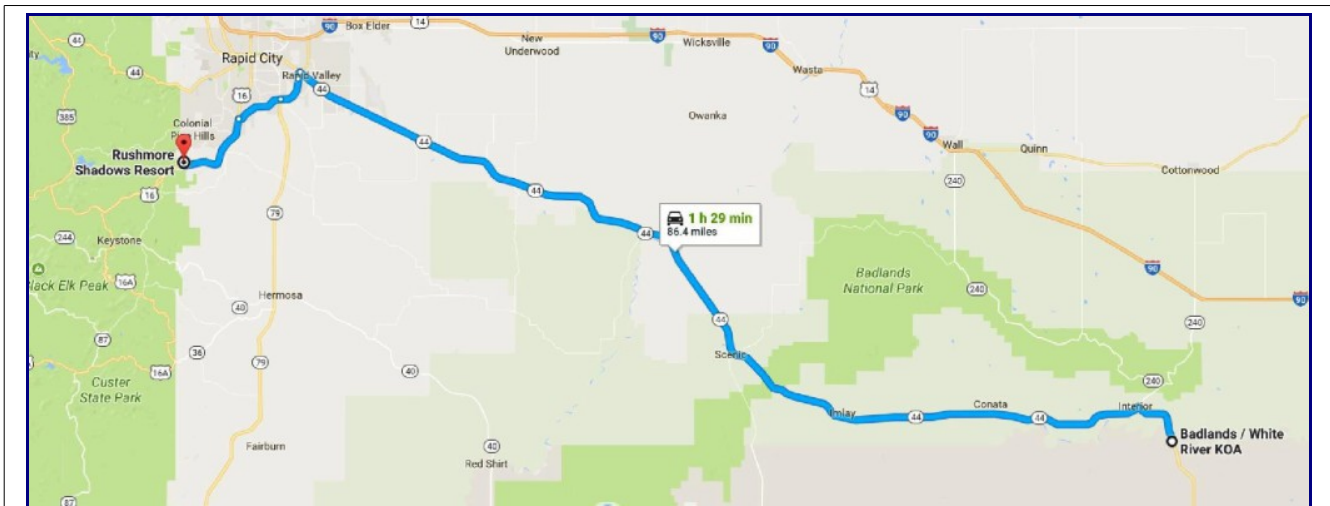
STW2 Hop 5: Interior SD to Rapid City SD

4 Sep 2017

87 miles via US 44 and US 16. Cumulative tow miles: 878. Truck miles: 163. Cumulative truck miles: 1118.

This was a "bonus hop" - a hop that was added to our original plan. I had planned to spend 3 nights in Spearfish SD, using one of the days to visit Mt Rushmore. But when I saw how far Rushmore was from Spearfish - almost 70 miles - and how close we would be as we passed by, I decided that it would make more sense to make a one-night stop near Rushmore, then move on to Spearfish for 2 nights.

I hadn't booked any of these stops, so I didn't have to change any reservations. But I was a bit surprised to discover that the campgrounds were still pretty full after Labor Day. I couldn't book my first choice in Rapid City and I also had to take my second choice in the stop after Spearfish, in Medora ND. I might have to rethink my "no need to book early" policy.



STW2 Hop 5

The trip was very scenic. US 44 is a lonely, wide-open road through Badlands-type terrain (including a short stretch through the Badlands National Park). Then, as we approached Rapid City, the Black Hills appeared. The last 10 miles on US 16 had some serious upgrades to deal with, including a 3-mile section at 6%. Good practice for the diesel engine before we get to the mountains.

Our home in Interior was the Badlands/White River KOA. This is a large (over 200 sites) KOA campground about 4 miles outside Interior (population 88). As Interior has one combination general store/gas station, two bars and not much else, you could say that the KOA is in the middle of nowhere. This view is reinforced by the almost total lack of Verizon cell phone and hotspot service (except to the JetPack hotspot - see the earlier post). The appeal of the location is its proximity to the Badlands National Park (which I will describe separately). Because there isn't much available nearby, the campground has a well-stocked campground store and has a grill that offers tasty meals for breakfast and dinner. We ate there last night - Jett had a hamburger with potato salad and I had a buffalo burger with cole slaw. Both were very good. I believe that was the first buffalo burger that I ever had. It probably won't be my last.

The campground also supplied free WiFi which was mostly very good, except for late night when everyone was surfing.

Our site was a sufficiently-large pull-through site adjacent to both the dog park and the campground owner's site. It was also just a few steps to the campground laundromat which we also used last night. Clean underwear!

Western South Dakota has experienced severe drought this summer, so the grass was burnt out and everything was pretty dusty. There were also wildfires far to the west, in Montana, which gave us a haze both days,



Teepee



Spooky sunset

particularly yesterday. The sun, as it neared sundown, was blood red. Very spooky.

We liked this campground a lot, despite the communication challenges. We would return.



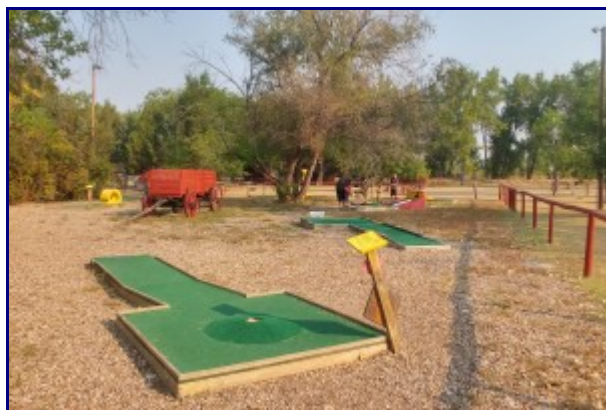
Our site



Dog park



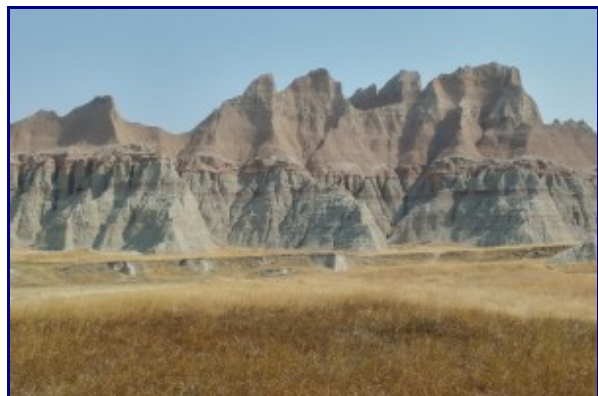
Grill



Mini-golf

Badlands National Park

5 Sep 2017



Saw some hikers on top



Yellow mound

We drove most of SD 240 on Saturday - about 25 miles of very scenic roadway through the Badlands National Park. We ended up in Wall, home of Wall Drug, which I have already described. This is to record some of the beautiful photos that I took in the Badlands.



Near the entrance



More yellow



Great colors



Rugged valley



Spires



Majestic



Three sisters?



Overlooking the plains

STW2 Hop 6: Rapid City SD to Spearfish SD

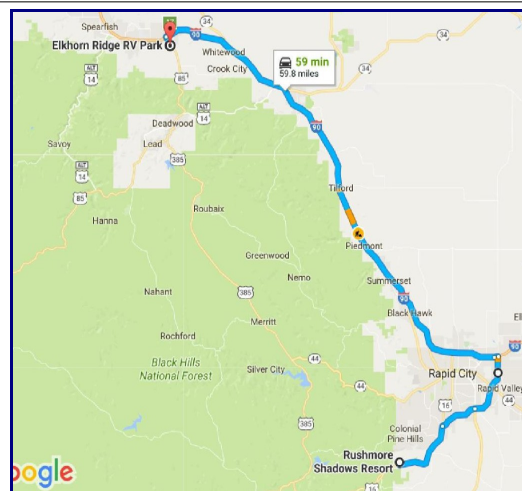
5 Sep 2017

61 miles via US 16, I-90 and US 85. Cumulative tow miles: 939. Truck miles: 144. Cumulative truck miles: 1262.

This was a short hop - just over an hour - to get to Spearfish, from which we will do a loop tomorrow touring Deadwood, Lead and Sturgis. It was an easy hop, mostly on a very flat I-90 through beautiful countryside on a beautiful day. An easy trip. Good thing, because Jett wasn't feeling well.

But she felt well enough to trek to Mt Rushmore after dark. It was a quick trip; I stayed just long enough to get some photos while Jett stayed in the truck. Then back home.

Unfortunately, the night shots didn't turn out very well so I returned this morning. I will post the day shots separately.



STW2 Hop 6

Our one night in Rapid City was at the [Rushmore Shadows Resort](#), a very nice newish resort about 12 miles from Mt Rushmore. It isn't the closest RV park for someone who wants to visit Rushmore and it isn't in Keystone which looks to be a pretty fun town. But it was a nice park that was well positioned for both a trip to Mt Rushmore and a resupply trip to Walmart.

Yesterday was a day of transition, weather-wise. It was over 90 when we left Interior and dropped to near 40 last night in Rapid City. The haze, due to wildfires in Montana, also cleared. The nearly-full moon was spectacular



Moon



Sunset



Mt Rushmore at night

Mount Rushmore National Memorial

6 Sep 2017

As I mentioned in my previous post, Jett and I visited the [Mt. Rushmore National Memorial](#) on the evening of Labor Day. It was a beautiful night and I thought I got some really nice photos. But I was wrong - they were fuzzy and washed out. I guess I need to learn more about taking photos at night.

I couldn't leave SD without at least one good Mt Rushmore photo and we were close enough that I could make a second trip there (and for free - the parking pass was good until the end of the year!). I got lots of photos and most of them were pretty darn good.



Peeking over the trees



Ponderosa pines

I walked the entire Presidential Trail which is not very long - maybe a mile or so - but has a lot of up-and-down. I got some good exercise to go along with my good photos. The trail takes you to the base of the sculpture, so I got some great up-the-nostril shots.

The other thing that the trail offers is a number of "isolation points" where only one of the presidents is clearly

visible. These points have displays highlighting the accomplishments of the individual.

I have to give credit to the weather. It was an impossibly beautiful morning with crystal-clear azure skies. Couldn't ask for better conditions for photography.

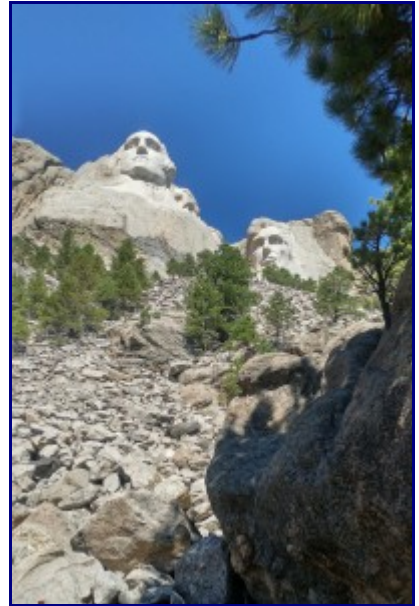
Besides the mountain, I also enjoyed the walk through the Ponderosa pines. It was strongly reminiscent of the forest scene from Hitchcock's [North by Northwest](#), which, of course, was filmed in this area.



Stairs on the trail



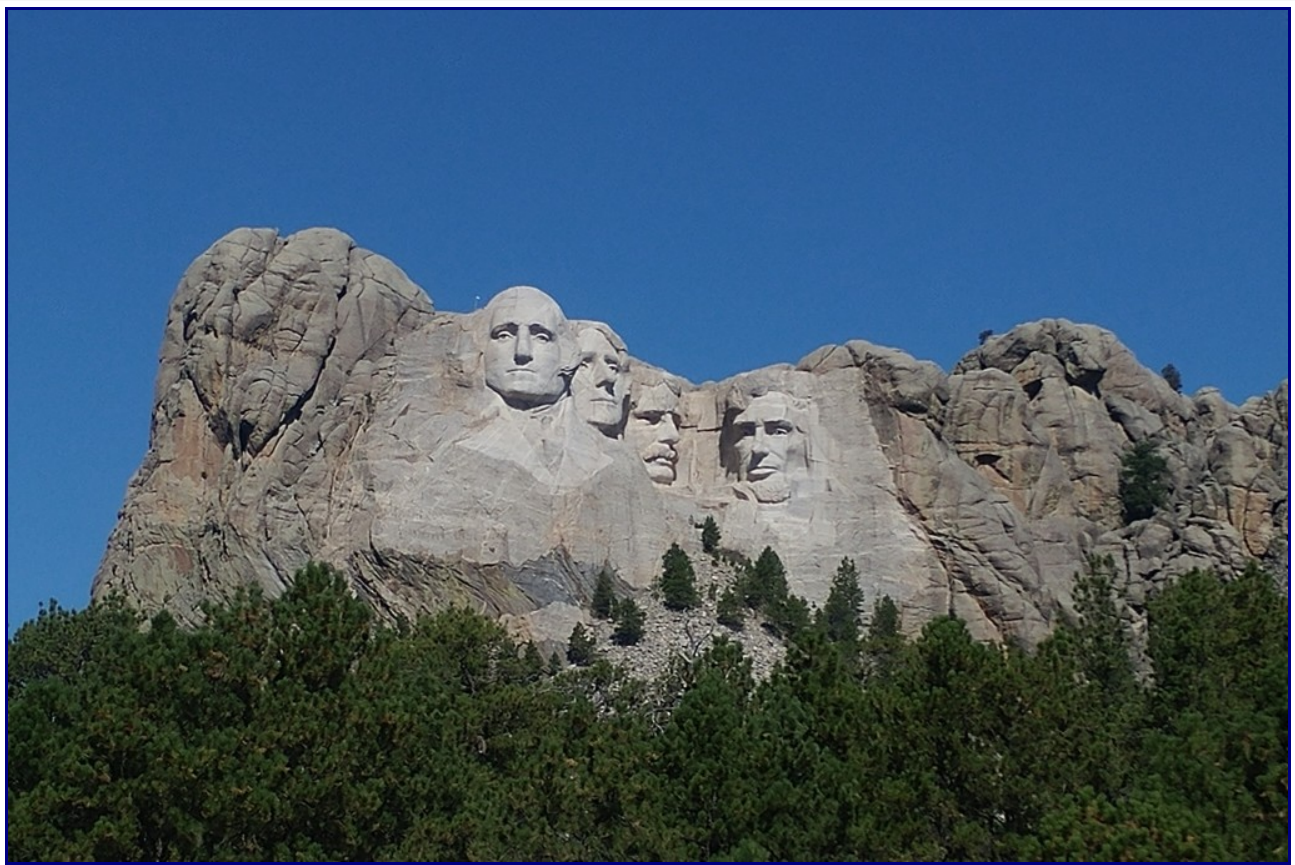
One of the isolation spots



Rubble



At the base of the sculpture



My postcard shot

STW2 Hop 7: Spearfish SD to Medora ND

8 Sep 2017

212 miles via US 85 and I-94. Cumulative tow miles: 1149. Truck miles: 316. Cumulative truck miles: 1578.

This was a straight shot north through some very desolate landscape. If it wasn't for one construction site where we were stopped for a minute, we would have made the trip non-stop.

The purpose of the hop was to get North Dakota on our map. I regard ND as "the state I am least likely to revisit" so it was important to get here once.

We were in SD for a full week and we really enjoyed our time there. It is a beautiful state. Our last two nights were at the [Elkhorn Ridge RV Resort](#) in Spearfish. It is a spectacular RV campground - huge, flat pull-through sites with concrete pads, a beautiful pool, two huge dog parks, tennis courts, a well-stocked camp store. We liked everything about this campground. We would most definitely return.



STW2 Hop 7

Our free day in Spearfish was planned for a day trip to Deadwood and Lead, two wild west towns just south of Spearfish. It turned into a longer road trip than originally planned when Jett needed to refill a prescription at the only CVS in the area - 40 miles away in Rapid City. But we combined that with a trip to Walmart and Petco to get some dog food and coffee, plus we came back on US 85 through some very pretty Black Hills scenery.

We loved Deadwood. It is filled with some great restaurants and old-fashioned casinos. We dined at [Mavericks Steak House](#) and then went downstairs to the Gold Dust Casino. Both were excellent choices. I had a ribs and pulled pork combo that was excellent, accompanied by a very tasty tequila chicken soup. Jett had a sirloin steak which she also rated "excellent."

Because we dined at Mavericks we were given \$5 credit each for Gold Dust. I lost \$11 but Jett parlayed her \$5 credit into a \$120 win.

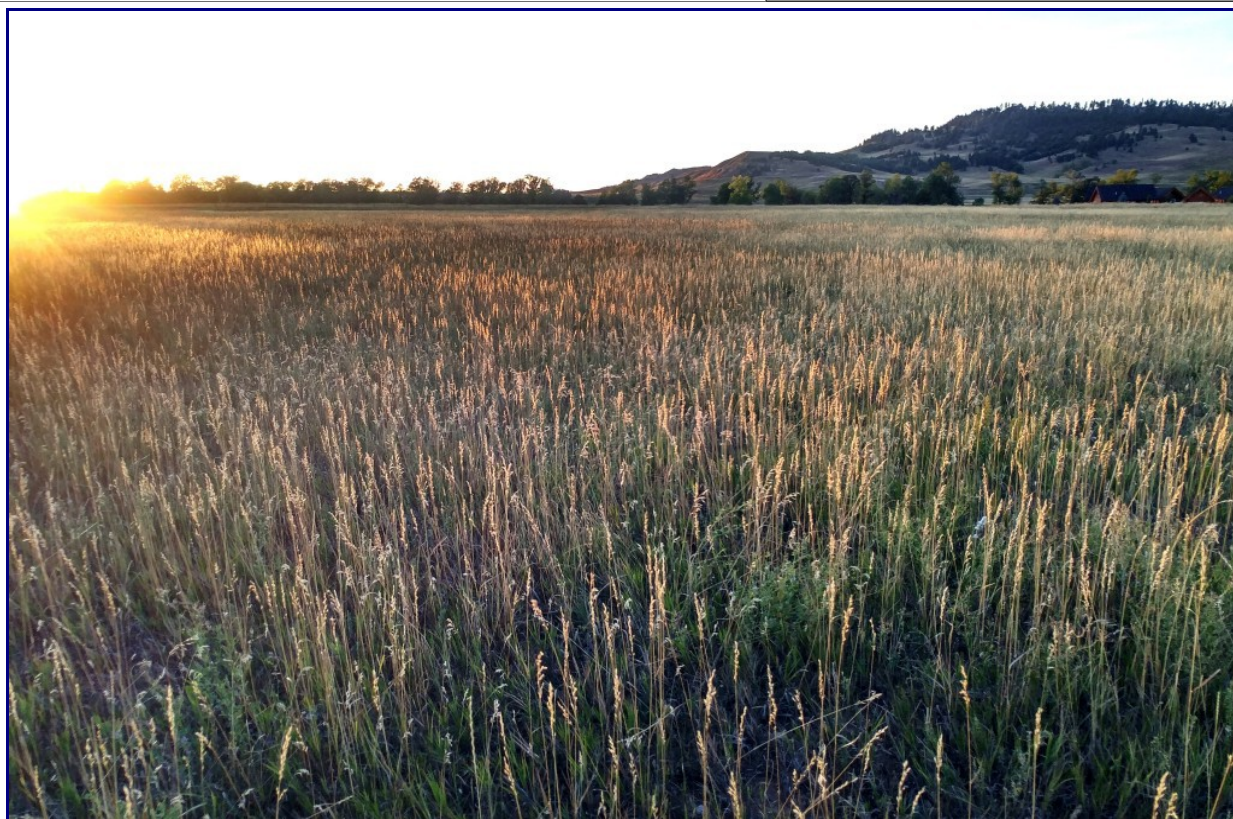
She wants to return to Deadwood. That would be fine with me.

We also stopped in Sturgis, ground zero for Harley-Davidson owners. We just had to stop at the HD franchise there and get a pin.

If we had had more time we would have visited both Lead and the Mt Moriah Cemetery in Deadwood, where the graves of both Wild Bill Hickock and Calamity Jane are located. Just another reason to come back to the area.



Sturgis Harley-Davidson



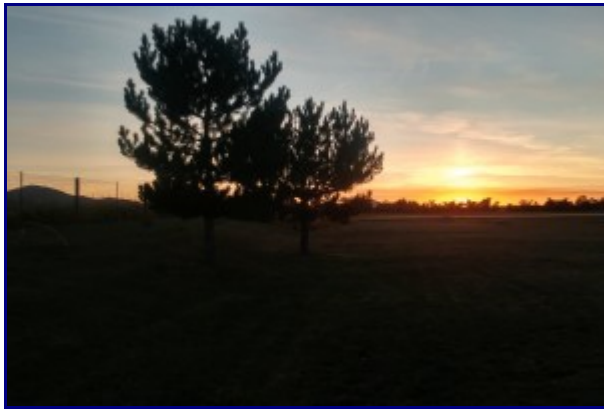
Grass at sunset



Elkhorn Ridge Resort



Our site



The view at sunset



Pool



Deadwood



Ribs and pulled pork

Theodore Roosevelt National Park (South Unit)

9 Sep 2017

I got a quick look at Theodore Roosevelt National Park (South Unit) yesterday. It was quick because we had guests coming to our RV for drinks at 5pm and because I was low on fuel. I entered the park with a plan: drive

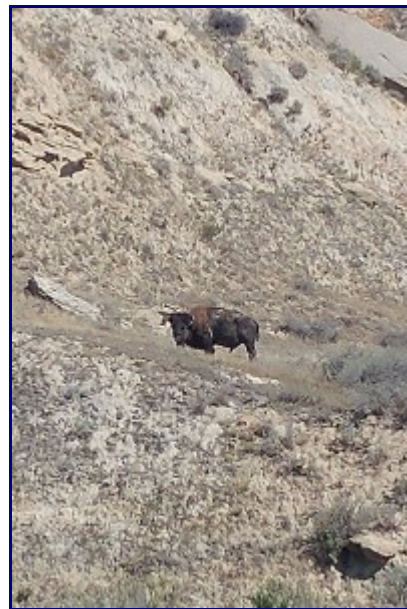


Theodore Roosevelt National Park

until the "low fuel" light appeared or 17 miles, whichever came first. Well, the 17 miles came first, so I turned around after driving about a third of the loop around the park.

This plan was necessitated by my belief that the nearest refueling location was 17 miles away from the RV park. So I drove to that location, got 29.4 gallons of fuel (in my 30-gallon tank) and returned to the RV park. Along the way I tried to find wine and cheese for our little party and finally found some at the one-and-only convenience store in Medora. And I was surprised to discover that they had diesel fuel. Yes, it was 17 cents per gallon more expensive than where I filled up, but it would have saved me 34 miles of driving. It would have been a wash, money-wise, and would have saved me 45 minutes of travel. More importantly, I could have done the entire park loop. Dang!

Anyway, what I saw of Teddy's park was impressive. Not as impressive as the Badlands National Park and not quite what I was expecting (I really thought it would be more wooded), but very interesting nonetheless. Most interesting was the wildlife: besides two very large prairie dog towns, I saw a coyote romping through the prairie dog community (which they didn't like very much) and two American bison (aka buffalo), one of which was in a location where I could get a photo.



Buffalo

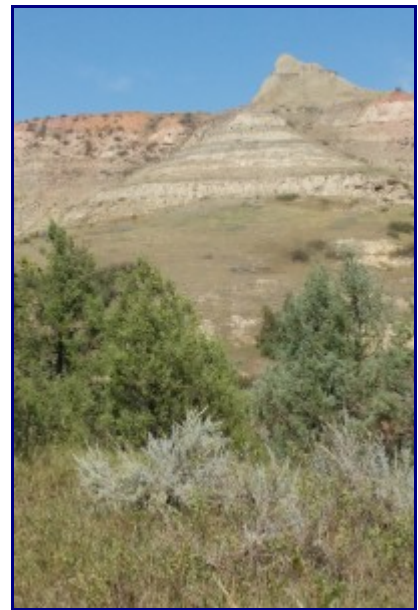
The park has a north unit and a south unit, 68 miles apart. I visited the south unit. I also visited the "Painted Canyon" scenic overlook off of I-94. That was a small version of the Badlands.



Rugged landscape



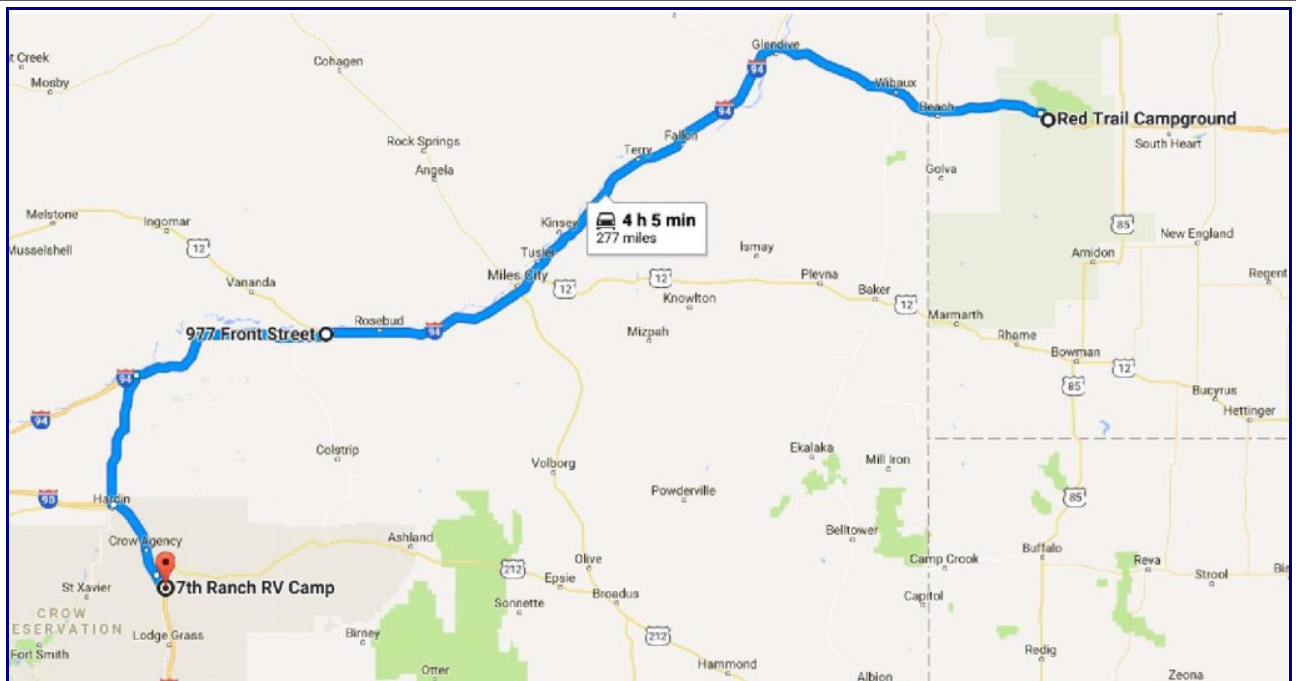
Painted Canyon



Distant peaks

STW2 Hop 8: Medora ND to Garryowen MT

10 Sep 2017



STW2 Hop 8

278 miles via I-94, MT 47 and I-90 with a refueling stop in Forsyth MT. Cumulative tow miles: 1427. Truck miles: 351. Cumulative truck miles: 1929.

This was an easy hop in terms of navigation, a fast hop in terms of average speed and a long trip in terms of clock time (almost 4.5 hours). The day was hot and hazy, due to the Montana wildfires. The landscape - what we could see - was beautiful in a rugged way. I didn't realize how rugged the land was out here in eastern Montana. How could I? I have never been to Montana before.

Our North Dakota home was the [Red Trail Campground](#) in Medora. This was an old campground, poorly maintained, with small, cramped sites. We will not return. But that is moot because it is highly unlikely that I will ever return to ND. I call it the "state I am least likely to visit again."

But the campground, while not very likable, was in a very likable location. The view from our site was very nice, Medora was an interesting small town and the shot I got at sunset as I crossed the railroad tracks made the stay memorable. Unfortunately I was crossing the tracks to go to a bar to watch the Patriots lose. Very sad.

North Dakota is our 40th state.



Outskirts of Medora



The view from our site



Our cramped site



#40 - ND



Medora at sunset

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument

11 Sep 2017



Last Stand markers (the dark one is Custer's place of death)

Yesterday Jett and I went a few miles up I-90 to visit the [Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument](#), site of "Custer's Last Stand." I wasn't quite sure what to expect but what we found was a remarkably well-preserved battlefield with markers for the locations where soldiers' bodies were found after the battle, plus a few markers where notable Indians were found as well. A 5-mile dead-end road with informative signs along the way connected the Last Stand site with the site where the survivors beat back the Indians for two days.

There was a haze from wildfires that prevented seeing some distant



Fallen soldiers at Calhoun's Hill

points - most notably the Crow's Nest where Custer camped the night before the battle - but the stark beauty of the place was not compromised.

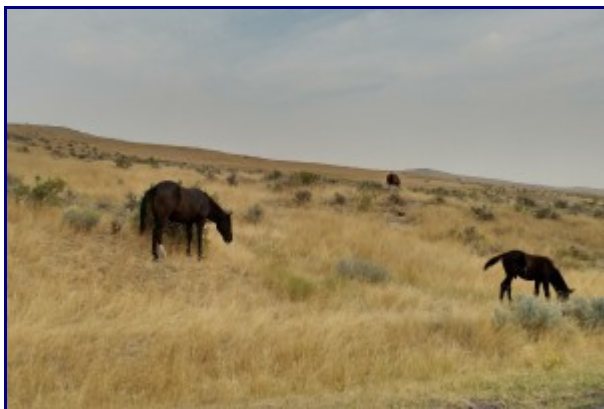
We started with a 30-minute lecture on the battle from a National Park Service employee that was very informative and ended with a short hike up the hill to view the monument and the markers for the 211 men - including Custer - that were killed in the Last Stand.

There were three horse-related events worthy of note. First, we were surprised to find free-range horses along the roadway. We asked about them and learned that they were horses belonging to a local rancher who just let them graze freely. Second, there was a marker near

the Last Stand memorial that commemorated the role of the horses in the battle and marked a common grave for all horse bones found on the battlefield. Finally, when we left the park we went a mile north to Crow Agency, the capital of the Crow Reservation, and were surprised to find a horse wandering freely through the town.



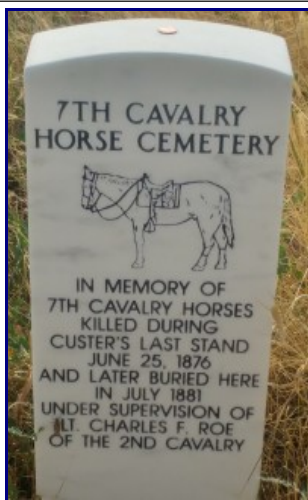
Looking down on the Little Bighorn



Free-range horses



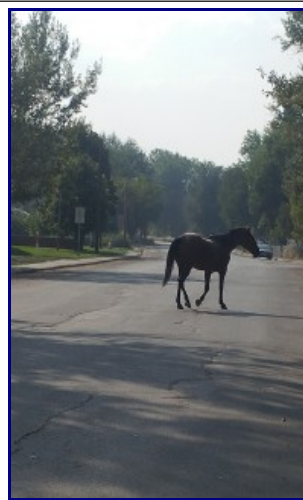
Marker at the survivor site



Horse grave



Last Stand memorial



One-horse town



Indian taco

After Crow Agency we returned to the Last Stand Café across from the park entrance to have a bite. I decided to try the "Indian taco" which is traditional taco ingredients piled on top of Indian fried bread - something similar

to fried dough, but not so sweet. Delicious!

STW2 Hop 9: Garryowen MT to Wapiti WY

12 Sep 2017

197 miles via I-90, US 212, US 310, MT 72 and US 14/16/20 with stops in Billings MT and Laurel MT. Cumulative tow miles: 1624. Truck miles: 237. Cumulative truck miles: 2166.

This hop was unusual in that we made two stops, not for refueling but for shopping. The first stop was at the [Cracker Barrel](#) in Billings MT, to return our audiobook. Cracker Barrel rents audiobooks and we thought we would give it a try. The rate is 50 cents per day, which is reasonable. The problem is that Cracker Barrel locations are few and far between in some portions of the US. We actually finished the audiobook 11 days ago, in

Minnesota, but couldn't return it until we got to Billings. An annoying waste of about 5 bucks. No big deal, though, and we took the opportunity to get a takeout lunch from Cracker Barrel.

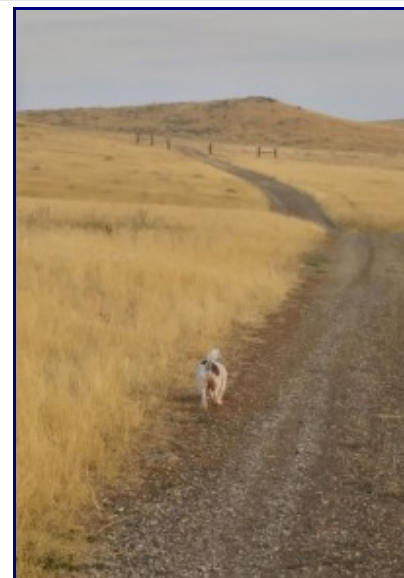
The second stop was at a Walmart in Laurel MT which happened to be adjacent to an AutoZone. We bought another Keurig coffeemaker at Walmart. Our old one failed in SD and we bought a new one there, but it, too, failed. We will return that one for credit later.

Why is it so hard to produce a coffeemaker that actually makes coffee?

The AutoZone was needed because a rear turn signal bulb on the GMC truck failed a couple of days ago. Got a bulb and replaced it last night.

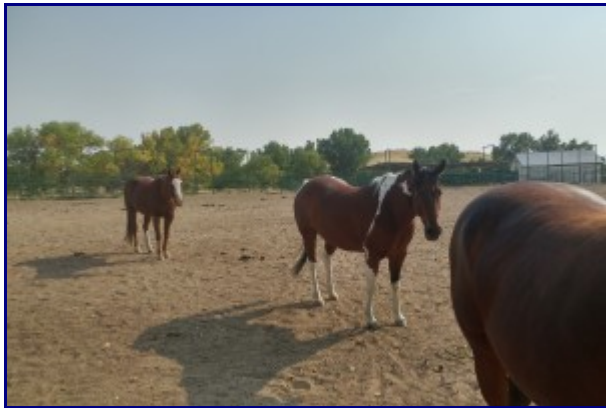
The hop? Easy navigation (except at the Walmart where there was construction), little traffic, good roads and absolutely gorgeous scenery. Montana was beautiful and Wyoming, as we approached and passed through Cody, was spectacular. I don't think I would enjoy winter here, but summer is glorious.

Our home in Garryowen MT was the [7th Ranch RV Camp](#). This is an actual working ranch that also has a medium-sized RV park (about 100 sites). It is adjacent to the Little Bighorn Battlefield, which I already described, and has the same rolling hills and golden grassland that you find there. Just beautiful. And beautiful sunsets, too. Rusty loved it because he could take walks off the leash. We would absolutely return



Rusty roaming free

here. And we were able to add another state to our map.



Cowboy horses at 7th Ranch



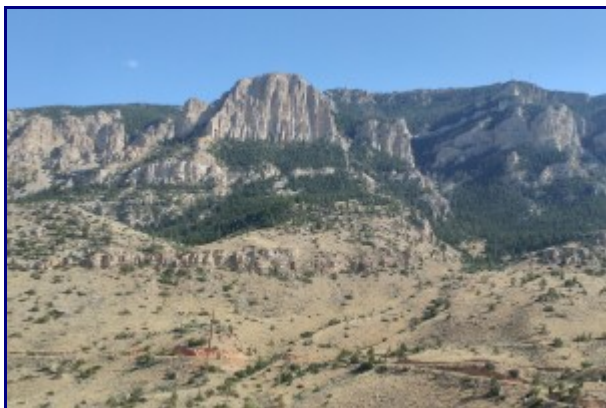
Golden grassland



Our site



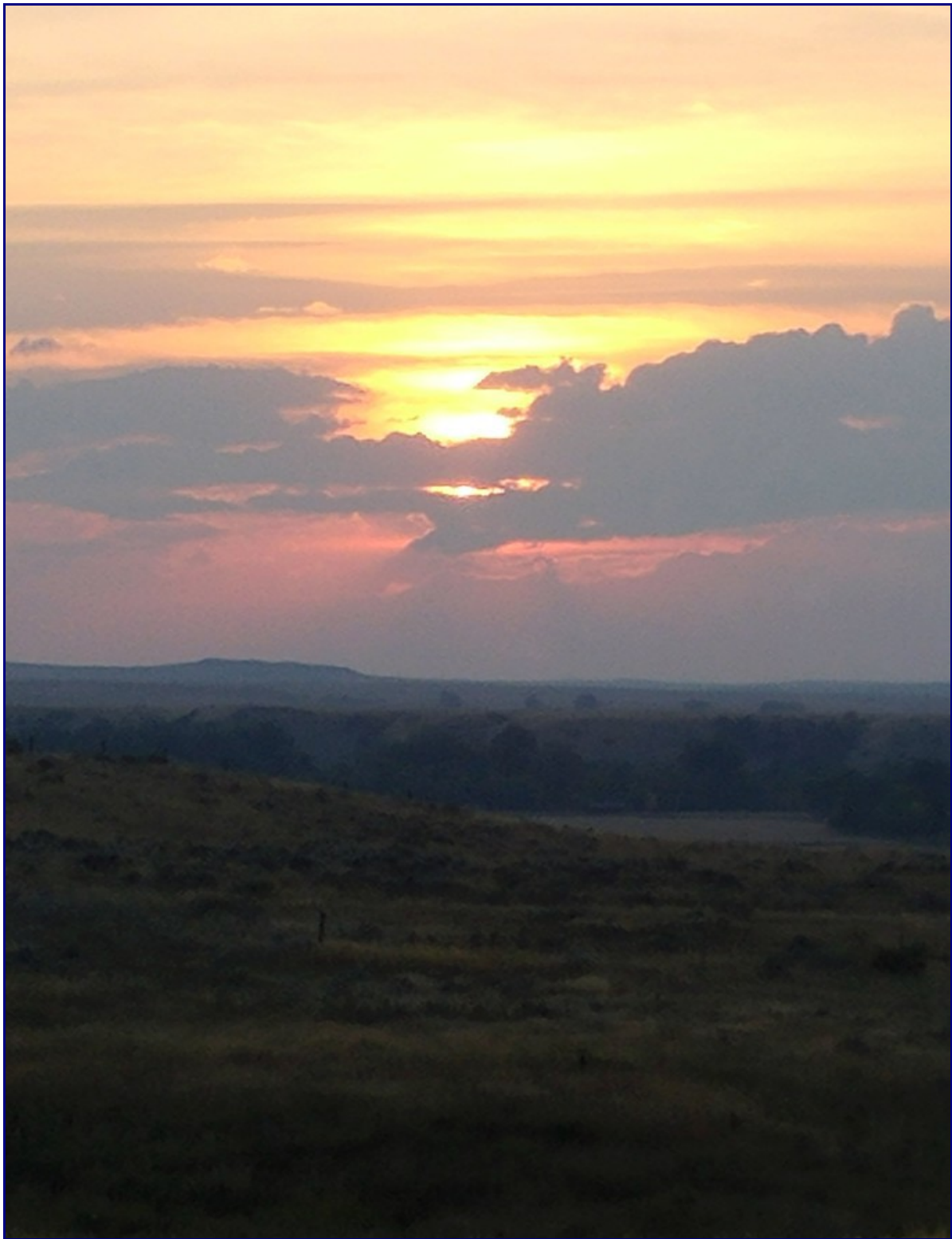
Sunset day 1



On US 20



#41 - MT



Sunset day 2

Yellowstone National Park – part 1

15 Sep 2017

We have been blessed with very fine weather on our STW - we have had mostly sunny, warm days. Great picture-taking days. But that is about to change. The forecast for the [Yellowstone National Park](#) area is for scattered thunderstorms today, rain tomorrow and rain and snow both Friday and Saturday. Yes, snow. There is no other word that scares me as much as "snow." I simply have no interest in hauling an 8-ton trailer around on slippery roads.

So we have changed our plans a bit. Today we will haul the RV across Yellowstone to West Yellowstone, but will stop at [Old Faithful](#) on the way. We really want to visit the geyser and are not at all certain that we will want to return to Yellowstone once

we leave it. I can't see that there would be much joy in driving around the park in a cold rain or wet snow.

I also took the day yesterday - a warm, sunny day - to drive into Yellowstone to take some photos. Because it was just the truck - and just me (Jett stayed home) - I was able to get to some places that would have been impossible otherwise. Most notably I drove to the top of the [Lake Butte Overlook](#) to take some elevated photos of Yellowstone Lake and I walked the 1 km trail at the Mud Volcano. I also got some unexpected up-close-and-personal shots of buffalo.

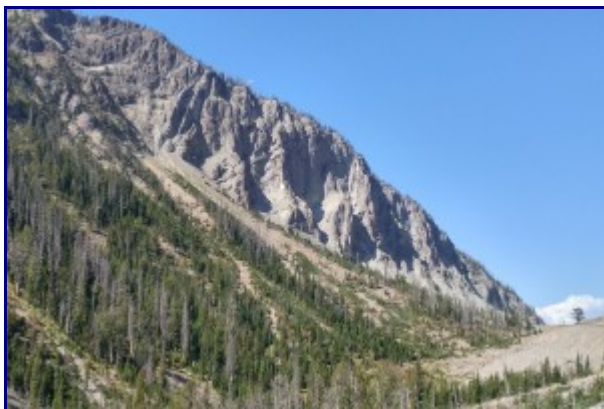
In all, I took over 100 photos. A few of the best are shown here.



Chimney Rock



Northern shore of Yellowstone Lake



Sylvan Pass – elevation 8350 ft



A bend in the Shoshone River



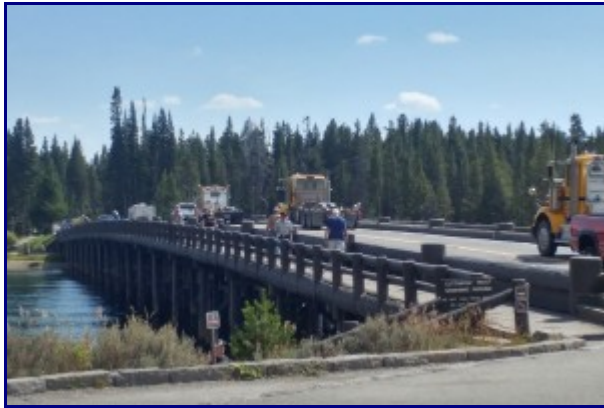
Sylvan Lake



Buffalo ignoring signs



LaHardys Rapids



Fishing Bridge



Grazing buffalo



Mud volcano



Boiling water

STW2 wrapup

13 Sep 2017

With our arrival at the gates of Yellowstone National Park (and with a brief foray into the park) we have completed the middle segment of the Second Trip West. Time for a wrapup.

9 hops in 16 days, 1624 tow miles, 2299 truck miles, total campground cost: \$750.04 (\$46.88 per night). The most expensive stops were Spearfish SD and Rapid City SD, but we had a grand time at those parks, so we didn't mind paying a premium.

The highlights:

- The [Field of Dreams movie site](#). Very cool and free.
- [Badlands National Park](#). Amazing scenery. Also totally free.
- [Wall Drug](#) and Wall SD. Good food, good souvenirs, free ice water. Lived up to the hype.
- [Mt Rushmore National Monument](#). The night photos were useless, but the day photos were spectacular, aided by an impossibly clear day. \$5 for parking.
- The Deadwood/Sturgis day trip. Had a great dinner in Deadwood and won some money.

- [Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument](#). Beautiful and sobering. And free.
- [Yellowstone National Park](#). Incredible. Again, got some great photos on a beautiful day. And saw some wild buffalo.
- Adding 6 states to our map: Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana and Wyoming.

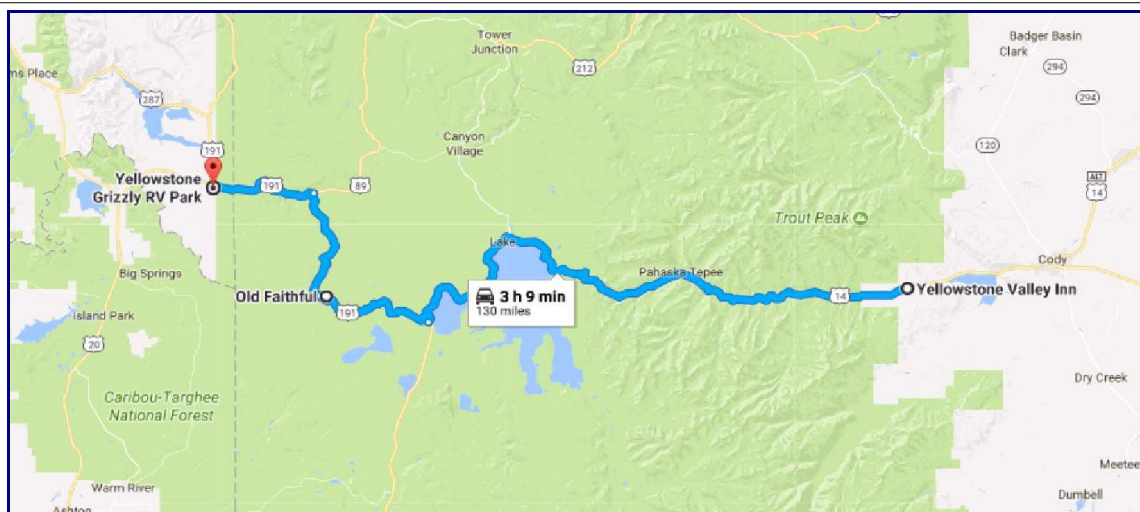
The lowlights:

- The Corn Palace in Mitchell SD. A complete waste of time.

The final segment of the trip west – STW3 – will take us from the eastern edge of Yellowstone, across the continental divide, all the way to Tillamook OR. We will travel about 1250 miles in 16 or 17 days, probably in 8 hops (there is some uncertainty as both the weather and the wildfires could cause us to reroute). We will add Idaho and Washington to our map, raising our state count to 44.

STW3 Hop 1: Wapiti WY to W Yellowstone MT

14 Sep 2017



STW3 Hop 1

134 miles via US 20 and US 191.

This was a short and simple (navigation-wise) hop that would have been even shorter and simpler had we not made a detour to see Old Faithful. Which, as it turned out, we didn't see. Let me explain.

We originally planned to see Old Faithful on a day trip from West Yellowstone (it is only about 30 miles from there). But the weather forecast got in the way. While it was sunny and fairly warm (70ish) on Wednesday, when we made the hop, the forecast for Thursday was cloudy, high near 60 with thunderstorms. The forecast for Friday was even worse, with possible **snow**. So we decided to haul the rig to Old Faithful. Google Earth showed a large parking lot and I thought there were RV spaces.

Wrong. The only spaces large enough for our rig were "reserved for bus." That wouldn't have stopped me, but they were almost all occupied. I did try to fit into the one free space and regretted doing so because I made contact with the bumper of the bus and put our first dent in the RV. Very minor, but very annoying. My fault entirely as I was reluctant to skip Old Faithful after traveling some 30 miles out of my way to see it. We gave up and went on our way.

I am still amazed that the National Park Service had no designated RV sites at Old Faithful. There were a *lot* of RVs there, but they were all in the regular lot, all occupying multiple car spaces.

I am going to return today to see if I can get an Old Faithful photo. But the whole experience kind of ruined the hop for me.

The route from Wapiti - a repeat of the trip I made on Tuesday in the truck - is spectacularly beautiful. But it is also a tough haul for the rig, with one pass at 8530 feet and another (the continental divide) at about 8300 feet. The truck had no problem lugging the RV up the mountains, but the winding roads and high elevations made it a white-knuckle trip for Jett. She admired the scenery but has no interest in doing it again.

I actually felt lucky to see the sun. About 2 hours before we left Wapiti a front blew through with wind gusts over 40 mph. And some intense but brief downpours. I was prepared to endure a dreary, windy trip. I am grateful that the weather turned out to be better than expected.

Our home for two nights in Wapiti was the [Yellowstone Valley Inn](#), an interesting motel/restaurant/bar/RV park facility. The RV park is nothing special in terms of facilities, but the views are spectacular and the restaurant was very good. We would stay here again if we ever return this way.

WY is a new state on our map - our 42nd.



#42 - WY



The view south



A local brew at dinner



Shoshone River at sunset



The view north

Yellowstone National Park – part 2

31 Jul 2017

On Tuesday I made a day trip into Yellowstone National Park ("part 1") and on Wednesday we traveled east-to-west through the park with an aborted attempt to see Old Faithful. So yesterday - Thursday - I made a second day trip into Yellowstone with the primary purpose being to view Old Faithful.

It turned out to be much more than that.

I entered the park around 10:15am via the west (West Yellowstone) entrance where traffic was heavy. I traveled with fairly heavy traffic for 20 miles until I encountered some stopped traffic. I could see ahead to where the traffic was halted and my first thought was that there had been an accident (I saw a tow truck with a flashing yellow light coming the other way). For a while the traffic moved, albeit very slowly. But as I approached the point of the bottleneck I saw the problem: a herd of about 300 buffalo, some of which were on the road. I edge forward a bit further until the traffic came to a dead halt as the herd began to cross the road. I sat for nearly 15 minutes, engine off, as buffalo



Crossing the road



More buffalo



The crowd at Old Faithful



Buffalo

swarmed nearby, some crossing just one car in front of me. Very cool. I didn't mind that 15 minute delay at all.

When I finally got to [Old Faithful](#) I had to endure a cold rain. I was underdressed, in shorts and a relatively thin hoodie. My first problem was trying to determine when it was next scheduled to erupt. I considered, then discarded, the direct approach of asking a tourist as it seemed that almost no one in attendance was speaking English. I got to the geyser and noticed that several hundred people were already waiting, which I took to be a clue that it was expected to erupt soon. I went into the lodge to get some coffee and found a sign that gave me the information I needed: it was scheduled to erupt at 11:25am. It was 11:10am. I got the coffee and got back to the edge of the viewing area by 11:20am. Exactly at 11:25am the geyser erupted. I got some video, then some stills. Very impressive.



Steaming rapids



Oxidized stream



Deadwood



Howling hole



Desolation 1



Desolation 2

Next I tried to get into the parking lot at [Grand Prismatic Spring](#) and failed - too many cars for a very small lot. I tried again later and again got shut out. So if there was a failure on the day, that was it. I was disappointed, but that disappointment was tempered by the other things that I did and the other shots that I got that were

spectacular and mostly unplanned.

I decided to take a run along Firehole Lake Drive, mostly because I liked the name. Well, it was well worth the investment of time as I saw the [White Dome Geyser](#) (but not erupting), Surprise Pool and Hot Lake - all very interesting. All very beautiful.

After the Firehole Lake Drive I went across the road to the [Fountain Paint Pot Nature Trail](#). This was a boardwalk with a wide variety of geothermal features - a roaring vent, some smaller geysers and bubbling mud. Beautiful vistas and closeups everywhere I turned.



Hot Lake



Surprise Pool



White Dome on a dark day



Blue Pool



Vents

At this point I thought I was done taking photos and headed home. But more photo opportunities appeared, including one of an elk buck and his harem.



A buck in the grass



Desolation 3



The eruption

STW3 Hop 2: W Yellowstone MT to Ennis MT

16 Sep 2017

75 miles via US 20, ID 87 and US 287. Cumulative tow miles: 189. Truck miles: 155. Cumulative truck miles: 289.

More than any other hop, this one felt like an emergency. It snowed 2" last night, with the temperature dropping to 30 degrees. The forecast for tonight in West Yellowstone is for a low around 25 degrees - cold enough to freeze the water line. We felt some urgency to get to a lower elevation. By going 73 miles to Ennis MT we dropped from 6800 feet to 4900 feet. Just enough to get below the snow. Just enough to stay above freezing.

Oh, by the way, we had to cancel our plans to visit Glacier National Park because it is burning up. The rains yesterday might have made their situation less critical, but the idea of visiting a smoldering park covered with snow just didn't appeal to us. Even if it has glaciers.



STW3 Hop 2

So we have had to rethink this segment of the STW. We still plan to hit Coeur d'Alene, but will get there via Ennis MT (1 night) and Missoula (2 nights). The day in Missoula will be spent replacing Jett's laptop, which failed two days ago, and getting two new tires for the truck because the tread is wearing thin.

Just to make life more interesting, I popped the valve stem on one of the tires that I was planning on replacing in two days while setting up in Ennis, so I am now awaiting a visit from AAA to change it.

Did I mention that I put a little dent into the BigHorn a few days ago? This whole segment is becoming reminiscent of the "ding-a-day" period when we first went on the road in the fall of 2012.

Anyway, our time in West Yellowstone was spent at the [Yellowstone Grizzly RV Park](#), a very nice park on the edge of "downtown" West Yellowstone. The town is interesting, with dozens of hotels, motels and inns, interspersed with restaurants and tourist attractions. Had the weather been better we probably would have spent a few interesting hours strolling around. But with the cold and snow, we spent our free time hunkered down in front of our electric fireplace. Survival.



Snow at Yellowstone Grizzly

STW3 Hop 3: Ennis MT to Missoula MT

18 Sep 2017

198 miles on US 287, MT 359, I-90 and US 93. Cumulative tow miles: 386. Truck miles: 208. Cumulative truck miles: 497.

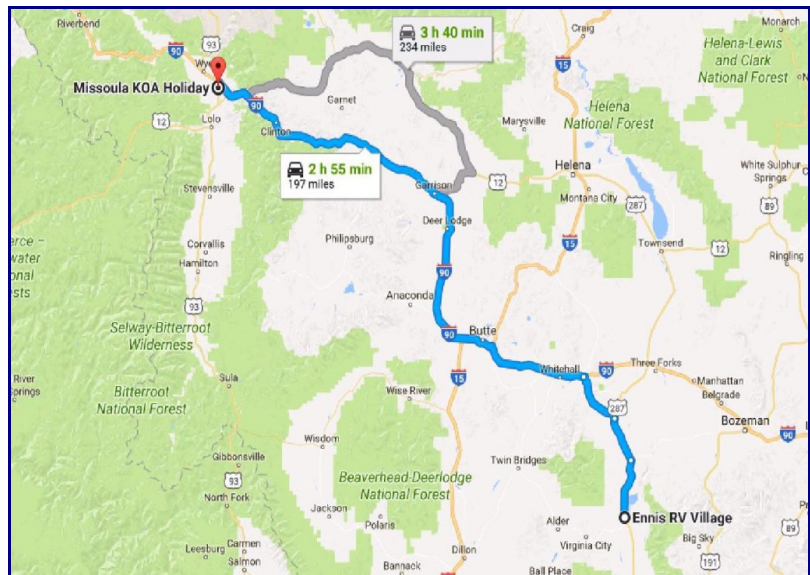
This hop, except for the first 40 miles, was almost exclusively on I-90. We did make two stops: a rest area stop about 150 miles into the trip and an emergency stop a few miles later because I noticed that one of the rear truck tires - the spare put on the night before by AAA - was wobbling. I tightened the lug nuts and made it the final 20 miles to the campground where I tightened them again.

That was WAY too close to disaster. I never, ever want to see my tire wobble again.

Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the trip? Just fine, thanks. Beautiful, in fact, though still chilly, with snow-covered mountains everywhere. There were also a couple of long uphill climbs that surprised me as Missoula is at 3200 feet elevation, a 1700 foot drop from Ennis. In fact at one point we were at 6400 feet, a 1500 foot climb from our starting point. Up and down. But the truck handled it just fine.

Except for almost losing a tire.

Our one-night stay was at the [Ennis RV Village](#) in Ennis MT (population about 900), in the middle of nowhere. As I explained before, the sole reason for being in Ennis was that it was lower - and warmer (low of 32 versus 25) - than West Yellowstone. It was not a good place to look for tire repair, though AAA eventually came through for us. And there was a food store less than a mile away, so we didn't starve. The site was large and flat. More than adequate for an overnight stop.



STW3 Hop 3



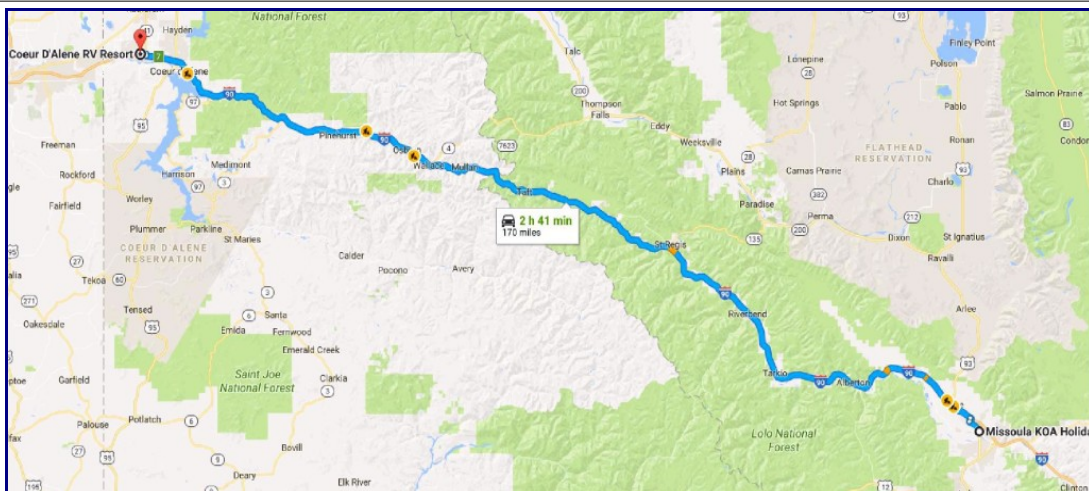
Plains and mountains



Snow-covered mountains near Ennis

STW3 Hop 4: Missoula MT to Post Falls ID

20 Sep 2017



STW3 Hop 4

171 miles via I-90 and local roads. Cumulative tow miles: 557. Truck miles: 214. Cumulative truck miles: 711.

This was an easy trip for navigation: a couple of turns to get onto I-90, a couple of turns to get off of I-90. Otherwise, just follow I-90. However, the trip was preceded by a trip back to the tire place to get the torque on the lugnuts checked, plus two rest area stops to make sure that none had come loose. Everything was fine, but to say we were spooked by the specter of wobbling tires would be an understatement.

There was also a number of significant climbs over passes - one up to 6000 feet - and it was all done in rain. Not heavy rain, but steady rain.

Not a fun hop.

Our home in Missoula was the Missoula KOA Journey campground. The campground was very nice - nice pool/hottub, nice store, nice store, nice dog park. And big, wide sites with separate parking spaces. If we ever return to Missoula (unlikely) we will come back here.

It also had a wonderful sunset on the day we arrived. A pretty good one the next night, too.

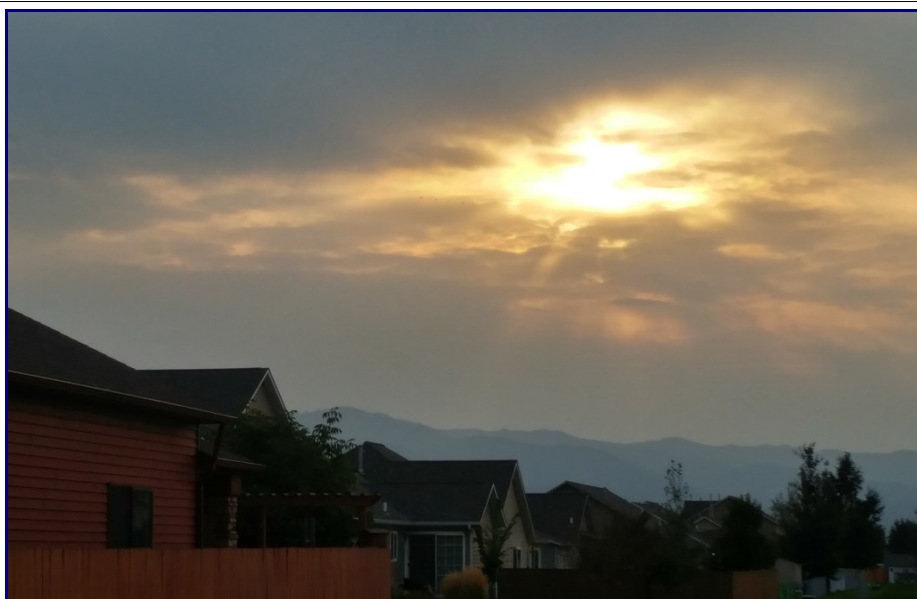
But as our stop in Missoula was primarily a regroup and resupply stop, the main feature of the campground was location: it was within 2 miles of Costco, Walmart, Staples (a new laptop for Jett), a laundromat (clean underwear!) and tire places (2 new tires). Everything got done and Missoula benefitted from our spending.



Dog park



Second night sunset



First night sunset

"A Wanted Man" by Lee Child

21 Sep 2017

[Delacorte Press, New York, 2012.](#)

It has been quite a while since I posted my last book review, which is both a statement about how much traveling/driving I have been doing and how this particular book just didn't demand that I finish it. It wasn't bad but it wasn't one of the best in the Jack Reacher series.

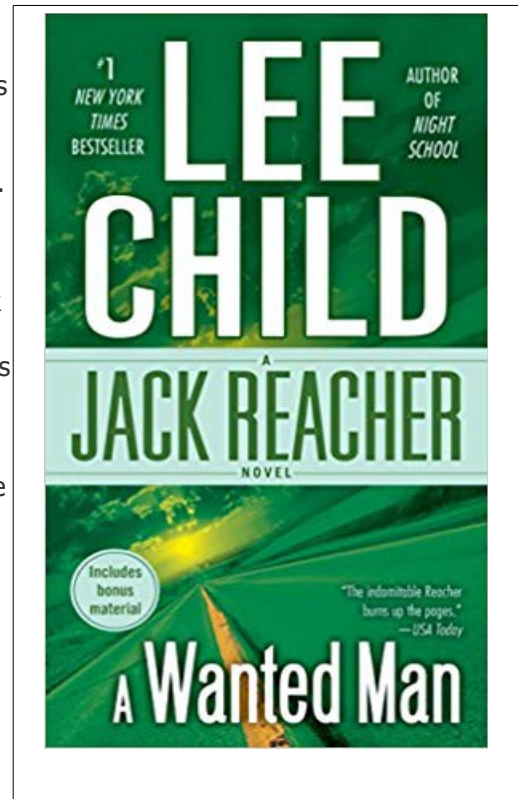
This book begins with Jack hitchhiking in Nebraska, trying to get to Virginia to see a woman. The book ends with Jack hitchhiking in Kansas, trying to get to Virginia to see a woman. Obviously this book is not about his hitchhiking progress. Rather, it is about who gives him a ride and the adventure he has, first as a hitchhiker, and later as a suspect in the murder of a mysterious man who interests the local police, the state police, the FBI, the NSA and, apparently, the CIA.

The book is also about some long car trips. First eastward toward the Mississippi, then back to where Reacher was first picked up, then south, then north, then east to Kansas City. I got tired just reading about all the travel. Probably not a good book to read as I was driving my rig across the country.

Anyway, the plot eventually results in a big shootout involving Reacher and two FBI agents in a situation in which the odds were heavily against him. Just the way he likes it. The final body count approached 20. Not the bloodiest Reacher story ever, but up there.

The plot is pretty far-fetched but is well-constructed. I didn't see a lot of flaws, just a lot of implausibility. But if implausible plots offend you, you probably won't be reading the Reacher books anyway.

Not bad but not great. 6 out of 10.



STW3 Hop 5: Post Falls ID to Ellensburg WA

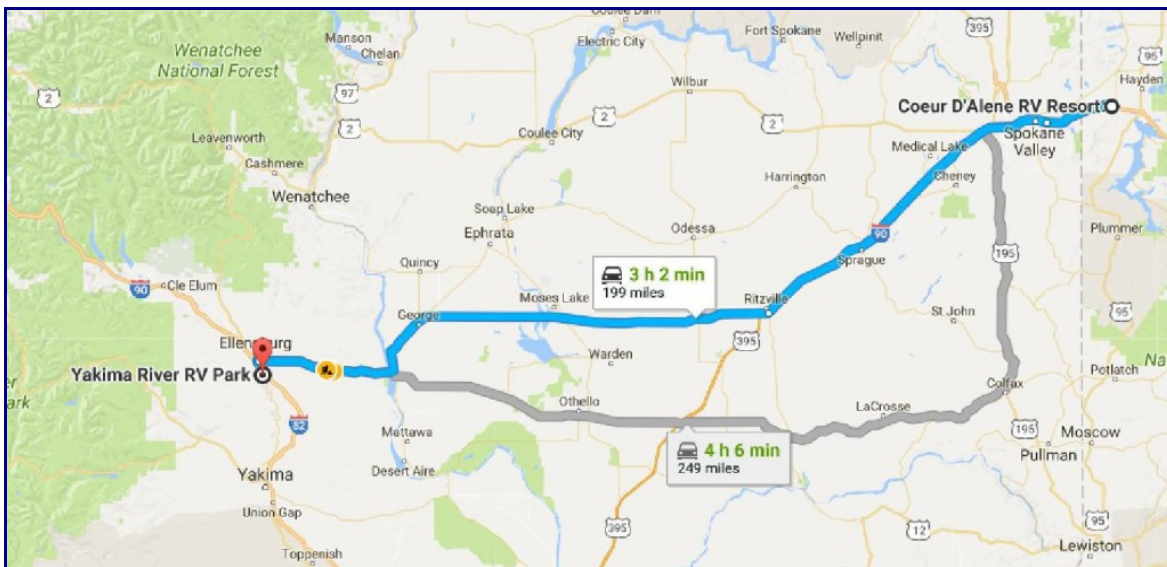
22 Sep 2017

202 miles via I-90 and local roads. Cumulative tow miles: 759. Truck miles: 224. Cumulative truck miles: 935.

Another very simple hop for the navigator. Pretty much follow I-90 west for 200 miles. The only hard part was finding our destination, which was a bit off the beaten track. But we made it, despite the rain.

Ah, the rain. There were periods when it wasn't raining, but there were many more when it was. Cloudy, dreary, damp. Not great for sightseeing. Not great for photo-taking. Except for the spectacular crossing of the Columbia River. There were a few sprinkles, but the view was still breathtaking.

Our home for two nights in Post Falls ID was the [Coeur d'Alene RV Resort](#), a very interesting medium-sized park (about 200 sites) just off of I-90 and just west of its namesake city, Coeur d'Alene. What made it interesting is that it clearly accepts long-term renters and is clearly open all year because dozens of the RVs were prepared for snow and cold. Insulation, taped seams, plywood around the base. But there were also clearly no rules about the ages of the units or how the winterization was done. There were some truly ancient and very ugly RVs



STW3 Hop 5

in the park. It was reminiscent of the [Circle Cg Farm Campground](#) in Bellingham MA, which we regard as one of the tackiest campgrounds we have ever seen. Yet Coeur d'Alene calls itself a "resort" and does so with some justification. It has an indoor pool - only the third we have ever seen - and a wonderful community center



Lake Coeur d'Alene



Downtown park



Our site



#43 - ID



The I-90 crossing of the Columbia River

featuring a fantastic fireplace. The place is a bundle of contradictions.

Despite the lousy weather, I made the trip into Coeur d'Alene because I had heard that it is a beautiful city. Well,

maybe it was the weather, but it just didn't strike me as anything special. Yes, it was very clean and yes, it does have some very nice public spaces downtown. But overall it didn't strike me as a place I would want to come back to. It was not, for example, as interesting as Burlington VT.

With our stay in Post Falls we were able to add Idaho to our map. Our 43rd state.



Fireplace



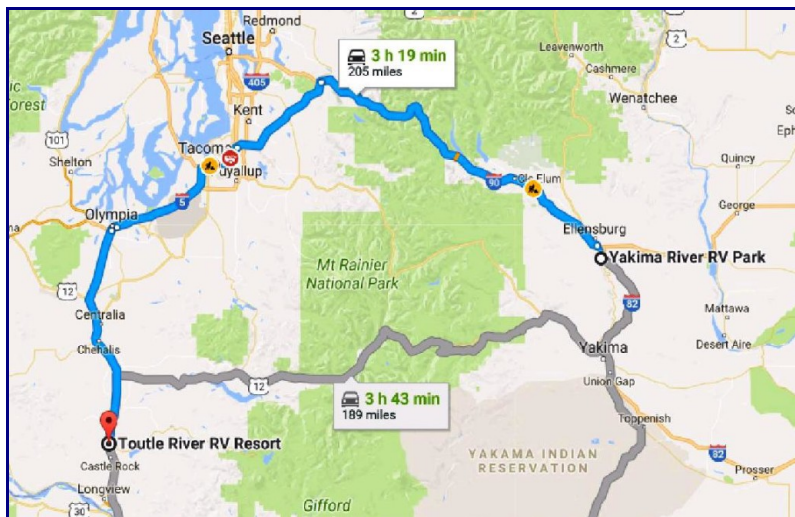
Indoor pool

STW3 Hop 6: Ellensburg WA to Castle Rock WA

24 Sep 2017

206 miles via I-90, WA 18 and I-5.
 Cumulative tow miles: 965. Truck miles: 214. Cumulative truck miles: 1149.

This hop was only slightly more difficult in terms of navigation than the preceding two. Over half the trip was on I-90 and that segment involved some pretty significant climbs, including the Snoqualmie Pass, followed by a long downhill that brought us nearly down to sealevel (altitude: 49 feet). The weather, which started with a few sprinkles, improved and the hop ended in sunshine (yay!).



STW3 Hop 6

This hop reached the outskirts of Seattle and took us down the heavily-traveled I-5 corridor through Tacoma and Olympia. The traffic on that segment was very heavy and didn't really let up all the way to Castle Rock.

Now let me tell you about our night at the [Yakima River RV Park](#) in Ellensburg WA (which put the 44th sticker on our map). On our way to Ellensburg Jett read some reviews of people who had stayed at the park previously. Most were critical, both of the park and the owners who some called rude. So it was with some trepidation that we arrived at the gate (after having called from a couple of miles away, as instructed). As we pulled up to the entrance a white pickup truck came toward us, then turned to block our way. A tall bronzed cowboy got out, came to my window and, with no greeting, asked who we were. I gave him our name and he walked away. He dialed a number on his cell phone, had a brief conversation on the phone, returned to his truck, got in, backed it up, then turned into the park. Jett and I had absolutely no idea what was expected of us. Were we admitted? Was there an office that we were to go to? And then the cowboy put his arm out the window and signaled us to follow. He led us to our site, had a brief conversation about rules (no dog poop on sites, don't let the dog bother the goat, no sewer for overnights) and drove off. Very strange. Jett: "I think we are in *Deliverance*."



Palace Cafe



Clubhouse inside



Clubhouse outside



View from the dog park



#44 - WA

His name was Randy and he actually turned out to be quite nice. Taciturn but communicative if engaged. He gave us a dinner recommendation ([The Palace Cafe](#)), which turned out to be an exceptionally good meal. We thanked him when we saw him the next morning. He actually smiled.

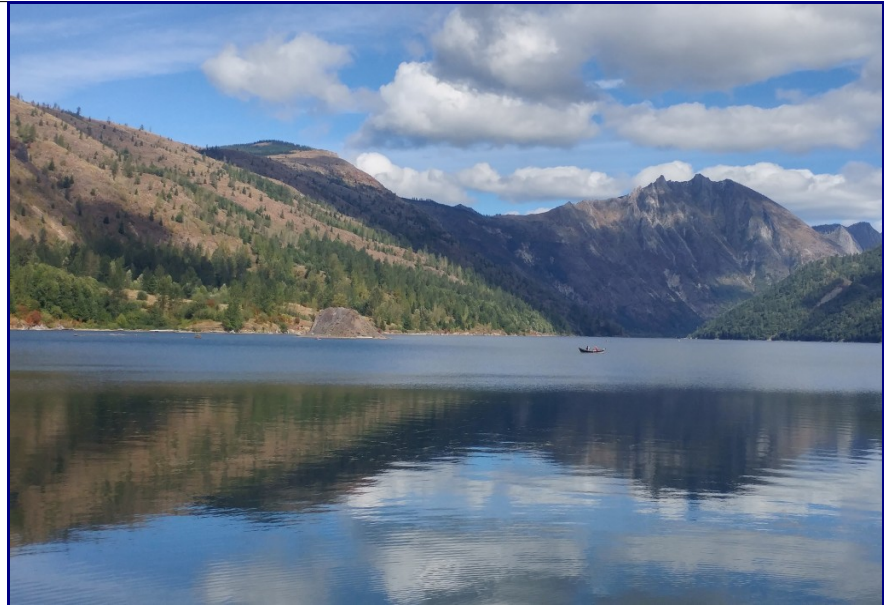
Other facilities include a very nice dog park (with a view) and a funky clubhouse full of farming antiques.

Mt St Helens and Coldwater Lake

24 Sep 2017



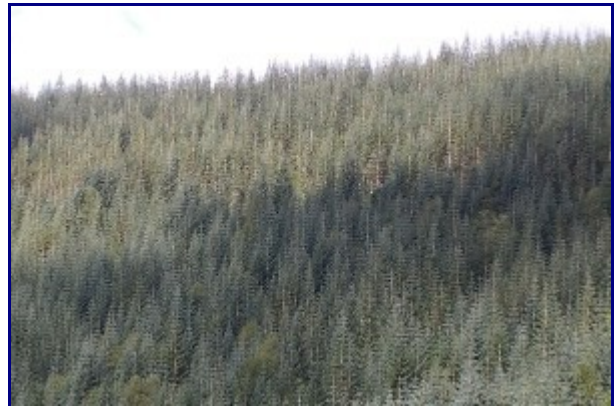
Coldwater Lake



Coldwater Lake

I first visited Mt St Helens about 2 weeks after the roads were reopened to the public following the disastrous 1980 blast that blew out the side of the mountain. I think that was probably 1981, about a year after the explosion. I recall a scene of utter devastation - millions of trees blown flat as far as the eye could see, all pointing in the same direction, away from the mountain. Ash covered everything. No living plants anywhere. It was like a forest turned into a desert.

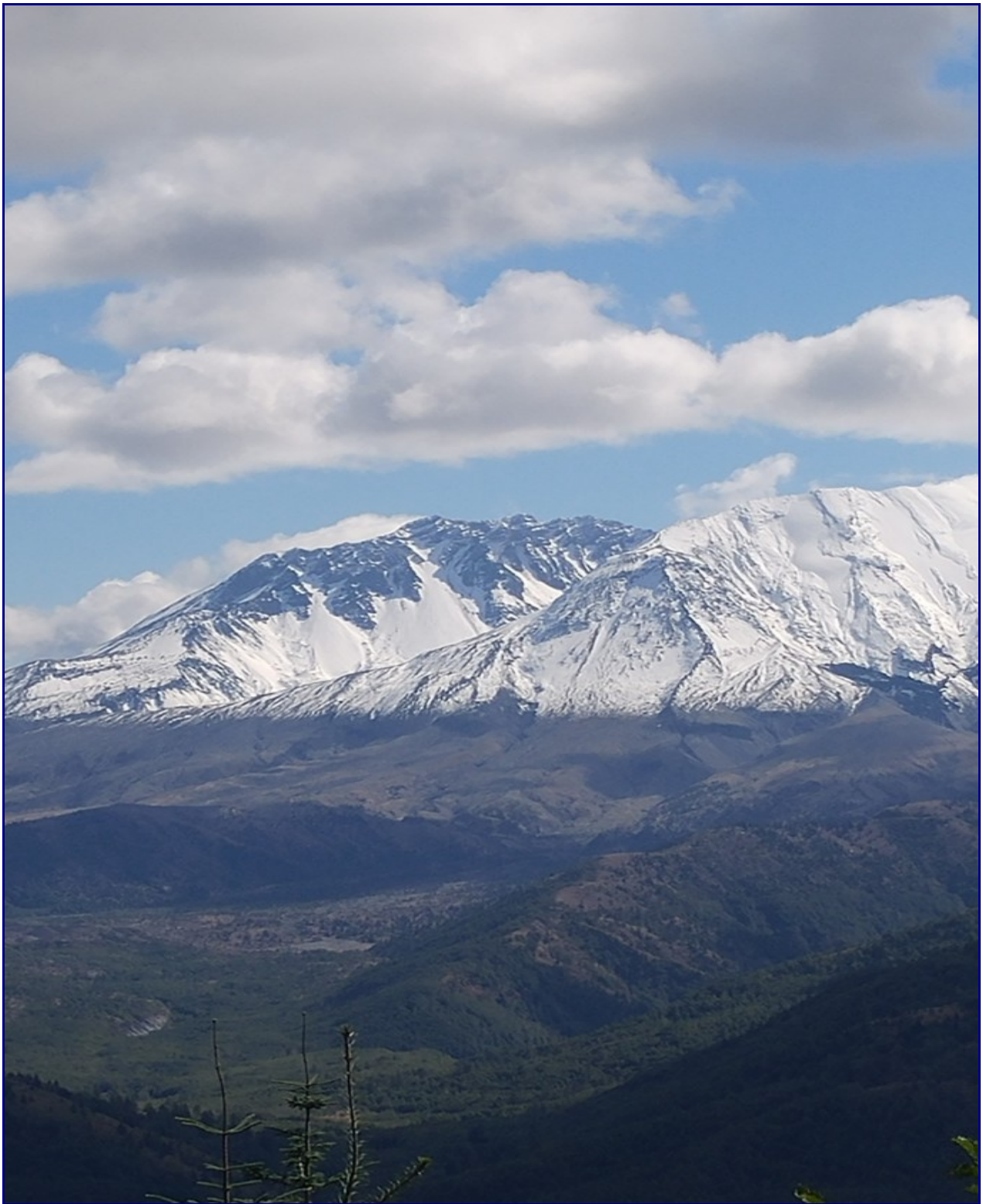
So I was curious to see what the area looked like after some 35 years of recovery. Well, the change is remarkable. The mountainsides are densely covered with evergreens. Not a flattened tree in sight. The snow-capped mountain is still beautiful, if ominous.



New growth forest

I got my first look at Coldwater Lake, too. This lake did not exist in 1980 and probably was just forming in 1981. It is a large lake that was created when millions of cubic yards of earth from the mountain were blown into the valley, damming the river. It is a beautiful mountain lake and arguably now provides more spectacular vistas than the mountain itself.

Getting to the lake is no easy chore. It is about 60 miles from I-5, elevated about 3,000 feet. It took me about



Mt St Helens

90 minutes to get there, with all the picture-taking stops. But it was worth the trip.

My biggest disappointment was that the volcano itself is now off-limits to the public. You can get some nice

photos, but you can't get onto the mountain itself. My recollection from 1981 was that the public could drive up the mountain. Not to the cone, but close enough that you could get some very close-up pictures. No more.



Valley below Mt St Helens



The mountain from a distance

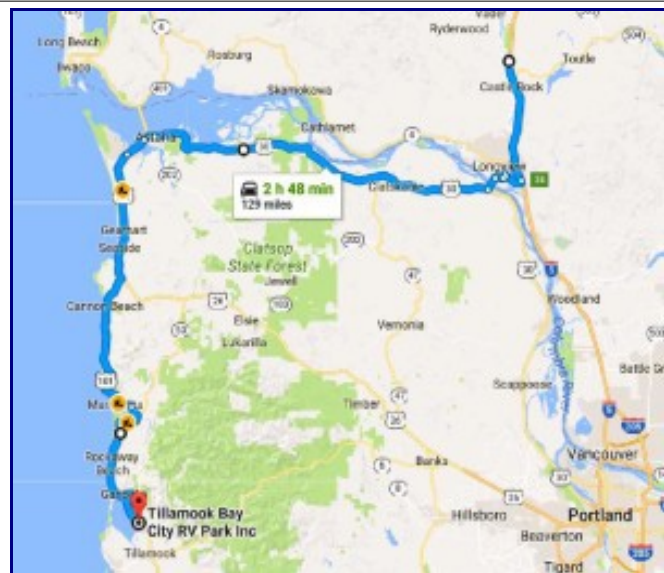
STW3 Hop 7: Castle Rock WA to Tillamook OR

25 Sep 2017

130 miles via I-5, WA 432, WA 433, US 30 and US 101. Cumulative tow miles: 1095. Truck miles: 212. Cumulative truck miles: 1361.

This was a relatively short hop and I thought it would be relatively flat. Wrong. A lot of up-and-down, starting with a steep 500-foot climb as soon as we crossed the Columbia River. But it was a route that I had never traveled before (as opposed to the most likely alternate route - down to Portland then over the coastal range on OR 6 - which I have done many times before). Jett didn't like it much. But I believe there is no way to get to Tillamook without going over some roads that she wouldn't like very much.

We did get some spectacular views of the ocean as we headed south along the Pacific Coast Highway (US 101), including the great vista overlooking Nehalem. Even Jett liked that view.



STW3 Hop 7

This hop ended both the third segment of the Second Trip West and the full coast-to-coast STW trip as well. But I won't do the wrapup until we leave Tillamook on the start of the Second Trip East (STE). I will give a preview of that trip as well. It is in a state of flux, mostly because we are unsure whether south Texas is in shape to receive us (it is still recovering from hurricane Harvey) and because we feel a need to get into warmer weather ASAP (that snow in Montana really spooked us).

Our two days in Castle Rock WA were spent at the [Toultle River RV Resort](#), just off of I-5 and conveniently located for my day trip to Mt St Helens. It is a very nice park, but is sandwiched between I-5 and the major rail route between Portland and Seattle, so there was a lot of noise. It had no pool (not that we would have used it with temps in the 60s). It had a 9-hole disc golf course which was only the third park we have seen with one,



PCH overlooking Nehalem

but this was the worst of the three. Not well marked and not very interesting. It did have something that was unique: a large-scale croquet course played with large wooden mallets and soccer balls.

I included a photo of Rusty just because he can be so damn cute.



Mega croquet



Getting the truck washed



Nehalem



Rusty looking damn cute

Second Trip East (STE) preview

26 Sep 2017

The Second Trip East (STE) will start in Tillamook OR and will terminate in Naples FL, out home for the winter (if anything is left after Hurricane Irma). It will pass through, among others, the four states that are missing from our map: Utah, Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas. It then drops down to southeast Texas (if anything is left after Hurricane Harvey) and ends with a trip along the entire US coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The plan is to travel the distance - just about 5300 miles - in 28 hops and 52 days. That is more than one hop every two days, so there will be a lot of traveling and no long-term stays.

Like the STW, the STE is organized into 3 segments.

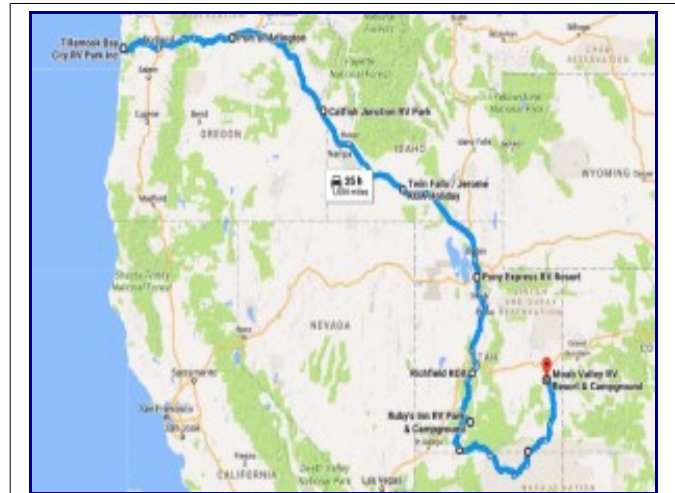
STE1: Tillamook OR to Moab UT

9 hops, 1555 miles, 18 nights.

This segment will add Utah to our map and will give us opportunities to see some great national parks. It also gets us further south, to reduce the chance of seeing more snow.

Highlights:

- Columbia River Gorge. I have never been up the Columbia River before. It is reportedly beautiful. Or was, before the recent forest fires.
- Salt Lake City. I hope to check out the Mormon genealogical archives, to see what they can offer. If they are good (and everyone says they are), maybe we will come back this way to do some research sometime in the future.
- [Bryce Canyon National Park](#).
- [Zion National Park](#).
- North Rim of the [Grand Canyon National Park](#). This will be a long day trip, so it might not happen if I am tired of all the driving.
- [Monument Valley](#).
- [Arches National Park](#).



STE1 plan

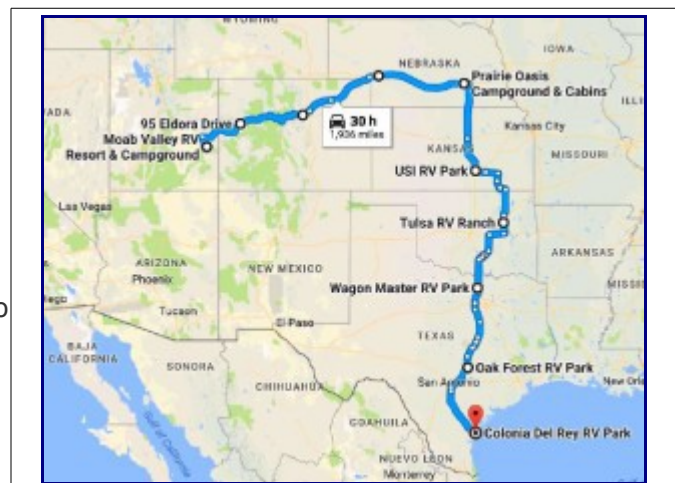
STE2: Moab UT to Corpus Christi TX

9 hops, 1936 miles, 16 nights.

This segment will complete our 48-state map by adding Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas. It will also give us a day in Denver and a chance to visit an Indian reservation.

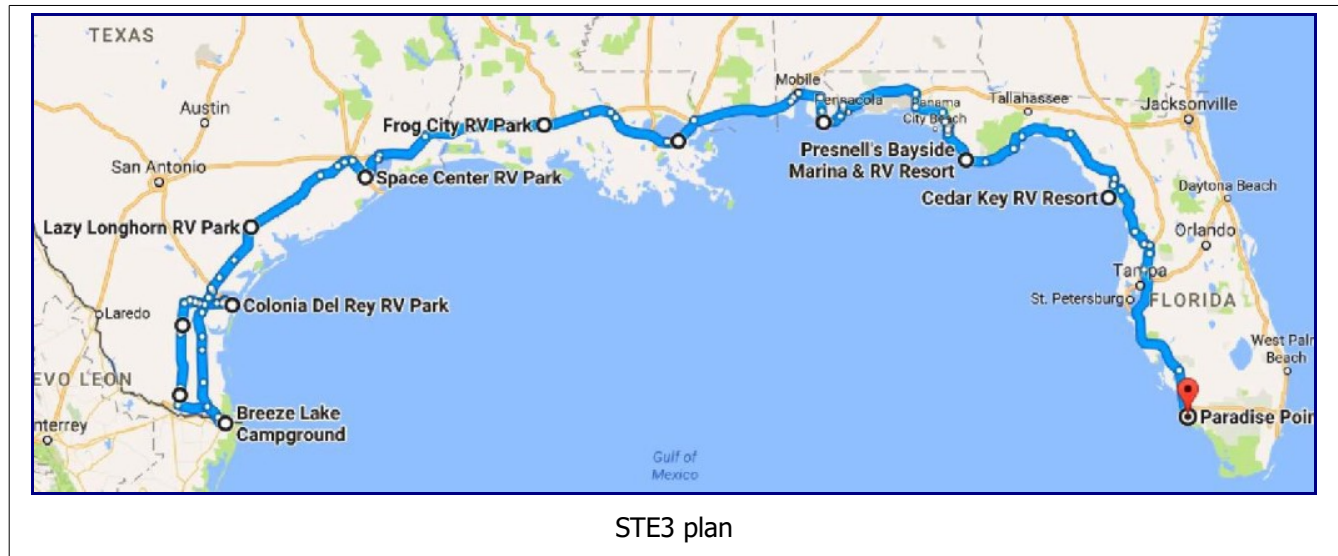
Highlights:

- The Rocky Mountains. Hopefully I will be able to enjoy them without dodging snowflakes.
- Denver.
- [The Osage Nation Museum](#).
- Austin TX and possibly a dinner at [Café Malta](#), the fine restaurant owned by Jett's nephew.
- Corpus Christi and the Texas coast recently ravished by Hurricane Harvey. If the damage is too severe we may have to bypass this area. Hope not.



STE2 plan

STE3: Corpus Christi TX to Naples FL



10 hops, 1871 miles, 18 nights.

This will be a lot of miles in relatively few hops. I expect that we will be exhausted by the time we arrive in Naples. But we will have at least 5 months to recover.

Highlights:

- South Padre Island. We want to check out the RV parks in the area.
- Mission TX. Ditto.
- Galveston TX. Again, we may have to bypass this area if the damage is too severe.
- New Orleans. Jett has been there but I haven't. It will be a nice day trip.
- Gulf of Mexico parks in Gulf Shores AL, Port St Joe and Cedar Key FL.

STW3 wrapup

30 Sep 2017

The third and final segment of the Second Trip West ended at Tillamook OR. We spent 5 nights there at the [Tillamook Bay City RV Park](#). This is a basic park that we chose because it was close to Tillamook and it had cable TV. Very good cable TV - like 90 channels. There were a couple of must-see shows scheduled for those nights. Besides, we stayed at a lot of parks on the STW that not only had no cable, but had no over-the-air reception either. There were quite a few nights when we used the TV to play DVDs. I guess we had a TV deficit.

The last night at the park our neighbors were a French couple traveling in a huge, heavy-duty RV unlike anything I have ever seen in person before, but which looked very much like a unit that was featured on one of those "mega RV" TV shows. If I recall, the unit cost upwards of \$1 million and could travel just about anywhere. A ladder with 6 steps was needed to reach the door. The unit was brought over on a ship. I had to wonder how much it cost to transport it across the Atlantic, but I guess if you can afford the RV the cost of shipping it is not an issue.

The other interesting feature of the park was a new yurt - kind of a Mongolian teepee with a wooden floor. The one at Tillamook/Bay City was very nice, with a plastic cap that let light in and could be raised to let smoke out.

Someday I am going to have to get a closer look at one of these. Just get a look - I don't actually have to stay in one. But maybe I would enjoy it. We'll see.



Mega RV



Yurt

The numbers for STW3: 1095 tow miles in 7 hops and 16 nights. 1698 truck miles. Total campground cost: \$801.60 (\$50.10 per night). The most expensive park, by far, was Yellowstone Grizzly in West Yellowstone MT - \$78.16 per night.

The highlights:

- [Yellowstone National Park](#). Old Faithful was a treat, but the unexpected encounter with a huge herd of buffalo was even better.
- [Mt Saint Helens](#). This was a long day trip, but it was great seeing the mountain fully recovered after 35 years.
- Tillamook. I got in a nice round of golf at [Alderbrook Golf Course](#) and we had some great times with my sister and her husband.

The lowlights:

- The weather. Starting with the 2" snowfall in West Yellowstone, the cold, mostly dreary weather dogged us until we got to Mt Saint Helens. It was more like late fall than late summer.
- Missing out on seeing my niece and nephews in Tillamook. I was really hoping to see some, if not all of them. And I was very interested in meeting my new grand nephew. But all were busy - and some were in Europe - so I completely struck out on seeing them.
- The flat tire in Ennis. This was not a typical flat tire due to a nail in the road; this was me kicking the valve stem and deflating the tire. But AAA came to the rescue and put the spare on.
- Nearly losing the spare while rolling down I-90 at 70 mph. The AAA guy didn't tighten the lugnuts enough and the tire came close - too damn close - to falling off while we were traveling.

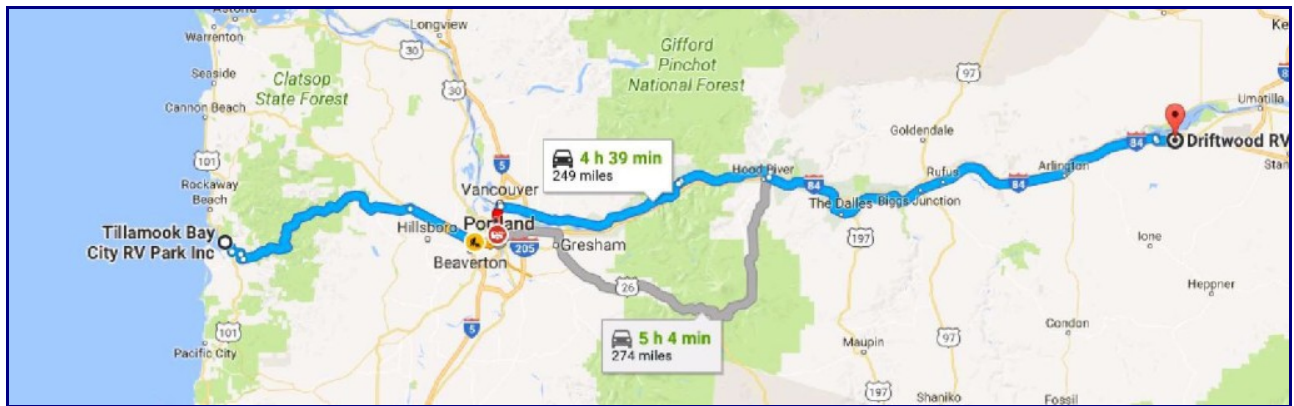
I guess the fact that I have more lowlights than highlights mark this as the least "successful" of the three STW segments. But we made it to Tillamook unscathed so I have to say that we did okay.

Final tally for the STW:

- 4158 tow miles
- 6933 truck miles
- 59 days
- \$2896.32 in campground fees (\$49.09 per night)

STE1 Hop 1: Tillamook OR to Boardman OR

30 Sep 2017



STE1 Hop 1

239 miles via US 101, OR 6, I-405 and I-5 (in Portland) and I-84 through the Columbia Gorge, with a refueling stop.



Columbia River in the Gorge

The drama of this hop is captured in the map above, which is incorrect. Google insisted, up until the moment we left Tillamook, that I-84 was closed through the Columbia Gorge due to a wildfire. I could not find any

corroboration for that. To the contrary, the Oregon DOT website reported that I-84 was open and had been open for nearly a week. I can't explain Google's inability to change the status because it is usually pretty good about this. But, because I couldn't get an accurate map, we had to first route ourselves to the refueling stop (a Love's truck stop just east of Portland), then continue on I-84 east.

I-84 east was, indeed, open. However, it also had some significant construction that cost us about 30 minutes of nasty traffic. The result was that his hop took nearly 5.5 hours - one of the longest, time-wise, hops on this entire trip. And most of it was done in rain.

Not a fun hop.

I did get one decent photo at a rest stop in the gorge.

STE1 Hop 2: Boardman OR to Huntington OR

2 Oct 2017

198 miles via I-84 and US 201. Cumulative tow miles: 437. Truck miles: 211. Cumulative truck miles: 450.

We started this hop at an elevation near 500' and ended at 2100'. But in getting to Huntington we had a couple of heavy climbs, one topping out at over 4500'. It was a more strenuous hop than I had expected.

But the weather was fine and the road (I-84) was very smooth, unlike the I-84 in CT that we detest. And there was a conveniently placed rest stop on the first climb, just east of Pendleton, at the ominously named [Deadman's Pass](#).

This pass appears on the list of "most dangerous roads" in America. It wasn't all that dangerous in good weather, but I sure wouldn't want to traverse it in snow.

But it did have a nice view.

Our home for one night in Boardman OR was the [Driftwood RV Resort](#). This was an interesting park in certain respects. Most notably, it had an indoor pool - just the 4th park we have found with that amenity. It also had flies, which were really annoying. On the morning of our departure I killed over 20 flies inside the RV. I don't know how they got in as I have never had that problem before or since. Maybe through the seams in the slides?

We were happy that we didn't stay longer. Because of the flies we would probably avoid this park in the future.



STE1 Hop 2



View from Deadman's Pass



Another view from Deadman's Pass

STE1 Hop 3: Huntington OR to Jerome ID

3 Oct 2017

200 miles, almost totally on I-84. Cumulative tow miles: 634. Truck miles: 224. Cumulative truck miles: 674.

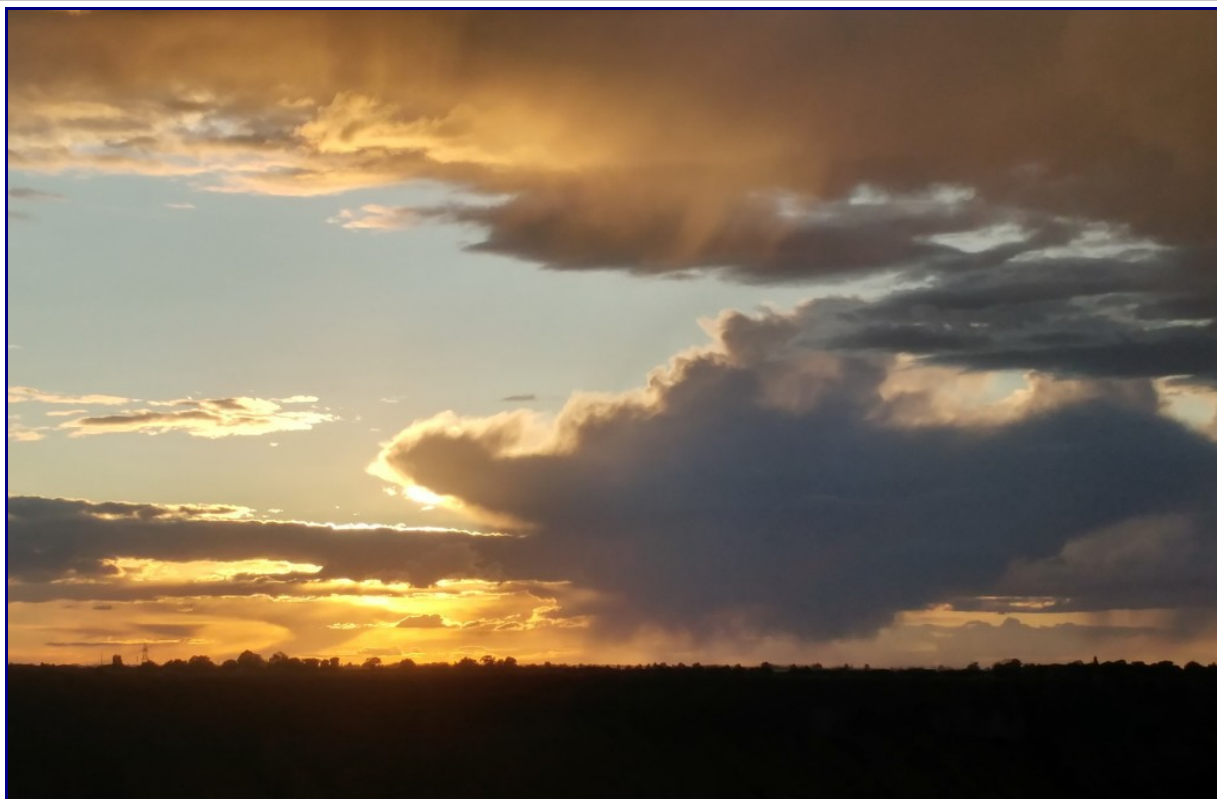
Another easy navigation hop: get on I-84 east, drive about 200 miles, get off. There was a bit of construction, but the delays were minimal. Weather was good, scenery was gorgeous. A very pleasant hop. For me, anyway.

For Jett the hop was pure misery. She was not feeling well and it was all she could do to keep from vomiting while I drove. We got to Jerome (just a few miles from Twin Falls) and she fell into bed. Fortunately, after a couple of hours of sleep she felt better. In fact, she felt so well that she sent me out to get some Italian food for dinner. On the way I took a shot of an awesome sunset.



STE1 Hop 3

The gorge cut by the Snake River just north of Twin Falls is also pretty impressive. I don't think my photos adequately captured its grandeur due to the twilight lighting, but if you ever get to Twin Falls definitely check it out.



Sunset in Twin Falls

We stayed two nights in Huntington OR at the [Catfish Junction RV Park](#). When we arrived my first impression was that we were stuck in the middle of nowhere and was regretting booking two nights. But the setting, near a bend in the Snake River, is incredibly beautiful, with ever-changing cloud patterns. I think it is arguably the most beautiful place we have ever been. I got dozens of great photos, only a few of which are included here.

I had to travel to Weiser ID to refuel. I did this on Sunday around noon and found a city more tightly shut down than any I have seen in decades. Not a soul on the streets and not a single establishment open for business - not the sports bar where I was planning on watching the Patriots/Panthers game and not the gas station where I was planning on getting fuel. Fortunately the pumps at the gas station were operational so I was able to accomplish that goal. And I found a little bar over the river in Oregon where I could catch highlights of the game on the NFL Channel. But I have to say that Weiser was downright spooky.

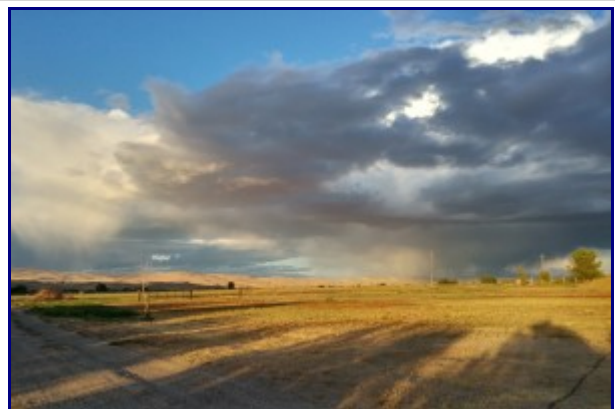
Oh - the Patriots lost. That is twice now that I have sought out a bar to watch the game and twice that they have lost. I don't think I will try to watch them in a bar again.



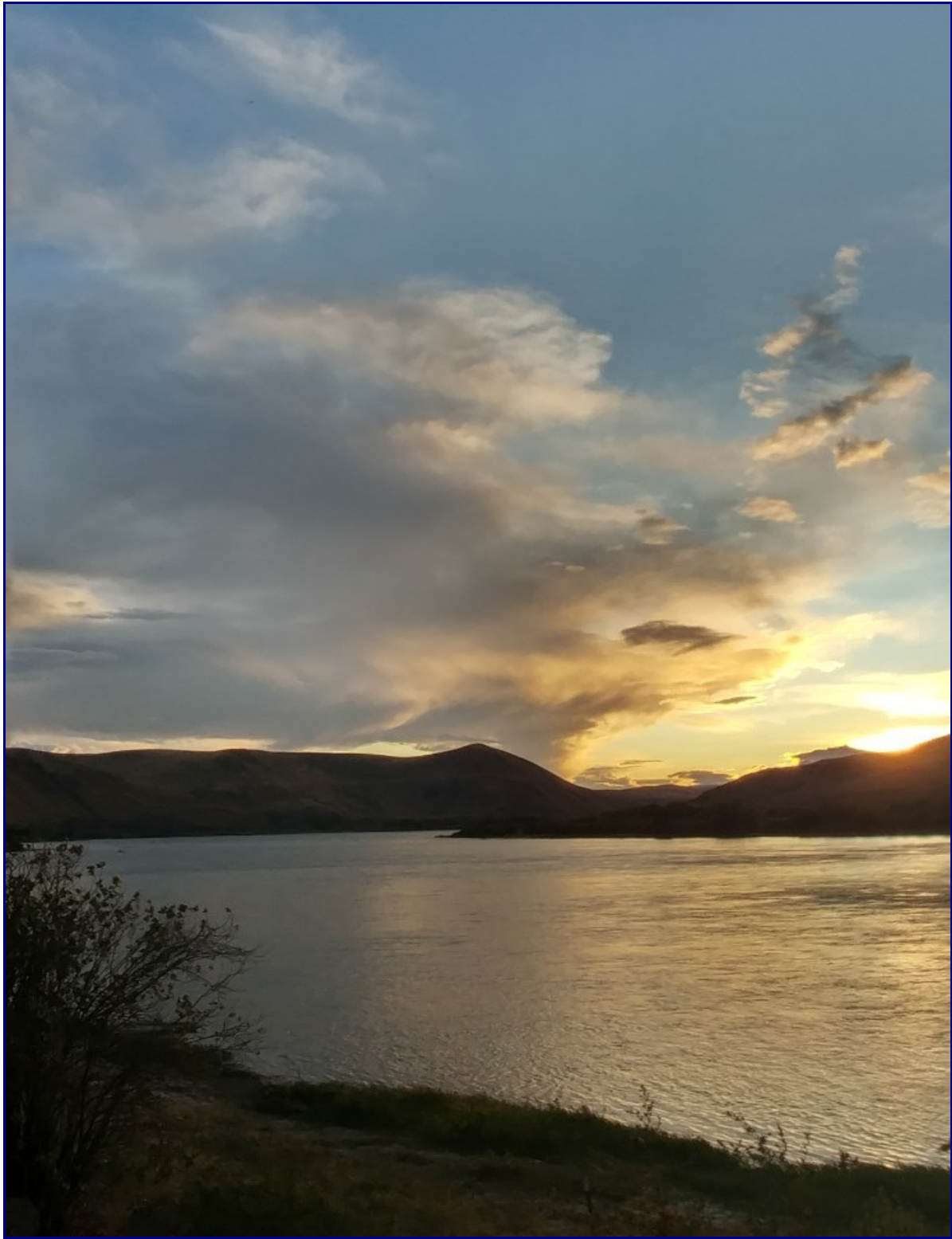
The bend on a sunny day



The bend, Tuesday morning



Sunshine and showers



Sunset on the bend



Rainbow



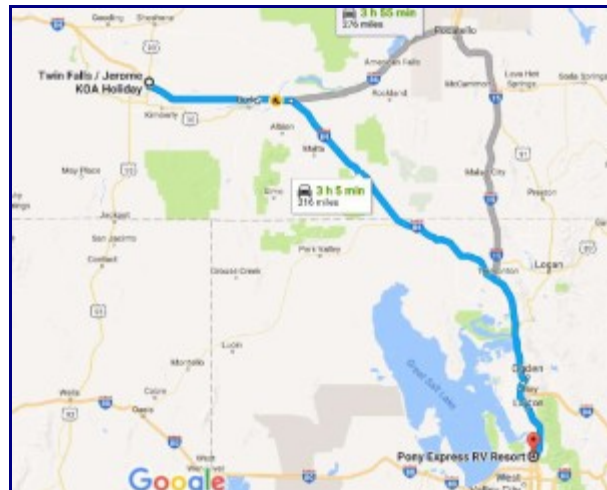
Sunset on the mountains

STE1 Hop 4: Jerome ID to N Salt Lake City UT

4 Oct 2017

217 miles on I-84, I-15 and local roads, with a refueling stop. Cumulative tow miles: 854. Truck miles: 244. Cumulative truck miles: 918.

Again, easy navigation (Jett loves these hops!). Again, beautiful scenery. There were some climbs, but no overly taxing ones. So I really don't understand why our gas mileage was so poor. Normally our one-tank range is about 240 miles, so I didn't plan a refueling stop for this hop. But it became apparent, as we approached the outskirts of Ogden, that we would be on fumes when and if we arrived. So we pulled off and got 10 gallons at a Pilot truck stop in Ogden. Not a big deal, but disappointing and a bit puzzling.



STE1 Hop 4

Our overnight home was the [Twin Falls/Jerome KOA](#). KOA is always decent, never spectacular. Unfortunately, KOA sites are always cramped. I like KOA for overnights because they are predictable, but I would avoid them for long-term stays.

As I mentioned previously, I caught a spectacular sunset in Twin Falls while I was out trying to get Italian food for dinner (which I did, at [Tomato's](#) - quite good). I also got a glimpse of the spectacular Snake River gorge as it snaked (get it?) through Twin Falls. Other than that I went out three separate times to get supplies and fuel: to Walmart for food, to the local Phillips 66 and TA truck stop for cigarettes (cheaper than NH!) and back to TA for propane because KOA couldn't fill my tank until the afternoon.

I needed the propane because I woke up at 4am in a room so cold I could have had icicles on my nose. The propane had run out, so I had to go outside - temperature 29 - and switch my propane tanks. That only took a minute, but no one wants to go outside, at 4am, in his pajamas, in sub-freezing cold. Yes, the water line nearly froze (a trickle for a minute before it broke loose) and frost on the windshield when I went out on my morning errands.

Florida can't come soon enough.



Our site



Snake River gorge

Salt Lake City

7 Oct 2017

We spent four days in Salt Lake City and didn't really get a chance to do any sightseeing until the last day. We didn't take the 45-minute tour of Temple Square because the website told us that we had to book a day in advance. Not true, but even when given the opportunity to join one we declined. No tour enters the sacred Temple and we got plenty of information about each building - the two visitor centers, the Tabernacle, the Temple and the Assembly Hall - from the dozens of volunteers who staffed each one. We saw everything we wanted to see. The highlight was the Tabernacle, home of the famous [Mormon Tabernacle Choir](#). It looks like a domed gymnasium, which was a surprise to me. An even bigger surprise was that the Tabernacle was built first and existed at the time the building of the Temple got underway in 1850. Who built domed buildings in the 19th century?



Christ among the stars



The Tabernacle



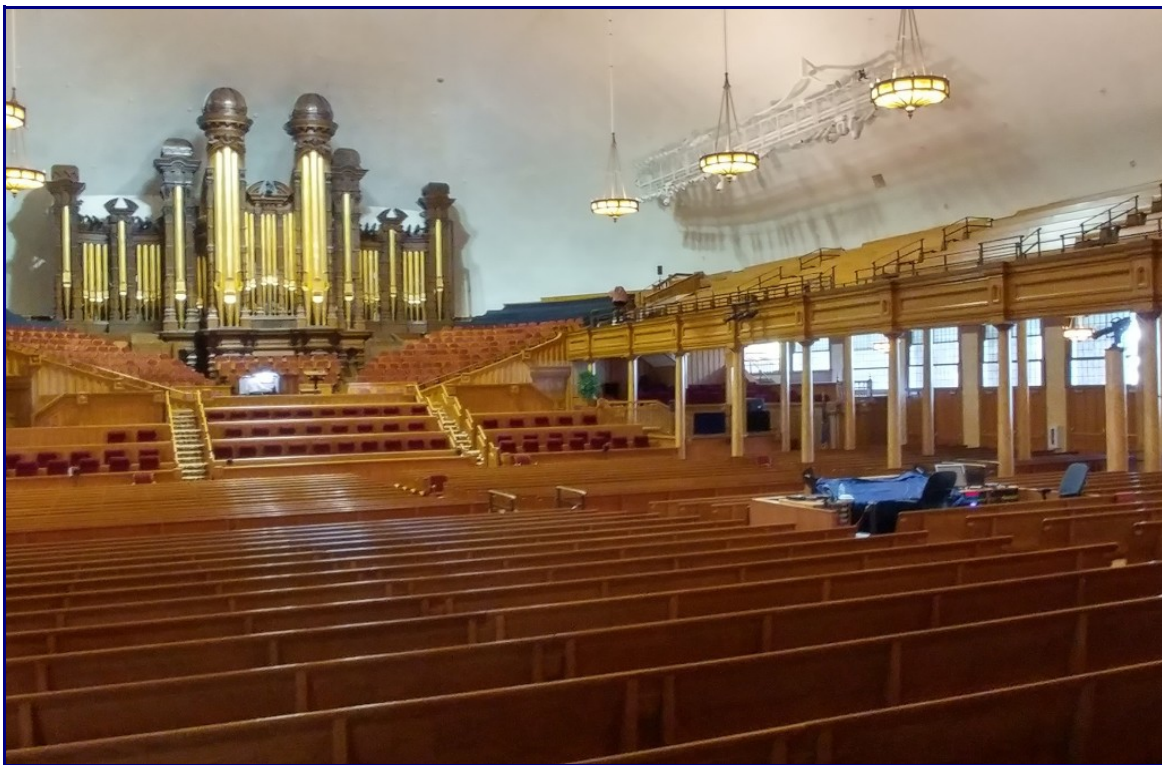
Cutaway model of the Temple

The interiors of both the Tabernacle and the Assembly Hall were beautiful, somewhat reminiscent of the interiors of the colonial churches in Boston - the [Old South Church](#) and [King's Chapel](#). The Assembly Hall had a spiral staircase that intrigued both Jett and me. We didn't ask where it led.

Though entry into the Temple was prohibited, a very detailed cutaway model of the Temple is offered in the South Visitors Center, in front of a window facing the Temple so that you can look at the model and then look at the full-sized building. Very interesting model and a very nice presentation.

I also liked the [Handcart Pioneer statue](#). Having driven some very long hops to get to Salt Lake City, I fully appreciated the effort it took to walk all the way, pulling a heavy handcart. Incredible achievement.

We also used our day in Salt Lake City to check out the [City Creek Center](#) mall, a very nice urban mall adjacent to Temple Square.



Inside the Tabernacle



Jett, puzzled by the staircase



Details of the Temple model



The Temple



The Temple from the Tabernacle



Handcart statue



Inside Assembly Hall



Assembly Hall



Temple Square gardens



LDS office building



City Creek Mall

STE1 Hop 5: N Salt Lake City UT to Salina UT

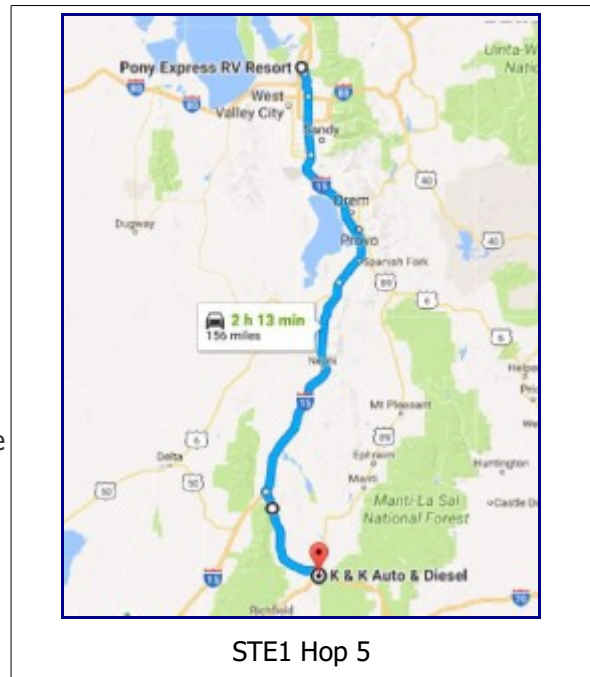
8 Oct 2017

157 miles via I-15, UT 50 and local roads. Cumulative tow miles: 1011. Truck miles: 226. Cumulative truck miles: 1144.

This was not the hop that I planned because the truck failed us when we got to Salina. Everything was fine until I got to a stop sign where UT 50 took a left into town. Stepped on the gas... nothing. Just some funny noises

from the engine. It was still running but no power whatsoever. I looked at the dashboard and, sure enough, the "check engine" light was on. Shades of Stony Brook VA where we had a problem with the electrical connection to injector #7 about 2 years ago. I shut off the engine for a minute, restarted it and had enough power to complete the left turn and get into a service station. The attendant there gave me a number to call. Got a guy who told me to take the rig to K&K Auto Service about a mile away. Drove the rig there and found a guy who diagnosed the problem - injector #2 - but was unable to fix it (not a diesel guy). He reset the code and we tried to move on, but the problem recurred immediately.

We have been very lucky when we have had problems with the rig on the road. We made it through our early blowouts relatively unscathed (though the RV took some hits), with no change to our itinerary. Even the injector problem in Stony Brook, though it delayed us by a day, turned out surprisingly well as a mechanic in a little shop in a little town was able to diagnose and fix the issue for a low cost.



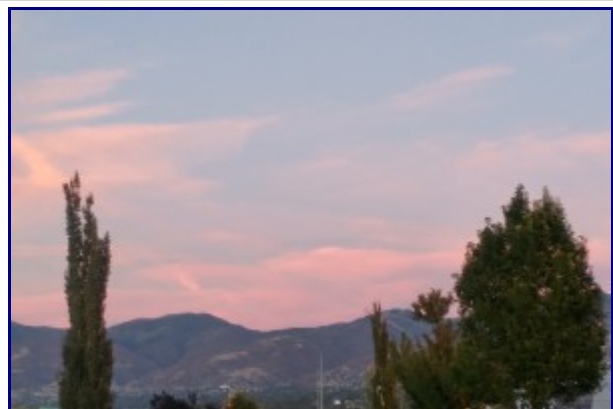
STE1 Hop 5

I have to say that our luck is still holding. We could easily have been stranded in the middle of nowhere (and there is a lot of nowhere in southern Utah). But the truck was gracious enough to break down in a place where we could deal with a serious problem with minimal discomfort. While we were unable to get to Richfield, 15 miles distant, where there is a GMC dealer, the K&K shop is adjacent to an RV park that had vacancies. We were able to hook up and settle in for a very nice dinner (filet mignon - a treat we felt we deserved) and, surprisingly, TV. While this little park - which appears in no travel guides - had no cable, it had surprisingly good over-the-air TV reception. On our bedroom TV (which always pulls in more channels than the living room TV - don't ask me why) we got 25 channels, all with good signal strength. That, to me, is mind-boggling. Salina is in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by mountains. Where are the TV towers?

So we are safe and warm for the weekend. I will take the truck back to K&K first thing on Monday and see if the diesel guy can solve my problem. Otherwise I will drive the 15 miles to the GMC dealer and see if they can help. Best case: we are able to move on to Kanab UT on Monday after a quick, cheap fix. Worse case: we stay in Salina for another day or two and have to adjust our itinerary while GMC figures out the problem.



View from the park entrance



Sunset over the mountains

I did have to cancel the two nights that we were planning on staying in Bryce Canyon, which puts my visit to Bryce Canyon at risk. But if we make it to Kanab on Monday I can make a day trip to Bryce Canyon in place of my planned day trip to the north rim of the Grand Canyon. But the RV park in Bryce Canyon didn't penalize us

for the late cancellation - they took pity on us and wished us well. Nice!

I have posted my photos from Salt Lake City, but haven't mentioned our RV park there - the Pony Express RV Resort. We really liked this park. Huge sites with concrete pads, very nice facilities, very well-maintained. A dog park that Rusty loved. Only about 15 minutes to downtown Salt Lake City. It suited our needs very well.

It wasn't the most scenic park, however. We were adjacent to I-215 (the beltway around Salt Lake City) and our view was mostly of a huge gravel pit and a Chevron refinery. But the sunsets were very nice and, not surprisingly, the weather was very clear (the area averages 72% of possible sunshine in October).

One surprise for us was our failure to get even a glimpse of the Great Salt Lake. It is a huge lake and I thought it would be a prominent feature in the region - like Lake Michigan in Chicago. But it is kept well hidden and doesn't figure into the geographical attractiveness of the area at all. The snow-capped mountains that hover over the city, on the other hand, dominate.

With our stay in North Salt Lake, we were able to add Utah to our map. Number 45. 3 to go.



#45 - UT



Sunset over I-215

Breakdown update

9 Oct 2017

We are, tonight, sleeping for a third night in a place we never intended to visit - Salina UT. The truck had some kind of major electrical problem which prevented it from running smoothly. Compounding that problem was our older battery (the truck has 2) which decided to pile on and fail. I was unable to even start the truck this morning (in 30-degree temperatures, with frost on the windshield) to drive it 100 yards to the repair shop. It just barely turned over and acted as if both batteries were completely drained. When I tried to start it again, about 15 seconds later, it started fine, no problem at all. But the clock had been reset because the voltage had gone so low, temporarily, that it couldn't keep its time. Weird.

Anyway, I got the truck to the shop around 9am. Fortunately they were actually working today (Columbus Day). But the mechanic admitted that he had never worked on a DuraMax engine and from what he could see of the problem the cylinder head would have to be removed - very expensive! He recommended that I have it towed 20 miles to Richfield to the GMC dealer there.

I called the GMC dealership and they agreed to take a look, but made no promises on when it could be worked on. Lacking any other options, I loaded the truck onto a flatbed for a \$150 mile trip to the dealership.



Our baby on the flatbed

I told the dealership that I would need a rental car, assuming that there was no possibility that they would be able to diagnose and fix the problem in one afternoon. They gave me the number of the local Enterprise office. I called. No cars. Maybe some later today. I left my number and asked them to call me back when they had a car.

Being noon and having nothing better to do, I walked the 1.5 miles to the Enterprise office. Closed for lunch. So I walked over to a drive-in diner and had a decent lunch. After lunch I checked the Enterprise office again. Still closed. So I walked the half mile to the only other car rental place in town, housed at the local Ford dealership. They had cars, so I rented one, drove to the nearby Walmart to do a bit of shopping, then drove back to the GMC dealership where they were busy diagnosing my problem. I sat and waited and an hour later - around 2:30pm - the service manager came to me, said they think they had found the problem and could fix it in about 1.5 hours. I gave my blessing.

I got the truck back around 4:30 and immediately set off on a 10-mile test drive on local streets and I-70. Everything seemed fine. However, I won't be convinced that the problem is truly fixed until I try towing the RV. So tomorrow morning we are going to hitch up, travel the 20 miles to the GMC dealership and, if everything is fine, pick up the rental car, return it and set off on the next leg of our journey.

If we have problems during that towing test drive we will limp to whatever RV campground is most convenient, unhitch, drive the truck back to the dealership, leave it for additional diagnostics, pick up the car and return to the RV.

And settle in for however long it takes.

The electrical problem was caused by a faulty injector connector. Cost of the part: \$89. Cost of the new battery: \$124. Total cost, with tow: about \$600. Not cheap but cheaper than any kind of fix that would have required removal of the cylinder head.

Needless to say, we are praying that the problem is truly fixed. We want to continue on our way. It is becoming rather urgent that we get across the Rockies soon: Denver had 4 inches of snow last night.

Keeping fingers crossed for a successful test drive tomorrow...

Oh - I am still waiting for Enterprise to call back.

STE1 Hop 6: Salina UT to Moab UT

10 Oct 2017



199 miles via US 50, UT 24, UT 118, UT 120, I-70 and US 191. Cumulative tow miles: 1210. Truck miles: 236. Cumulative truck miles: 1380.

This hop was not in the original plan. The basic trip - Salina UT to Moab UT - was the result of chopping out Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks and Monument Valley. They were chopped because I just didn't trust the truck enough to take it into such desolate places. And the breakdown had cost us 3 days of schedule. So straight to Moab, arriving 4 days earlier than originally planned. We will likely use those days in STE2 and STE3 as those segments had a lot of 1-night stays, which are never fun.



I-70 near Devil's Canyon. Scary.

But Salina to Moab is only about 160 miles. The other 40 miles was basically a shakedown trip down to Richfield UT and back. I had rented a car on Monday, thinking that the truck would not be fixed. When the GMC dealer unexpectedly found and fixed the problem in one afternoon, I kept the car, thinking that I would hang onto it until I tested the truck with a short tow. So 20 miles down to Richfield - no problem. Pick up the car, return it to the rental agency, get our propane tanks filled, then back up to Salina to top off. Then, finally, off on the hop east on I-70.

I had never traveled I-70 through Utah before and it was a revelation. Simply beautiful. Jett took photo after photo because every bend in the road presented a new vista. We also stopped at a number of scenic overlooks, both to take some photos and to give the truck a rest. There were two tough hauls up and over passes that exceeded 7500 feet.



Devil's Canyon overlook



Pinyon tree?

Our (unexpected) home for 3 nights was "RV Camp" - an unnamed, unadvertised, tiny 20-site camp that was conveniently located behind the K & K Auto Service shop where we first had our truck problem diagnosed. It was very fortunate that we didn't have to go any further to unhitch because the truck was a very sick puppy at that point on Saturday afternoon. Even though K & K was unable to fix the problem on Monday, they had a flatbed that could take the truck down to the GMC dealership in Richfield UT.



First overlook



Salt wash overlook



At RV Camp



View north from RV Camp

The park had no amenities, but had a wonderful, welcoming host (thanks for everything, Stacy) and it kept us warm, safe and very comfortable during a very difficult time.

Canyonlands National Park

12 Oct 2017

[Canyonlands National Park](#) is one of two national parks near Moab UT, the other being Arches National Park. I visited both, but I went to Canyonlands first, yesterday morning, because the day started out cloudy and, since it was farther away - about 30 miles - I figured that it might clear up a bit by the time I got there. I was right.



Shafer Canyon



Overlook of White Rim Trail

Canyonlands is not one of the better-known parks. It is a bit difficult to get to. You first have to find your way to the Moab area, which is 30 miles from I-70. Then you have to drive over 20 miles up a dead-end road to even reach the gate. Before you get there signs warn you that there are no restaurants, no gas stations, no water in the park. The only service provided is toilets. Primitive toilets. This is not a hospitable park.

But it is beautiful.



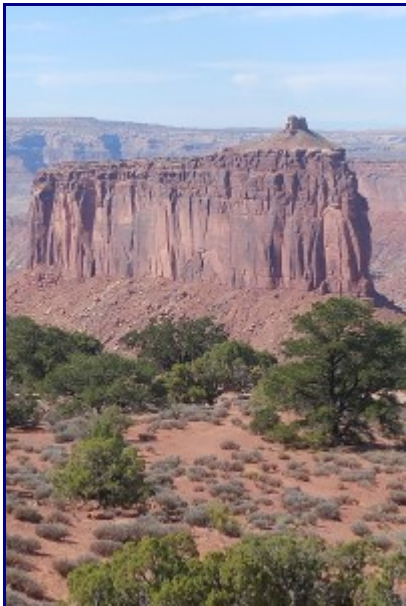
Red walls



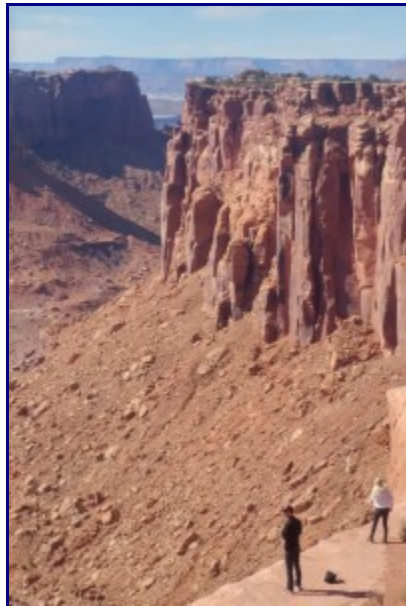
Far and deep



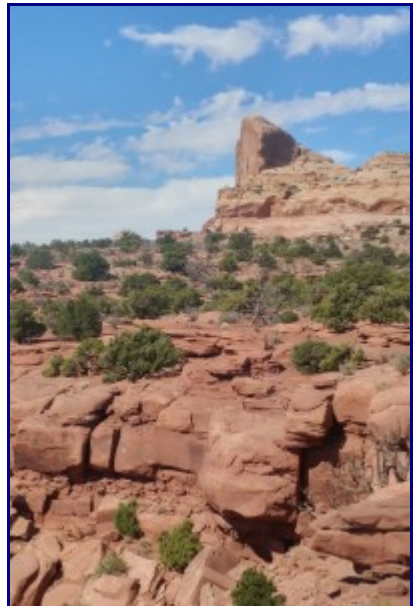
Vista



Candlestick Tower?



Long way down



Some lookup up too

I really liked this park. I think it is arguably as interesting as Grand Canyon National Park. And more varied in its vistas. It has both towering rock monoliths and gaping canyons. And it has something that the Grand Canyon does not have - challenging offroad trails. The White Rim Trail is a 100-mile trail around the rim of the lower canyons. It is flat and is probably not a challenging drive, but the length of the loop and the isolation of the area (the park warns that, should your vehicle become disabled, towing charges could exceed \$2,000) would make it an intense driving experience - probably a multi-day experience.

I should note that the park is huge with several distinct "units". I visited the most popular and most accessible unit, the "Island in the Sky" which offers a 17-mile (one-way, 34-mile roundtrip) scenic drive in the highest sections of the park. At the point it overlooks the White Rim Trail it is probably more than 1,000 feet above the trail.

Anyway, I will let the photos tell you how much I liked the park.



Monitor and Merrimac



Canyon



Buck Canyon overlook



Edge of the canyon

Arches National Park

14 Oct 2017

I visited [Arches National Park](#) twice - by myself late afternoon on Thursday and with Jett Friday around noon. The second visit was to give Jett an opportunity to see this beautiful park, but I also wanted to take a look at the "Windows" area, which I had skipped when I ran out of time on Thursday. Besides, Friday was even clearer than Thursday.

The roads in the park were being resurfaced, which made it more difficult to get around. Some areas - most notably the "Park Avenue" area - were totally closed, which was disappointing. But the park has so many features that there was still plenty to see.



Devils Garden



Windows Arch

The entrance to the park is flat, but it immediately transitions into a climb up the side of a cliff. In less than a mile the road rises over 500 feet, producing a panoramic view of the Moab Valley. From there it flattens out and

the rest of the 18 mile ride is relatively flat and easy, with just one additional drop - maybe 200 feet - into a valley.

Many of the arches require a walk to get close. Jett wasn't interested in any hikes and I was pressed for time on Thursday, so I only did two hikes. The first was about a half mile up to a promontory, to view the Delicate Arch. I found that view disappointing and probably not worth the effort. The second hike was about a quarter mile, into a chasm containing the Sand Dune Arch. That hike was eerie and definitely worth the effort. But I found myself wishing I could find a time when the lighting was better. But with the chasm being as deep as it is, there may never be a time when it gets direct sunlight.



Sand Dune Arch



Plains vista



Tower of Babel?



Distant view of Delicate Arch



Colorful valley



Moab Valley vista



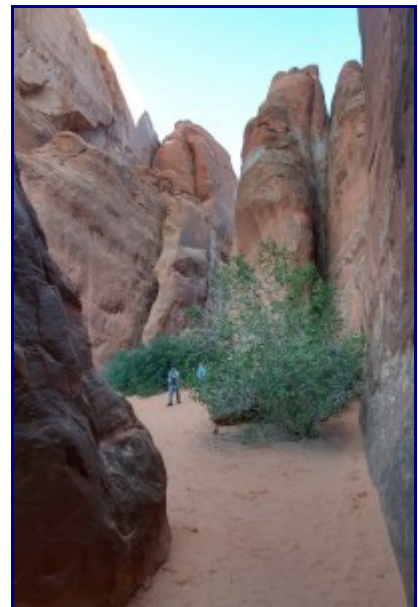
"We Three Kings"



Climbers



Near Sand Dune Arch



Chasm to Sand Dune Arch



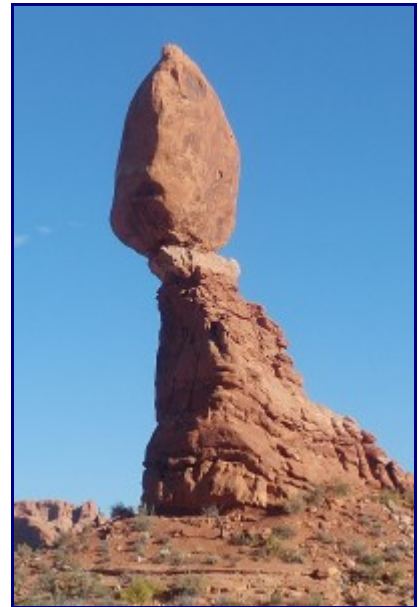
Courthouse Towers



Phallic rock



Obelisk pair



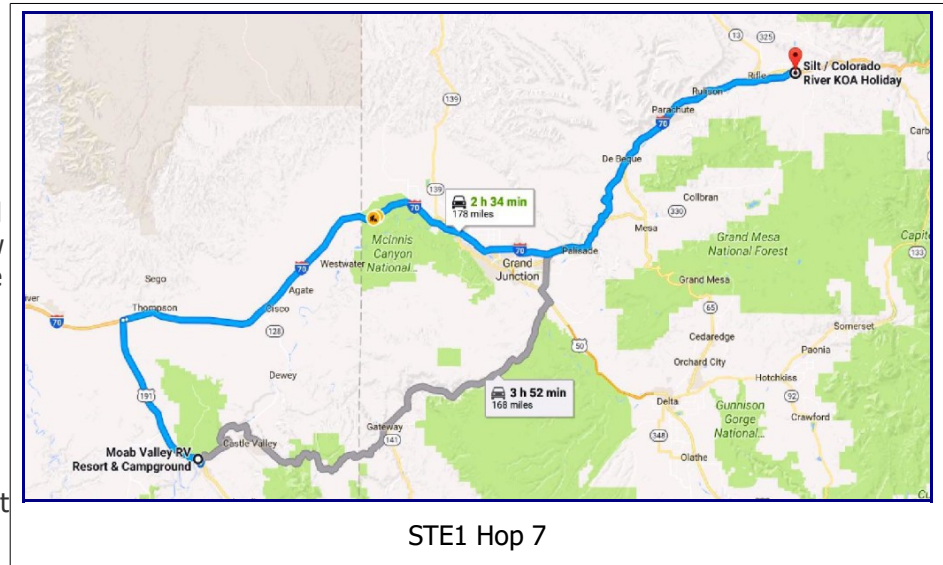
Balanced Rock

STE1 Hop 7: Moab UT to Silt CO

14 Oct 2017

179 miles via UT 191 and I-70.
Cumulative tow miles: 1389.
Truck miles: 379. Cumulative truck miles: 1759.

The best thing about the trip to Moab was that the truck handled the load just fine. Every hop now increases my confidence that the truck repairs actually fixed the problem. Still, we have decided to avoid the 11,000-foot pass on I-70; the last hop in STE1 will be north to Rawlins WY. We can go straight to Nebraska from there over a less demanding 8,500-foot pass.



The weather on this hop was clear but very hazy. I think it was just due to atmospheric conditions, but I can't rule out the possibility that part of it was smoke from the California wildfires.

The high truck miles were due to the visits to the national parks - Canyonlands and Arches (twice). I have blogged about those trips separately.

The other feature of the stay in Moab was Moab itself. The Colorado River canyon on the edge of Moab was very beautiful. And the RV park had mule deer that weren't intimidated by our presence. Rusty and I encountered them twice. Rusty was very interested but, surprisingly, did not bark at them.

We stayed 3 nights at the [Moab Valley RV Resort](#). We booked late due to the truck problems and they could accommodate us for only 2 nights. They found a place for us for the third night, but we had to move. I think that is a first in our travels. I suppose you could even call it a "hop" - of about a tenth of a mile.

The park was nice, but a bit cramped. I got an "extra vehicle" space for the truck, to keep its butt from hanging out on the campground road. There was a \$5 fee (per night) for the space, which was waived for the first 2 nights. The staff person I dealt with when paying for the third night wasn't so generous.

The park was right on a road so it was a bit noisy. But a red cliff also loomed over it, which made it kind of exotic. I guess overall we liked it and would return.

We also liked Moab. We only took one trip into town and that was for food shopping. There were some interesting restaurants but the only establishment we visited was Denny's. Sometimes you just need a Moons Over My Hammy.



Out site, first 2 nights



Colorado River canyon at dusk



Mule deer



The campground

STE1 Hop 8: Silt CO to Rawlins WY

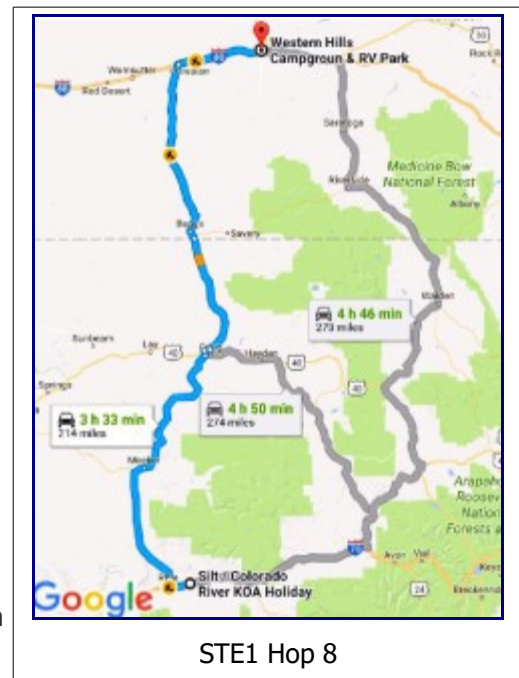
16 Oct 2017

216 miles via I-70, CO 13, WY 789 and I-80. Cumulative tow miles: 1605. Truck miles: . Cumulative truck miles: 2026.

This was a "Plan B" hop. Plan A was to drive from Silt to Denver via I-70. But I scotched that plan after I took a close look at I-70. The mountain passes were extremely high (one at 11,000 feet and another in excess of 10,000 feet) and the road was very narrow and downright dangerous in places. And steep - both going up and coming down. I couldn't be sure that the truck could handle it.

Plan B was to drive north and take I-80 across the Rockies. This hop gets us north; the next hop gets us across the Rockies via an 8500-foot pass. About the same height as the one in Yellowstone, so I know the truck can do it.

One of the downsides of Plan B is that the first half - up to Wyoming - was almost exclusively on 2-lane state highways: 13 in Colorado and 789 in Wyoming. But the route is sparsely populated and lightly traveled. It was a fairly pleasant ride in clear, if cold (mid-50s), weather. It was completed almost non-stop. Just a couple of lights in Craig CO, the only town of any size on the route.



STE1 Hop 8

Our home for the two nights in Colorado was the Silt/Colorado River KOA. This was a pretty basic campground, but the pullthrough sites were large and flat and it was situated on the banks of the Colorado River. The river is not very big at this point, but it flows rapidly - about 5 mph. And since the trees were pretty much in their prime autumn colors, I was able to get a couple of nice river photos. The trees do not have the vivid reds and oranges that New Englanders are used to, but the yellows are very bright.

Because this was our first (and maybe last) stay in Colorado, we were able to add the 46th state to our map.



Colorado River colors at dusk



Silt KOA



#46 - CO

STE1 wrapup

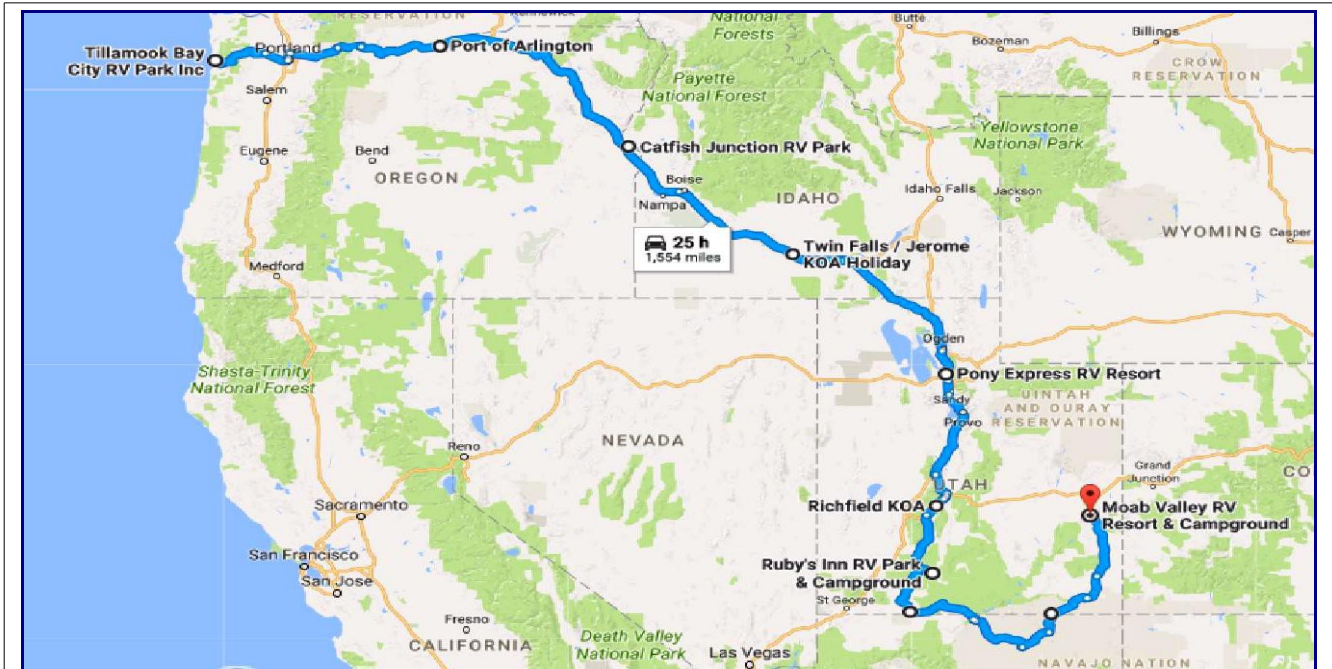
16 Oct 2017

Our one-night stay in Rawlins WY concluded the first segment of the STE. The segment by the numbers:

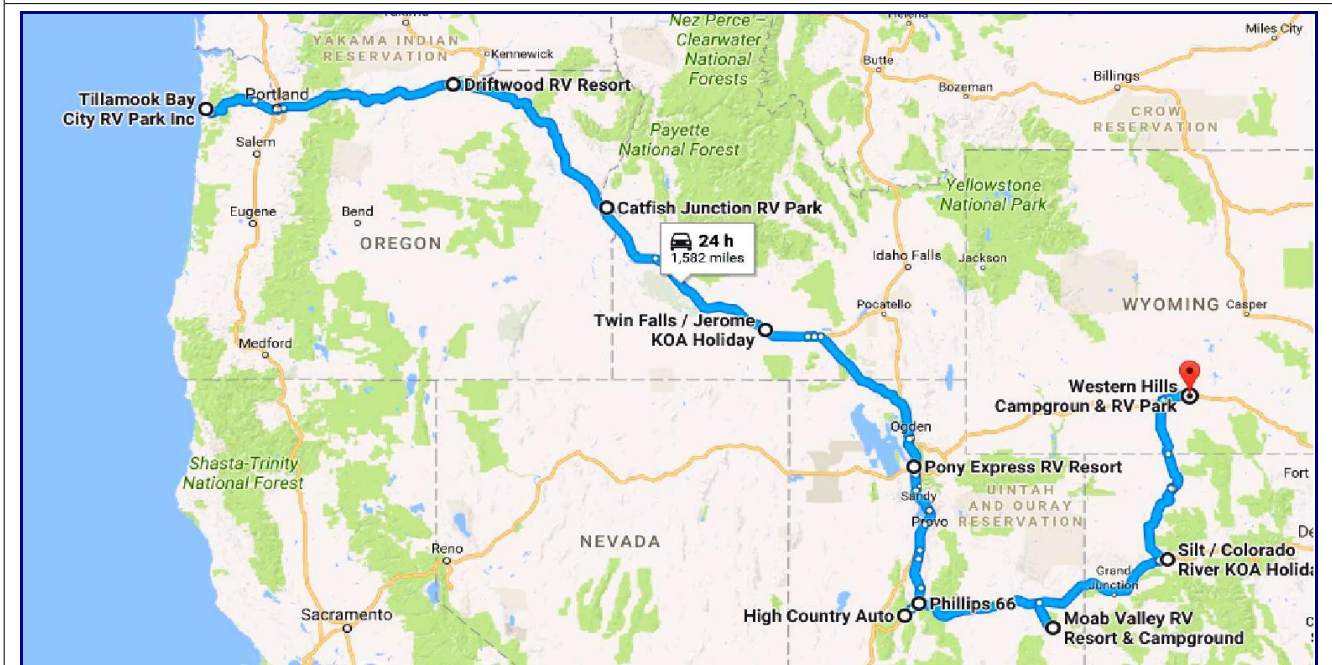
- 8 hops

- 17 nights
- 1605 tow miles
- 2033 truck miles
- \$719.56 in campground fees (\$42.33 per night)

This was not the segment that we planned. The planned versus the actual routes:



STE1 plan



STE1 actual

Highlights:

- Visiting Tillamook again and catching up with my sister and her husband.
- Seeing Canyonlands and Arches National Parks.
- Touring the Mormon Tabernacle and other LDS buildings.
- Catching some incredible sunsets in Oregon and Idaho.
- Getting the truck fixed quickly and relatively painlessly.

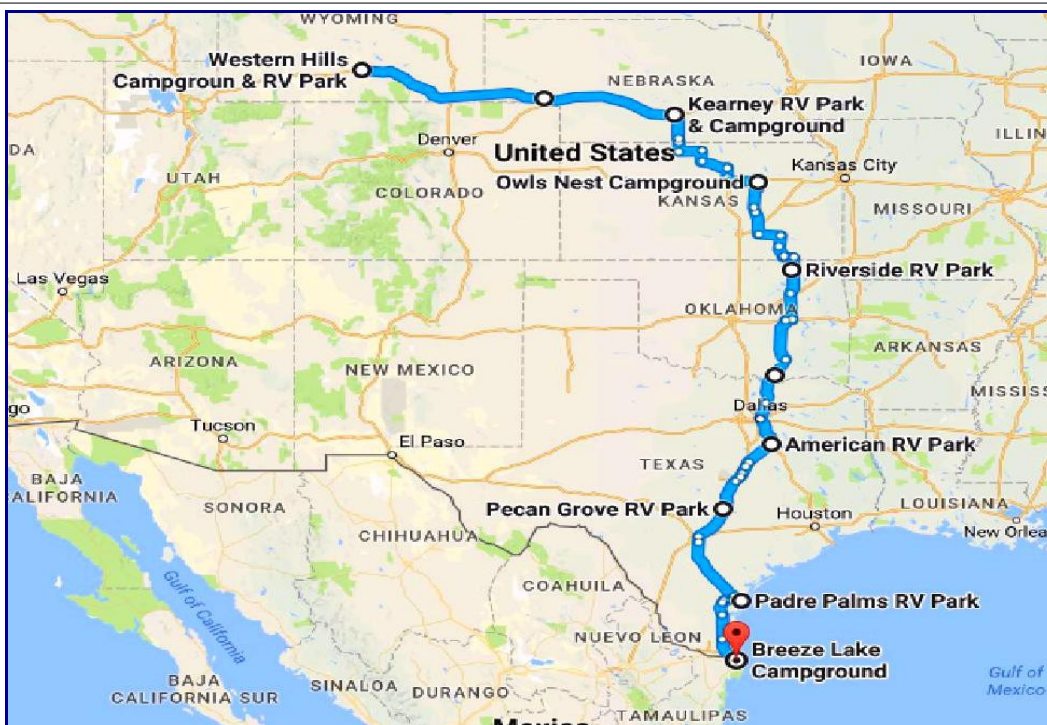
Lowlights:

- Having the truck fail in Salina UT. Fortunately we were able to get to a campground and were safe and warm while we waited for repairs.
- Missing out on Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks due to the truck problem. We also had to skip Monument Valley. All huge disappointments.
- The cold weather. We had to endure a number of sub-freezing nights, including one, in Silt CO, that dropped to 25 degrees. I had to wrestle with a frozen hose to pack up there. We also had to adjust our schedule to avoid snow in Wyoming. In general, this entire segment has been much colder than I expected for early October.

The next segment, STE2, will take us through Nebraska and Kansas, completing our 48-state map. It will also get us down to Oklahoma and Texas and, hopefully, into warmer weather.

STE2 preview

17 Oct 2017



STE2 plan

Due to the truck problems and the decision to avoid the 11,000 foot pass on I-70, the starting point for the second segment of the STE (STE2) has changed significantly. So I thought I had better update the STE2 plan.

It starts in Rawlins WY and terminates in Brownsville TX. It will consist of 9 hops over 19 days for a total towing distance of about 1900 miles. The highlights will be completing our 48-state map and checking out the RV parks in southern Texas to see if we might want to spend a future winter down there. We will also visit the Osage Nation Museum and will see Jett's sister and nephew in Austin.

And, perhaps most importantly, it will be warmer. The chill is really getting to us.

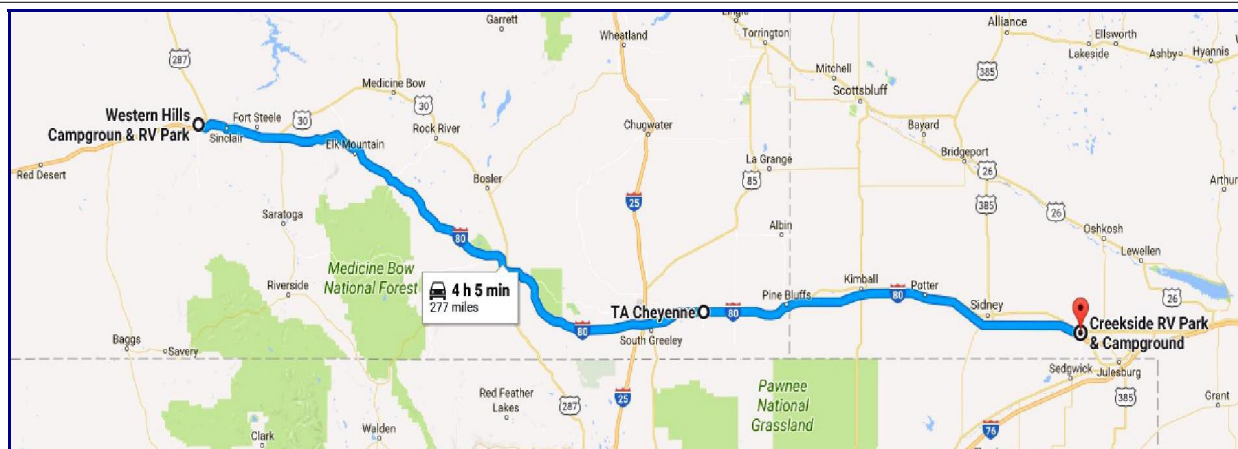
STE2 Hop 1: Rawlins WY to Chappell NE

17 Oct 2017

269 miles almost entirely via I-80, with a refueling stop. Cumulative tow miles: 269. Truck miles: 269. Cumulative truck miles: 269.

This was a very easy navigation hop, but it was a true test of the truck repairs. We passed over the Rockies at 8500 feet. The engine got pretty warm, but didn't overheat. Once over the pass it was a long, slow downhill trip to Chappell NE, elevation 3700 feet. Not only did we get out of the heights, we got a bit warmer, too. It was in the low 70s when we arrived in Chappell. Relief!

We refueled just east of Cheyenne and had a Burger King lunch. A whopper for me. Better than the carrots that I usually get for lunch while traveling.



STE2 Hop 1

Our overnight stay in Rawlins was at the [Western Hills Campground and RV Park](#). This was a gravel parking lot where the only amenities were a dog park and cable TV. But those are the only amenities we care about, so it was fine for an overnight stop. We had dinner at the Golden 8 Chinese Restaurant. It had a very nice buffet for a reasonable price. Not spectacular, but a pretty good meal. Then we took a brief tour of Rawlins before refueling for the next hop. It is an interesting little western town.



Our site in the gravel lot

STE2 Hop 2: Chappell NE to Kearney NE

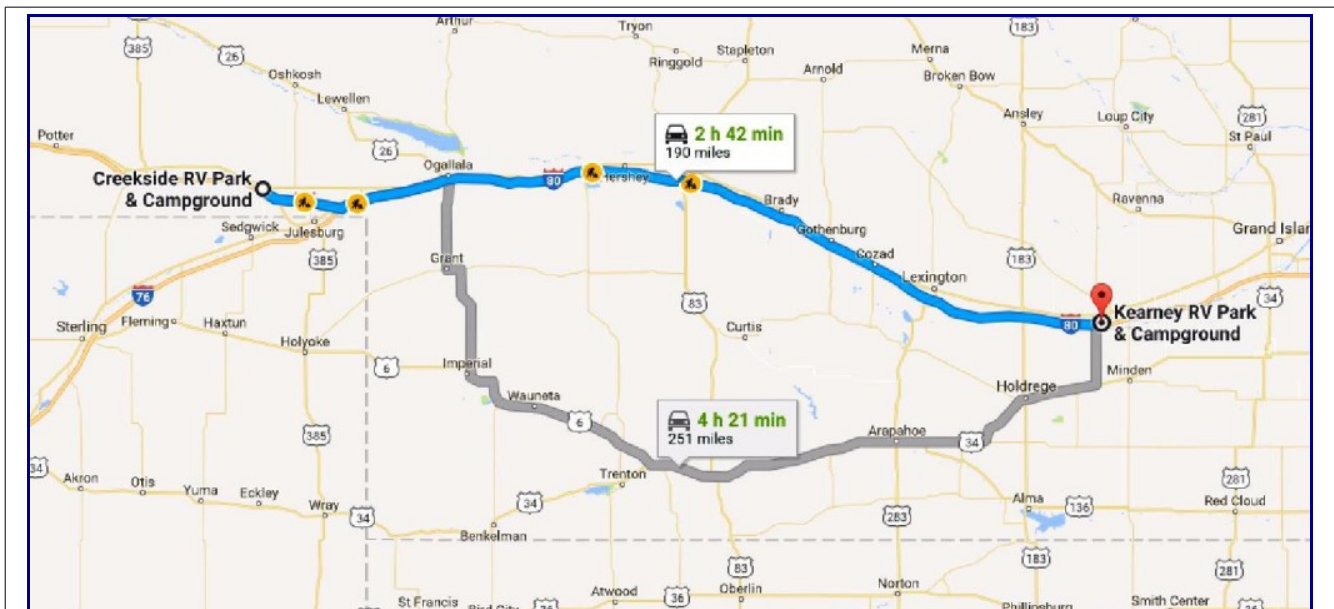
18 Oct 2017

190 miles, almost exclusively on I-80. Cumulative tow miles: 467. Truck miles: 204. Cumulative truck miles: 473.

This route was Boring, with a capital B. Straight, flat, a few trees among the fields, but everything brown. Dull, uninteresting.

All of which didn't help Jett's headache. We were supposed to stay in Chappell for 2 nights - and paid for two - but two things combined to cut it short: (1) I learned that the Osage Nation Museum, which I had scheduled for a visit next Monday, was closed on Mondays and (2) the train traffic in Chappell, with loud horns blaring all night long, kept Jett from getting more than about 2 hours sleep. Which explained her headache.

Normally I would not want to travel when she is feeling so lousy, but when the reason for her illness is the campground... what's a guy to do? The Osage Nation Museum problem pushed the decision over the edge. I decided that I needed to get to Bartlesville OK two days early. The only way to do that was to cut a day out of Chappell and a day out of Junction City KS (our next stop after Kearney). So I called, made the necessary



STE2 Hop 2

changes to reservations and, once Jett was feeling well enough to travel, headed to Kearney.

The fact that we paid for 2 nights actually helped as we could leave a couple of hours later than normal. We departed Chappell at 1:30 and got into Kearney at 5:30 pm, losing an hour along the way due to the time zone change. But it all turned out to be worth it when Jett got a good night's sleep last night.

Our train-filled night in Chappell was at the [Creekside RV Park & Campground](#). If you follow the link you will see that it actually gets pretty good ratings. Not from us. Yes, the elderly hosts were very nice, and the site was large and level, but the train noise negatives overwhelmed any positives. It is a very basic park. I also made the mistake of choosing a 50-amp site with no water over a 30-amp site with water. Not having water meant that we had to operate off of our internal fresh water tank, which is fine, except that the pump noise is very irritating. That didn't help Jett's headache, either.

In addition to being adjacent to the train tracks, the campground was also near a large grain elevator or similar structure that had a lot of truck traffic. There were also some interesting long-term resident rigs in the park, including a trailer with a bolt-on deck. Unique.

On a positive note, I liked Chappell. It is an interesting small town that seems to be brimming with civic pride. I shopped at a very funky old-fashioned food market that had a nice meat section and decent prices. I got some really good photos of the beautiful sunset and we got to add our 47th state. But the negatives outweigh the positives. We won't return.



Funky trailer and nearby factory



Sunset in Chappell



Our site at Creekside

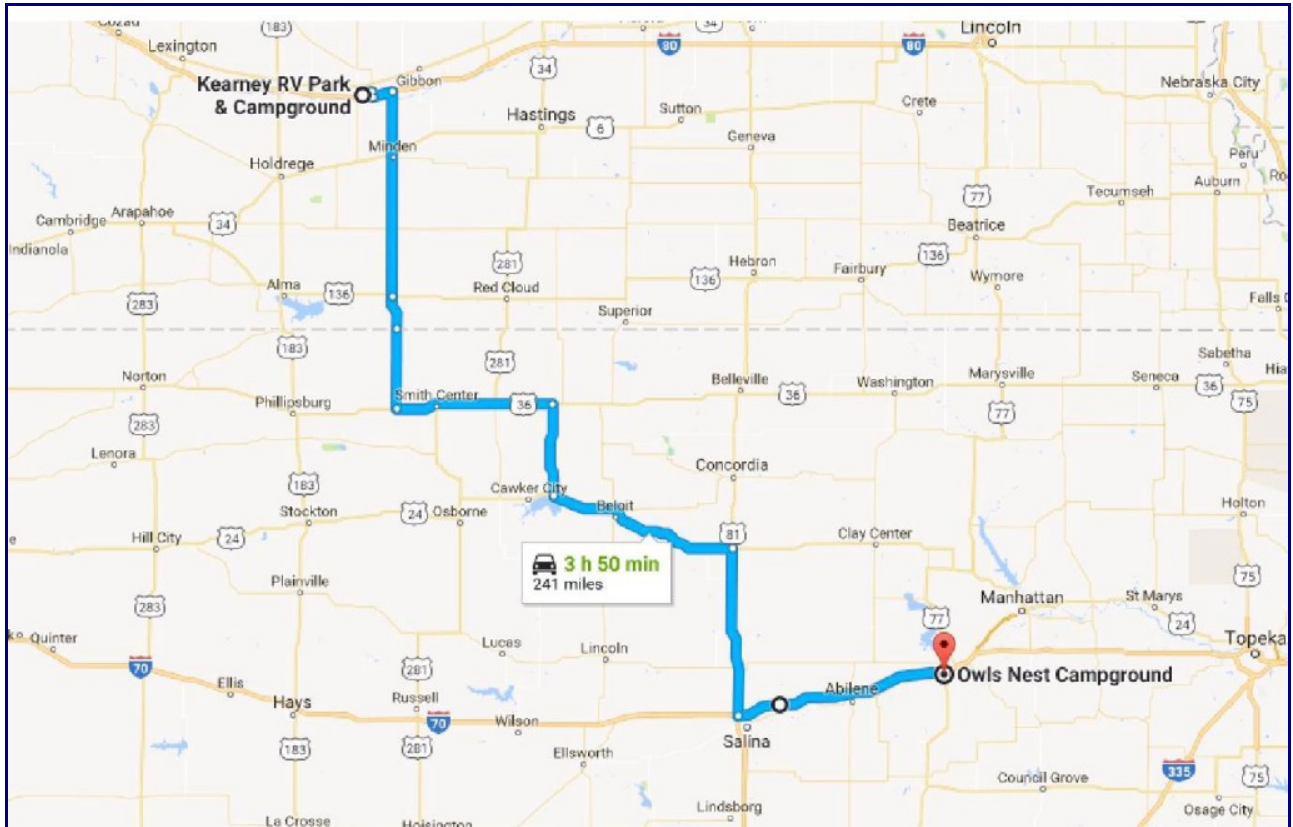


#47 - NE

STE2 Hop 3: Kearney NE to Junction City KS

20 Oct 2017

242 miles via I-80, NE 10, KS 8, US 36, US 81 and I-70. Cumulative tow miles: 709. Truck miles: 258. Cumulative truck miles: 731.



STE2 Hop 3

This was another boring trip in terms of the scenery, but this time we had some navigation issues to keep us

busy. I originally planned this to be a 230-mile trip the used only about 6 miles of I-70 at the end. But Jett convinced me to add a refueling stop and, knowing that range was no longer an issue, opted for a slightly longer but faster route down US 81.

We saw a lot of corn, much of it being harvested. Consequently we had some trucks on the road carrying corn and wheat. But not many. Traffic was not a problem.

The truck ran flawlessly once again. It has now been over 1,000 miles since it was repaired. I am starting to think that the repair was good.

For the two nights in Kearney we stayed at the Kearney RV Park & Campground. This was a nice short-term place. Concrete pads on large pull-through sites. No cable TV but we pulled in about 10 channels over the air. Not that it mattered, but the park had a lake with a beach. And it was near shopping. We dined at Culvers the first night and at [Whisky Creek Wood Fire Grill](#) the second night. Whisky Creek was a mixed bag. The salad and bread were simply excellent. The prime rib... not so much. Very strange prime rib. Almost like ribeye - very fatty. And not very thick. Good flavor but still disappointing.



Sunset at Kearney RV Park

STE2 Hop 4: Junction City KS to Bartlesville OK

21 Oct 2017

209 miles via US 77, US 400, KS 99, US 166, US 75 and US 60 with a refueling stop in El Dorado KS. Cumulative tow miles: 918. Truck miles: 209. Cumulative truck miles: 940.

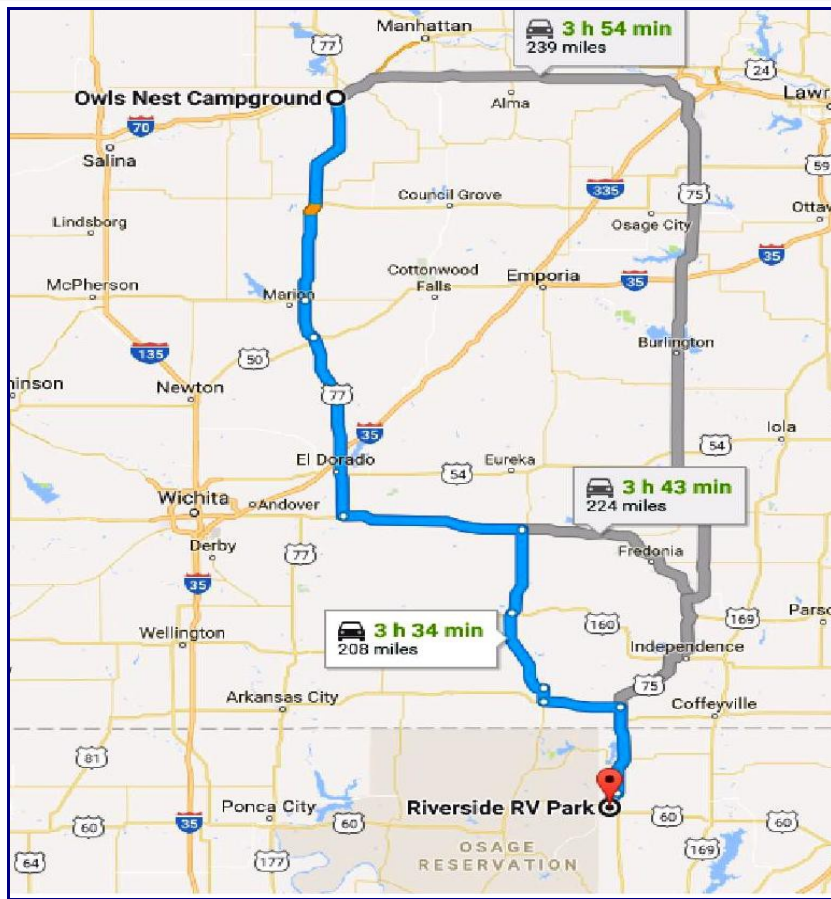
The truck miles equaled the tow miles in the case because we did something we almost never do: we stayed hitched up overnight. That meant that we needed to plan a refueling stop for Hop 4. There weren't a lot of options - we didn't pass a single gas station in the nearly 90 miles to El Dorado. And we cut it close - the low fuel light popped on as we turned into the service station. But we made it, no problem. We even took a lunch break.

The route was, as usual in Kansas, boring. The only thing that made it interesting is that the corn and wheat harvests were in high gear and nearly every field had harvesting activity. Which also meant that there were a lot of trucks on the road hauling the harvest. But no major slowdowns.



Refueling stop in El Dorado

Our one-night stop in Kansas was at the [Owl's Nest Campground](#). Our original plan was to spend 2 nights here, but we cut it to one in order to make it to Bartlesville OK on Friday - so we could get to the Osage Nation Museum on Saturday. It turns out that we didn't like the campground much and were very glad it was just one



STE2 Hop 4



#48 - KS

night. The campsites were mostly small and the roads were narrow. Plus there was no cable TV and absolutely no over-the-air service. So we played cards, watched DVDs and left without looking back.

While we didn't like our overnight stay very much, we had to appreciate it for what it was: the culmination of our 5-year goal to visit all 48 states.

Pawhuska OK

23 Oct 2017

We used our free day in Bartlesville OK to travel 20 miles to Pawhuska, in the Osage Reservation, and capital of Osage Nation. We visited the [Osage Nation Museum](#), which is a nice little museum chronicling the history of the Osage tribe - including the period in the 1920's when white men married Osage women, then murdered them, specifically to obtain the rights to the oil that had been found on tribal lands. Several dozen Osage Indians were murdered during this period. Murderous greed.

We also walked around downtown Pawhuska, which was a fairly interesting small town with some interesting shops featuring Osage crafts. We had some ice cream and marveled at the line which wrapped around The Mercantile. We learned that Pawhuska is home to the [Pioneer Woman](#), one of the most popular chefs on the Food Network. She actually is in the restaurant on Fridays and Saturdays and people travel hundreds of miles to see her and sample her new recipes.

We didn't stand in line.



Flying the Osage Nation flag



Osage Nation Museum



Pioneer Woman line



Shopping

STE2 Hop 5: Bartlesville OK to Durant OK

23 Oct 2017

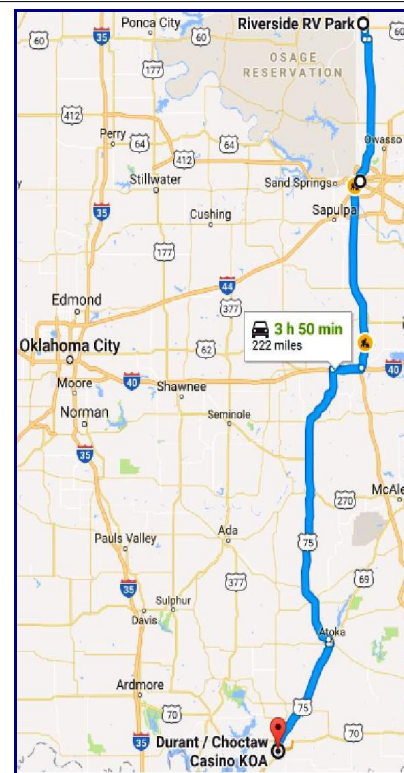
222 miles via US 75, with a refueling stop and an unexpected detour in Tulsa. Cumulative tow miles: 1140. Truck miles: 285. Cumulative truck miles: 1225.

This was probably the longest hop we have ever traveled on a single US route. US 75 travels basically due south all the way, so it was a logical choice. Google wanted to divert us onto a toll road south of Tulsa, but we don't like toll roads so we continued on US 75. Or tried to. Turns out there was a closed ramp for where US 75 turned west in Tulsa and I missed the detour sign, so I had to scramble and find my own detour. It cost us a couple of miles and about 5 minutes. Not a big problem.

We didn't like US 75 much. Parts of it were smooth and wide, but most of it was narrow and bumpy. And more sharp curves than I expected. The rough ride jumbled things in the RV pretty good. Jett didn't like the curves.

Our home in Bartlesville was the [Riverside RV Resort](#). I didn't have high hopes for this park. On Google Earth it looked small and the sites looked cramped. But we were given one of the few pull-through sites in the park and it worked out very nicely. It put our window side up against the creek, which gave us a lot of privacy. We didn't even drop our shades at night.

We spent our free day in Pawhuska (see my previous post) and



STE2 Hop 5

spent the night surviving a severe thunderstorm. Before the storm hit I took Rusty out for a walk where I was trying to find a place to shelter in case we received a tornado warning. Didn't find much - Plan B was to drop down into the river ravine and hang onto roots. Not much of a plan, but, fortunately, I didn't have to execute it. The rain was heavy only for about an hour. The lightning was too frequent and too close, but did no damage - except the loud clap at 3:11am the made both Jett and me pop up out of bed.

I never like severe thunderstorms in Oklahoma.

I was chatting with our neighbor the morning after and the topic of Rockport TX arose - our STE2 Hop 8 destination. She said she was there just 2 weeks ago and the Hurricane Harvey devastation is hard to believe. She showed me some photos. Horrible. I expect we will see things we have never seen before when we get down there.

Today we are going to the [Choctaw Casino](#). We will probably lose money there - money that we should have donated to Hurricane Harvey relief.

STE2 Hop 6: Durant OK to Corsicana TX

26 Oct 2017

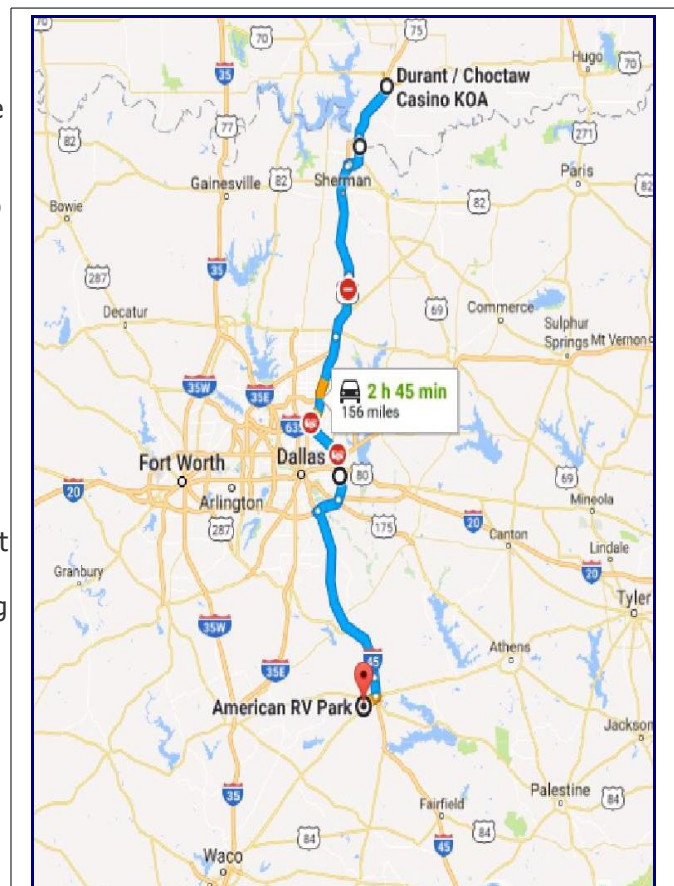
157 miles via US 75, I-635, I-45 and TX 31 with a brief stop to figure out how we screwed up. Cumulative tow miles: 1297. Truck miles: 173. Cumulative truck miles: 1398.

This was another hop that didn't exactly go as planned. I intended to take a route that used US 69 instead of US 75 because we had had enough of 75 and didn't like it very much. But after we exited onto US 69 and passed through Denison TX, we missed a turn and ended up back on US 75. We stopped at a truck stop to get our bearings and decided that it would be best to take US 75 down to the outskirts of Dallas, then use I-635 to go around rather than through. We picked up I-45 south of Dallas and it was pretty simple from there.

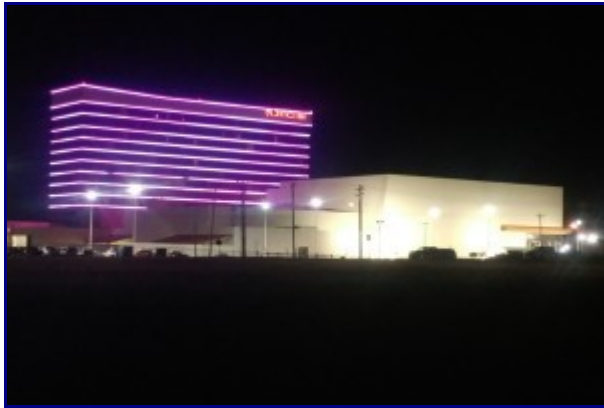
Not much scenery on this hop. And the roads - notably US 75 - were very rough. Not a fun hop to drive.

Our home is Durant OK was the [Durant KOA](#), conveniently located adjacent to the [Choctaw Casino](#). The campground was superb. Without question the best KOA we have ever seen. All pull-throughs. Wide concrete pads, plenty of room for the truck, landscaping and a very nice patio set, all included. A gorgeous clubhouse, a double dog park. There is nothing bad to say about this campground. We would stay here again in a heartbeat.

We also loved the casino, despite losing about \$200 there. It is big and beautiful with a wide variety of slot machines and entertainment options, including a movie theater and a bowling alley. It also had some very fine fast food dining options including [Smashburger](#) which is now our favorite burger place.



STE2 Hop 6



The view from our site at night



Ready to leave our site

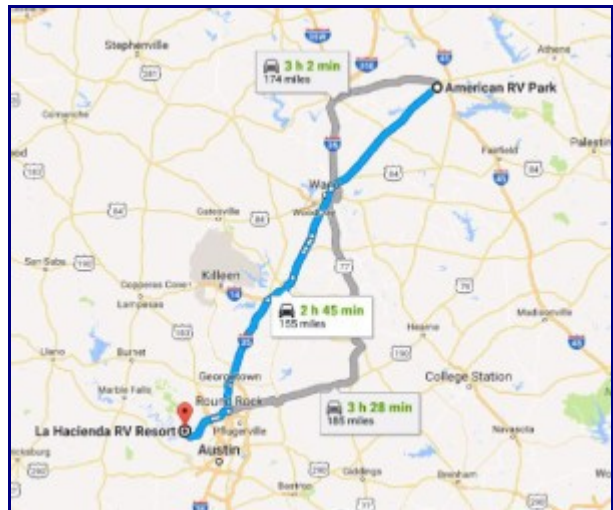
STE2 Hop 7: Corsicana TX to Austin TX

29 Oct 2017

156 miles via TX 31, I-35 and TX 620. Cumulative tow miles: 1453. Truck miles: 165. Cumulative truck miles: 1563.

Texas is boring. There is no notable scenery. It really is a matter of putting in the time to get where you are going. Fortunately, this hop required only 3 hours of driving and they were uneventful. Except for the wind which in this case was mostly in our face. But it was strong enough to buffet us. And make me grateful that it wasn't coming at us sideways.

Our home for 2 nights in Corsicana was the [American RV Park](#) (and Sales - but we didn't see anything for sale). This is a medium-sized park with mostly long-term residents. But they had two rows of pull-throughs and they were long enough to fit us comfortably. And their ice was about the best we have found on this trip and only \$1.79 for 10 lbs - cheaper than WalMart. Small things like that make me happy.



STE2 Hop 7

Not a lot of amenities but we didn't care. It was quiet so we got some good sleep. It was also just a half-mile from WalMart, so we were able to replenish the pantry. We dined out at [Sirloin Stockade](#) which turned out to be a Sizzler-style steakhouse. Not an epicurean delight, but decent food at a decent price. We happened to arrive on Senior Wednesday which meant that we dined for about \$8 each. With unlimited (small, thin) sirloin steaks. Jett had two, I had one (but I also had some pot roast).

One problem with our site: there was a huge nest of fire ants right next to the sewer connection. I knelt for about 30 seconds to hook up the hose and when I stood I saw about 200 ants roaming around my right leg. I brushed them off quickly and didn't think any more of it. Until my hand and leg started tingling. Now, nearly a week later, my leg is still covered with red welts. But, oddly, they neither hurt nor itch.

STE2 Hop 8: Austin TX to Rockport TX

30 Oct 2017

212 miles via TX 620, TX 71, TX 210, US 183, TX 188 and some local roads, with a refueling stop. Cumulative tow miles: 1665. Truck miles: 367. Cumulative truck miles: 1930.

The refueling stop was unplanned and was due to remembering, too late - I was already hitched up - that I hadn't taken the truck down to the corner gas station to fill the tank. So we had to start off looking for a place that we could get the rig into. We found one about 10 miles into the journey, which wasn't all bad as it reduced the anxiety on the destination end when the gauge hovered near "E".

Once again, the trip was pretty boring. Lots of flat farmland (after fighting our way through Austin church traffic) and nothing to really catch our attention until we were about 20 miles from Rockport. Then the Hurricane Harvey damage started to show up. Fences down, roofs being repaired, piles of debris lining the road.

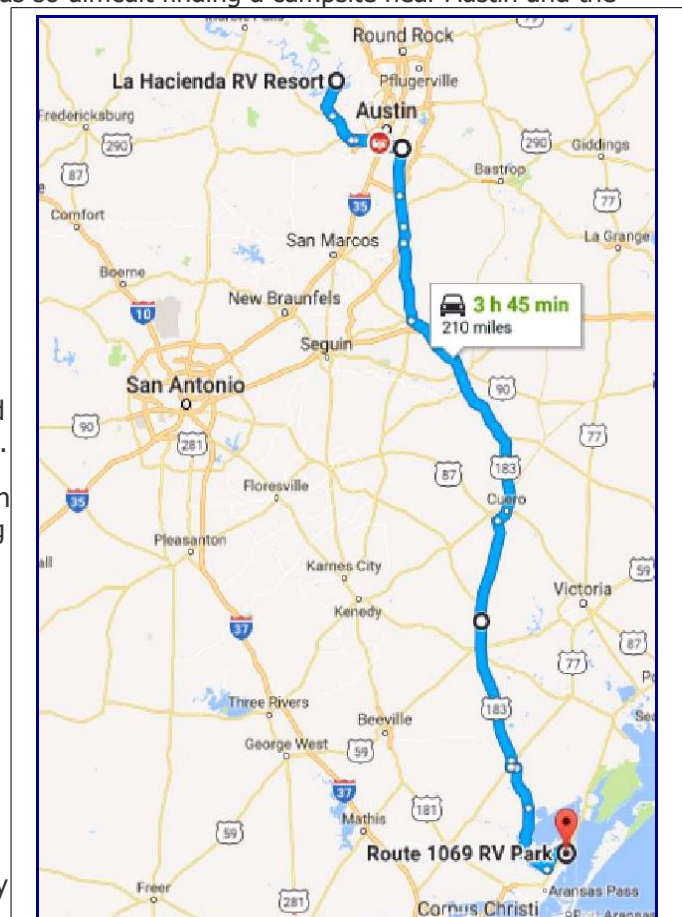
Rockport itself is, reportedly, a mess. I will check it out today. But the park is located directly across the street from a restaurant that is being rebuilt. Looks like it lost most of its roof and windows and probably had lots of water damage.

We spent our three nights in Austin at [La Hacienda RV Resort](#). This is a very nice medium-sized park near Lake Travis. It was packed, which didn't surprise me a lot as I had had a lot of trouble finding a park in the Austin area that had vacancy. I asked the office staff why it was so difficult finding a campsite near Austin and the

answer surprised me: winter seasonals are starting to arrive. That is very different than our experience in Florida where the parks seem to be only about half full until Christmas. I guess snowbirds in Texas roost earlier.

The biggest problem with the site we was given at La Hacienda was that it was designed for a motorhome - you drive in, back out. Except with a fifth wheel you can't just drive in because you need to unhitch, too. We were lucky in that our site was at the end of the row with a large grassy field to our right, so I was able to unhitch and drive around using the field. But we had to back out of the site, which is, I believe, a first for us.

We have been having problems with the large 47" TV in our living room. It has always been very poor at pulling in stations, whether we are on cable or antenna. Typically we get about two-thirds of the stations that the bedroom TV gets. Lately, this problem has been compounded with the screen simply going black at random times. As I was out, taking Rusty for a grooming, I got a text from Jett telling me to buy a TV while I was out. Well, the PetSmart was right across the street from a Best Buy, so I returned with a groomed dog and a new TV and spent most of the day on Friday replacing the television. It was harder than I expected, mostly due to the two televisions having very different mount points. I had to improvise to get the new TV mounted.



STE2 Hop 8



Our site



Swapping out the TV

Sadly, the new TV doesn't pull in stations much better than the old one, so the problem must be in the cable connection. Which is not easily solved. The new TV does have a better picture on the stations it gets and does have WiFi, so we now theoretically have the ability to use Netflix. And it doesn't go black. But I now have a used 47" Samsung TV that is probably not as bad as I thought, so I need to find a way to donate it - to either a person or an organization.

Part of the attraction of the Austin area was visiting with Jett's nephew and niece and having another spectacular dinner at his restaurant, [Café Malta](#). If you ever get to Austin, make an effort to get to this restaurant. It is always imaginative and always superb. The big winners this time were the cream of broccoli soup, the braised lamb ribs and the brisket ravioli.

Jett's sister was also visiting which was another reason for being there at this particular time. Of course we had to have a couple of games of hand, knee and foot and I am happy to report that Christine and I simply crushed Jett and her niece.



Braised lamb ribs

Rockport TX after Hurricane Harvey

2 Nov 2017



Wrecked 5-story boat storage facility

Hurricane Harvey roared ashore at Rockport TX the evening of Aug 25, then raked the area for over a week with torrential rains and strong winds. Recovery is underway but even now, more than 2 months later, parts of Rockport look like the hurricane roared through last night. The most stunning example of total devastation is the 5-story boat storage facility, which I am sure was fully loaded with boats that owners took out of the water before the storm to keep them safe. Well, they weren't safe there. There are now hundreds of boats that are total losses, along with the building itself.

But the most poignant scenes can be found on nearly every side street in town. The cleanup efforts have not reached there yet, so the streets are lined with debris of all kinds, including fallen trees, wood from roofs and sheds ripped apart and mattresses, furniture and even toys that were destroyed by the rains. Nobody escaped unscathed and some look like they have lost everything. Everywhere you look you see homes that can't possibly be occupied. But they are.

RVs that were left on site were also destroyed. Dozens like the one shown line streets throughout the area. I asked the owner of the RV park where we stayed whether any RVs were lost in the storm. Yes, she said - 9 completely destroyed.

Many businesses were lost, too. There was exactly one restaurant the we could find in downtown Rockport that was open for business. Many convenience stores and gas stations remain shuttered.

It is going to be a LONG time before Rockport returns to normal. I can't even imagine how much it is all going to

cost.

One of the most puzzling things I saw was the debris just inland from the shore south of Corpus Christie. The city did not get hit very hard - sustained winds there were barely minimum hurricane force, compared to the 140 mph winds that smashed Rockport. But the shore had lots of debris, including things like a chest freezer and other heavy appliances, more than a mile from the nearest home. How did they get there? I can only guess that they floated south from Rockport and washed in with the tide.

One very thin silver lining: there is going to be a LOT of cheap firewood this winter.



A roof, I think, peeled off



A typical side street



Random debris along TX 35



One of many destroyed RVs



Shore debris



Firewood



Destroyed playground at our campground

STE2 Hop 9: Rockport TX to Brownsville TX

2 Nov 2017

247 miles via TX 35, US 181, I-37, US 77, I-2, US 83, FM 511 and local roads at each end and to find a gas station in San Jose TX. Cumulative tow miles: 1912. Truck miles: 460. Cumulative truck miles: 2390.

This was the worst hop of the trip. Why? Let me count the ways.

1. Our intended path over to US 281 included a bypass, on FM 1930, around Alice. Well, FM 1930 was a very narrow road which I opted to skip, so we had to go through Alice. Not that Alice was a bustling metropolis, but this unexpected adjustment to our route was indicative of what was to come.
2. Our planned refueling stop was at the H-E-B in San Jose TX. But the GPS missed it and told me to take the next exit. There was no way to get back to it except to execute a very long U-turn. So we went off on local roads looking for a suitable service station.
3. We found an Exxon, but it had only one diesel pump and some guy was camped out there, apparently having gone into the convenience store to get a corn dog and chat up the clerk. I decided to go on, which meant snaking my way through the pumps. I had to move the window washing canister and give Jett a heart attack as I got within 4 inches of pumps both up front and in the rear.
4. We chose the WalMart next. I was able to fill up there, but exiting required a very tight left turn. A bus

driver helped me navigate my way out of there.

5. The staff at the campground gave me the wrong directions to our site and when I got there I found a trailer set up where I was supposed to go. A call to the office resulted in a reassignment two sites down. But the markings on the sites were so poor that I tried to enter at the wrong point. Other campers corrected me on that, but the turn was so tight that I couldn't make it. I had to go around and **back into** my "pull-through" site.
6. When we started to set up I discovered that we had no electrical power. Another call to the office. Apparently power was out to about a quarter of the park. They would look into it.
7. We went out to dinner and then decided to look for generators. I found one that was plenty powerful enough, but too big (it would have to fit into the bed of the truck). I found another that was small enough but not powerful enough. The "just right" one was out of stock.
8. When we got back the power was on. But the freezer had been off for about 8 hours. We had to toss the ice and we are still considering whether anything else needs to go.



Our home in Rockport TX for 3 nights was the [Route 1069 RV Park](#). This is a bare bones park with a lot of long-term residents. Very small - maybe 50 sites. Our pull-through was small (we had to park cross-ways behind the RV), but at least we could get into it. And, quite surprisingly, the park had very good cable TV - over 70 channels. The park still had some residual damage from Hurricane Harvey (see the previous post for photos of its trashed playground set) and they were cutting down tilting trees.



Our site



Odd bus

There were some old rigs in the park, including one unique converted tour bus. No slides, maybe 300 sq ft

interior space and 3 air conditioning units on the roof. 100 sq ft per unit? Just what goes on in there?

I didn't like the park at first, but we actually had a good time there. I would return.

I spent the first day touring some RV parks in the area (and found one that was worth a second look) and taking photos of the hurricane damage. The second day I took Jett back to see the one park that impressed me and to show her some of the devastation. We dined out at the only restaurant open for business. I won't mention it because I can't recommend it.

STE2 wrapup

3 Nov 2017

Our arrival in Brownsville TX concluded the second segment of the Second Trip East (STE2). The segment by the numbers:

- 9 hops
- 19 nights
- 1912 tow miles
- 2390 truck miles
- \$719.07 in campground fees (\$37.85 per night)

The actual route differed from the planned route only in minor ways, mostly due to missed turns or, in one case, a decision to skip a road that looked too narrow. The biggest difference was the RV parks. We had to select a different RV park for Austin because the first choice (and second choice, and third choice...) was booked. I also changed the penultimate stop because I thought I found a better option.

Highlights:

- Completing our map, YAY! We didn't do 48 states in 48 months, as originally planned, but we got all 48 in 61 months. That feels like a major - if unimportant - accomplishment.
- Seeing Jett's sister, nephew and niece in Austin. It is always nice to catch up with her family.
- Seeing first-hand the utter devastation left by Hurricane Harvey. It was stunning and sobering.
- Losing money at the Choctaw Casino in Durant OK. No, we don't enjoy losing money but the casino is beautiful, the machines were fun and the RV park there is spectacular.
- Checking out some of the RV parks in south Texas. It is unlikely that we will choose to winter here, but it is an option and we now have a much better idea what that option offers.

Lowlights:

- The weather. It continued to be very chilly through the first 7 hops. Not until we got to Rockport TX did it warm up. Now, in Brownsville TX, sweat is dripping from my brow as I type this. Be careful what you ask for.
- The scenery. After months in the Rockies, the Cascades and the Oregon coastal range, the flatness of Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas was pretty boring. I didn't get many good photos in this segment.
- The ridiculously bad RV park that we stayed at in Brownsville. Pitted roads with deep mud, sharp corners, poorly marked sites, office staff who gave me the wrong directions to my site and no electricity when we set up (not the park's fault, but it contributed to my sense of being in a really bad park). One of the worst in our 5+ years of travel. I will report on this park when I document STE3 Hop 1.

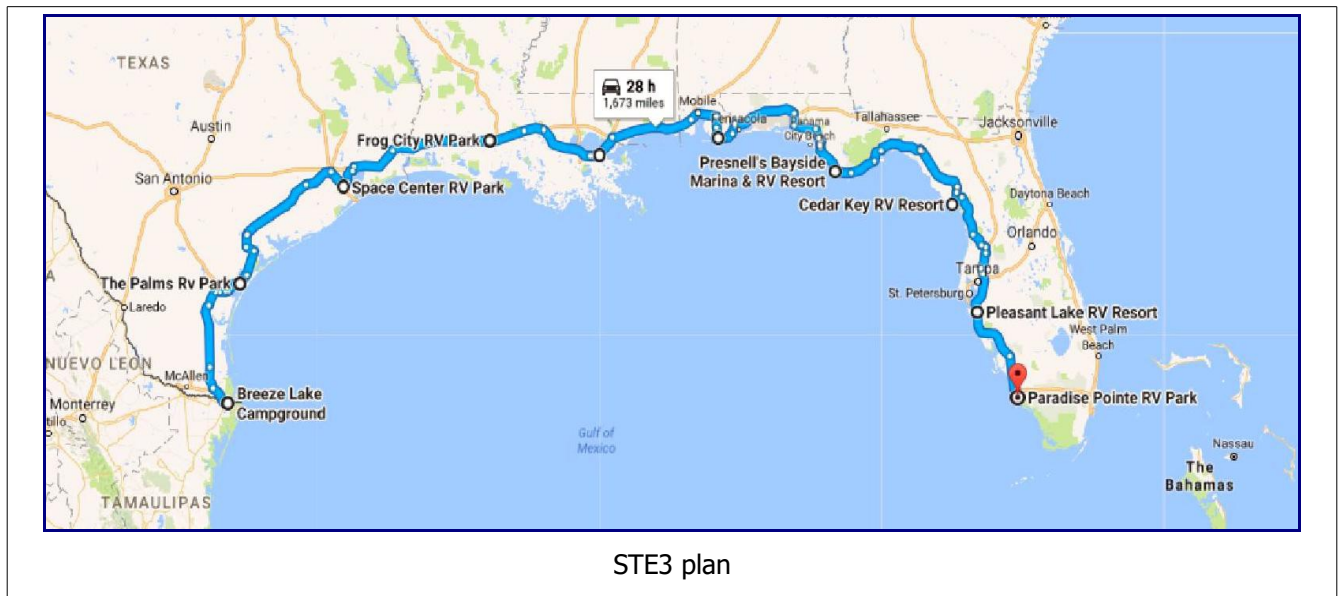
- Probably wasting \$500 to buy a new TV because we thought the old one just couldn't pull in weak stations. Well, the new one is just as bad. The upside is we donated the TV in Rockport. I'm sure the RV park there - or one of their long-term residents - will appreciate it.

STE3 preview

4 Nov 2017

Our 10,000 mile journey is nearing its end. Our winter home - Naples FL - is just down the road, one segment away. This final segment is planned to take 16 days with 9 hops covering about 1700 miles. That is 2 nights per hop. The only planned 3 night stay will be near New Orleans, which Jett has visited but I haven't. Other than New Orleans and checking out some RV parks (and hurricane damage) near Houston, it is mostly a matter of getting the miles behind us with short stays in interesting places.

The planned route:



STE3 Hop 1: Brownsville TX to Aransas Pass TX

5 Nov 2017

183 miles via TX 511, I-69E, US 77, TX 44, TX 358, I-37 and TX 35. Cumulative tow miles: 183. Truck miles: 298. Cumulative truck miles: 298.

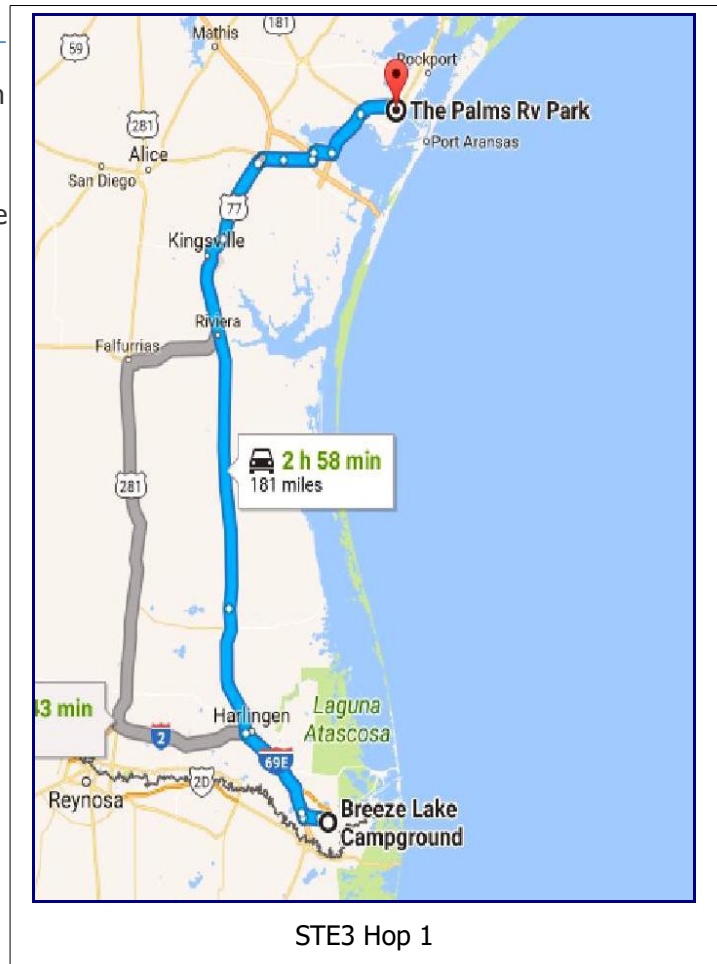
This was a truly boring ride. At least coming south, via US 281, there was some farm activity. Going north on US 77 there was nothing to see because there were no farms, just scrub brush. At least the weather was sunny and warm. And very, very humid. We had to turn on the AC, which is rare in our truck.

Our 3 nights in Brownsville were at the [Breeze Lake Campground](#). This was a fairly large (250 sites) campground with mostly park models and long-term residents. The number of transient sites was probably no more than 50.

First let me say that the campers we met there were friendly and helpful. Other than that, I have nothing good to say about this campground.

The negatives:

- The park management was terrible. First, they gave us a site that was occupied, then gave us incorrect directions to another site. The office was not open during the posted open hours. There was no place to leave the key card when we left. Stupid stuff. These people have no clue how to run a campground.
- The roads were in terrible condition. Big potholes, mud everywhere.
- The roads were so narrow that I could not turn into my "pull-thru" site - I had to go around to the other side and back in.
- The utility boxes at the sites were also in terrible shape. Defunct cable hanging on them (the cable service had been terminated), rusty electrical boxes.
- The sites were very poorly marked. I had to get out of the truck and walk along the row of pull-thrus to find my site. Again, stupid management? How much effort would it take to clearly mark the transient sites?



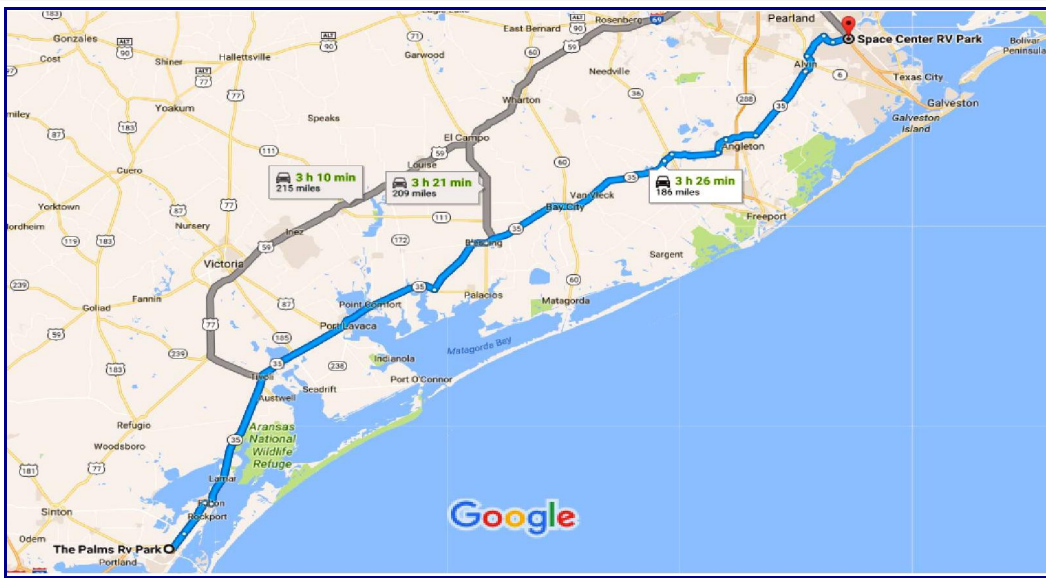
Bottom line: this was one of the worst parks we have ever visited. You would have to pay us to return here.

The additional truck miles were from two fairly long trips made to look for possible seasonal RV parks for next winter. We found one we liked: [Llano Grande Resort and Country Club](#) in Mercedes TX. There is just no question that this park offers great value: winter monthly rates under \$700 ((we will be paying more than \$1000 per month in Naples FL this year), with beautiful facilities, large sites (in some areas of the park) and an associated golf course with low rates. It is also just a few miles from Progreso Mexico where we could get cheap dental work done if necessary. So we will definitely consider it. The problem, we suspect, is that the sites that we would need for our large rig are going to be very popular. It is unlikely that we could get in. But we might try.

STE3 Hop 2: Aransas Pass TX to League City TX

8 Nov 2017

186 miles, almost entirely on TX 35. Cumulative tow miles: 369. Truck miles: 191. Cumulative truck miles: 489.



STE3 Hop 2

This hop was more interesting than the previous two as it brushed the coast and had some nice causeways over two broad and very scenic bays. While it was just a state road, it was in good shape and much of it was 4 lanes. Not a bad hop.

Our Aransas Pass home was [The Palms RV Park](#), a very nice park just 11 miles from the Route 1069 Campground - our home in Rockport less than a week prior. This park was unique in the STE in that it was a back-in site rather than a pull-through. We prefer the pull-through variety because they are easier to get into. But this park had none and we really wanted to stay there because we were considering it for a winter residence in 2018. But we are no longer considering it. It is just too small - only about 150 sites. And the cable was nearly unusable. But other than those negatives I really liked the park. The people were great, the laundry room was very nice and they had a large library and pool.



Our site



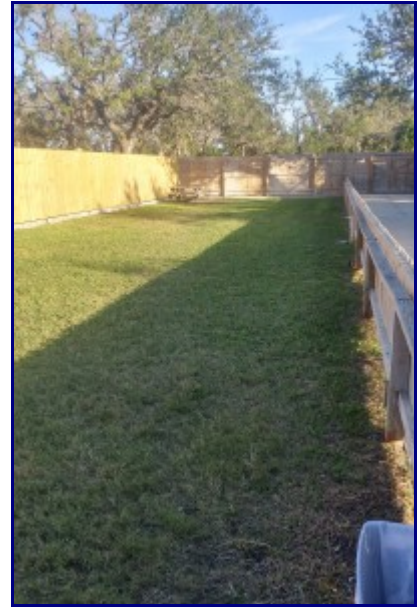
The Palms

It probably took a couple of minutes longer to get into the back-in site, but it wasn't difficult. Maybe 5 years ago it would have been difficult, but not now.

When I was removing the sewer hose in Brownsville I realized that one of my secondary hoses (I have 3) had a small hole and needed to be replaced. I needed the two remaining hoses to set up in Aransas Pass and in doing so discovered that a second hose - my main, favorite one - also had a small tear and needed to be replaced. Two hoses out of three failing at basically the same time. So I had to run down to WalMart and get replacements. I got a replacement for the cable connection, too, because we have been having so much trouble with signal quality on our main TV and thought that replacing the 50' connection with a 25' connection might help. The jury is out on that one. It probably helped a bit, but not much.



The pool



Dog park

Johnson Space Center

9 Nov 2017

I used our day in League City to travel about 5 miles to the [Space Center](#) museum, adjacent to the [Johnson Space Center](#). The Space Center is both a welcome center for tours of the Johnson Space Center and a museum containing some very interesting artifacts of US space exploration.

When I got to the Space Center I immediately took a tour of the Johnson Space Center because I really wanted to see where our space program was based. I wasn't disappointed. The 90-minute tram tour made 3 stops:

1. The "Historic Mission Control" center -



Lobby with Lunar Lander mockup

the control room for the Apollo 11 mission to the moon and the first walk on the moon. This is where the "one small step for man" words were first heard. It is also the room where the Apollo 13 near-disaster was managed (see the [Apollo 13](#) movie). It was smaller than I had imagined and, of course, the technology looked ancient. But it is a historic place and I am glad I got a chance to be there. It was also interesting to learn that the control room for the International Space Station - in communication 24/7 with the astronauts on the ISS - was just down the hall.

2. The "mock up" building where mock-ups of current and future space vehicles are kept. The building currently houses a full-scale mock-up of the International Space Station, a prototype of the Martian Rover and several prototypes of trans-Mars modules. I was not aware that so much work was underway for a manned Mars mission. This building is used for training current astronauts - both those heading to the ISS and those training for a Mars mission - and for engineering solutions to problems that crop up in the ISS. This is also the building where solutions to the Apollo 13 problems were concocted.
3. The Saturn V building. This huge hanger houses an actual Saturn V rocket - one of the largest rockets ever built and the rocket that sent the Apollo missions to the moon. It is, of course, incredibly large. The fact that it exists at all after the termination of the Apollo program was a surprise to me. This particular rocket was the one that would have been used for the Apollo 18 mission, had that mission not been canceled. I doubt that a Saturn V exists anywhere else, so I was really thrilled to get to see this one.



Apollo control room

The Space Center also had some interesting attractions:

- "Independence Plaza" with an actual 747 that was used to transport the Space Shuttle, with a mock-up of the Space Shuttle *Independence* mounted on its back. They were both open for viewing and contained some interesting kid-friendly displays that showed how the piggyback transport was put



Mars Rover

together and how NASA came to decide to use this odd transport vehicle.

- A moon rock that could be touched. I found this a bit disappointing as the rock was a flat shiny black tile-like artifact that didn't look at all as I expected. I expected something rough and other-worldly.
- The Apollo 11 and Apollo 17 command modules.
- One of the Gemini capsules.
- A Mercury capsule.
- A whole room of space suits worn by our astronauts.
- A mock-up of the Lunar Lander.
- Several theaters that offered several films and live presentations. I went to just one - a film about our manned Mars mission.



Moon Rock vault

I spent about 4 hours at the Space Center and felt that I really rushed it. If you get to Houston, try to stop by this place. It will be well worth your time.

Even better if you take your kids. There weren't a lot of kids there when I visited on Tuesday afternoon, but the ones that were there looked like they were having a grand time.

I hope I can get back here for another visit the next time I get to Texas.



Apollo 11 command module



Soyuz mockup



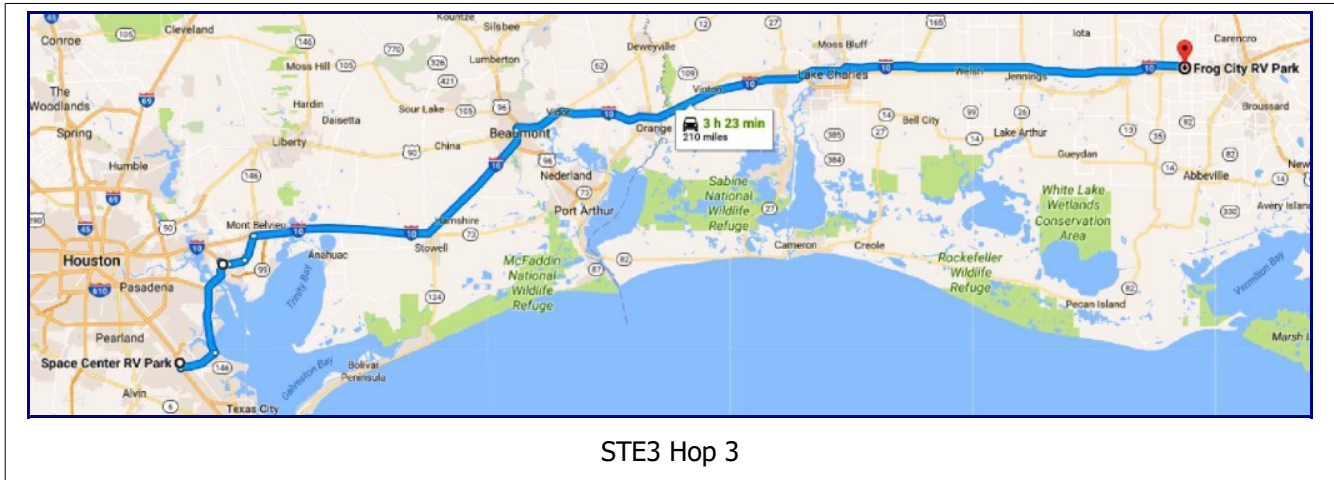
Saturn V



ISS mockup

STE3 Hop 3: League City TX to Duson LA

11 Nov 2017



210 miles via TX 96, TX 146 and I-10, with one minor screwup and a refueling stop. Cumulative tow miles: 579. Truck miles: 214. Cumulative truck miles: 703.

The minor screwup was due to following a sign for I-10 rather than listening to the GPS. We went about half a mile, turned back and returned to TX 146. The refueling stop wasn't really necessary, but was a nice rest stop.

The route, mostly on I-10, was rougher than we like. As with all the major interstates, this one was pretty beaten up in some stretches and, as always, was under construction. Things in the RV got pretty jumbled. Not the best hop ever, but not the worst. Pretty uneventful. The weather was cloudy and cool, so a pretty dreary trip.

Our home in League City was the [Space Center RV Park](#). This was a pretty nice park, convenient to both the Space Center and Galveston. It had long pull-through sites (but very narrow) and good places to walk the dog. It also had a pathway to an adjacent Cracker Barrel restaurant, which we used the first night.

After my tour of the Space Center I made a quick trip to Galveston, just to see what the city looked like. I liked it. Perhaps not as nice as Charleston or Savannah, but it had a bit of that oceanfront southern charm feel. Its [Pleasure Pier](#) looks like it would be a fun way to spend a sunny afternoon.



Our site



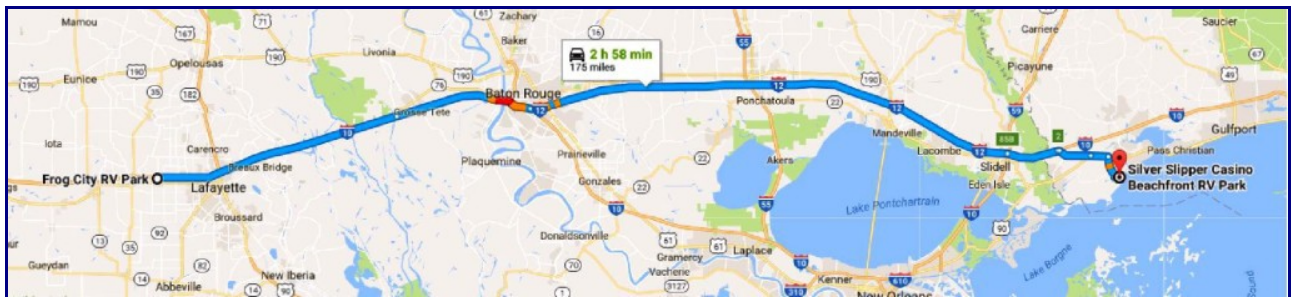
The park



Pleasure Pier

STE3 Hop 4: Duson LA to Waveland MS

12 Nov 2017



STE3 Hop 4

175 miles via I-10, I-12 and MS 607. Cumulative tow miles: 754. Truck miles: 176. Cumulative truck miles: 879.

This hop, like the others on I-10 and I-12, was rough. There were some pretty long stretches that felt like we were riding on railroad ties. But it was also interesting. It skirted the northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain, with long bridges over swampland. This was much more interesting scenery than we had in Texas. And, somewhat surprisingly, the bridges were a smoother ride than the rest of the interstate.

The navigation on this hop was a snap: get on I-10 until we reached MS 607, then follow the signs to the Silver Slipper Casino. Our destination was the casino's RV park on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico.

Our two nights in Duson were spent at the [Frog City RV Park](#), just off of I-10. This is a perfect location for an overnight stay. We stayed an extra night because I wanted to sample the local cuisine - [cracklins](#) and [boudin](#). But the day was cloudy and unseasonably cold, so we didn't go anywhere. I regret that as the boudin sounds delicious. I'm not so sure about the cracklins.



Frog City



Our site

New Orleans

14 Nov 2017

I don't think any city was higher on my US Cities bucket list than New Orleans (or "Nawlins" - I like to say that just to annoy Jett). I finally got to remove it from the list on Saturday. Jett and I drove the 55 miles to the French Quarter with the intent of walking around, having dinner and just seeing what the city has to offer.

It almost didn't happen.

New Orleans is not a friendly place for a large pickup truck. Following the GPS we got stuck in near-gridlock traffic as we entered the French Quarter. We found a way around that jam just to find another. After 30 minutes of frustration - and bypassing our intended parking lot because it looked too small - we had decided to head back home. But as we headed back up Rampart St we spotted a parking lot that looked like we could get into. We did and for a \$10 fee we got the opportunity to walk around for 3 hours.

We used those 3 hours to get a good idea of what goes on in the French



Jett at Cafe Soule



Bourbon Street, with construction

Quarter early on a Saturday. Crazy. Wall-to-wall bars and partying. A wedding, a street band, street fairs. A lively place, to say the least. I can only imagine what it is like later on a Saturday night or on Mardi Gras.

Jett got some beads. No, not by showing her boobs; by buying them.

We used one of our hours to dine at [Café Soule](#). I had the "New Orleans Trio" - a cup each of shrimp gumbo, crawfish etouffee and chicken and sausage jambalaya. Delicious! We were also entertained, while dining, by a wedding reception just across the street.



New Orleans Trio



Wedding

The rest of our time was spent walking around the French Quarter. Yes, we walked a portion of Bourbon Street, but that wasn't very pleasant because it was ripped up with construction. I learned that this construction - to update the sewer system - had been going on for nearly 2 years and had encountered all kinds of engineering problems.

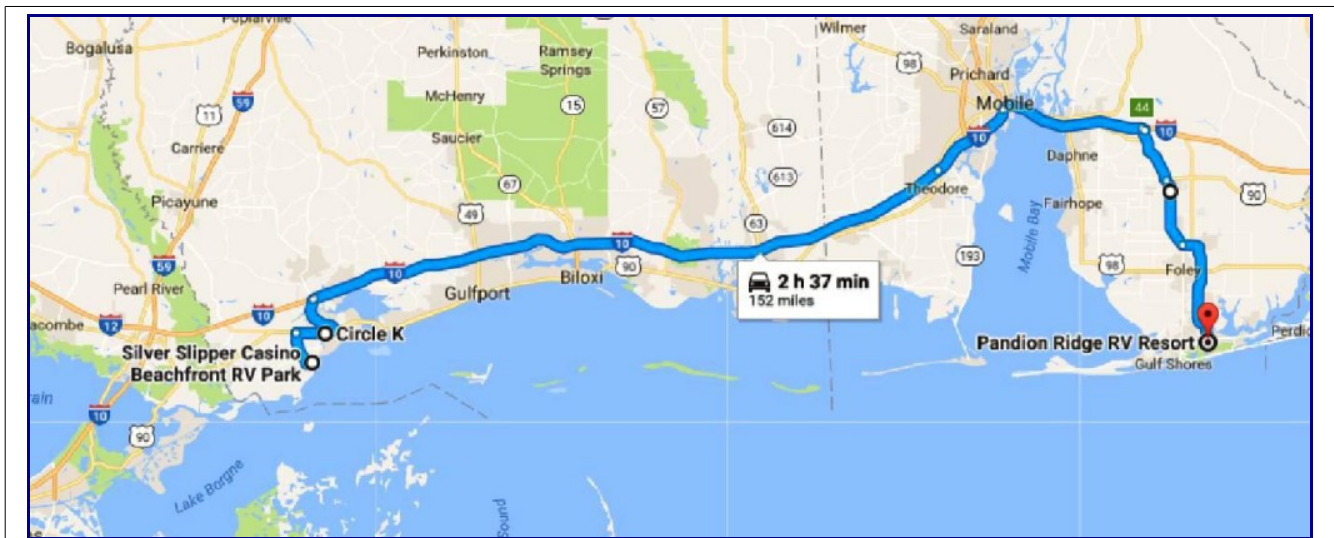


St Louis Cathedral and Jackson Park

We made it down to Jackson Square and the St Louis Cathedral just as the sun was setting, which made for some beautiful photos. Then we wandered our way back to the truck amidst the revelry which was just ramping up. We escaped the city before it got too crazy for old people like us.

STE3 Hop 5: Waveland MS to Orange Beach AL

14 Nov 2017



STE3 Hop 5

153 miles via US 90, MS 43, I-10, AL 59 and the Foley Beach Express. Cumulative miles: 907. Truck miles: 341. Cumulative truck miles: 1220.

We don't normally go on toll roads, but in this case it seemed like a good thing to do: by paying a \$4.25 toll to use the Foley Beach Express we cut off over 10 miles of travel. It was a nice road, too. Well worth it.

This was another beautiful travel day - sunny, nearly cloudless, low 70s. The roads weren't too crowded and we got some nice scenery, particularly across the Pascagoula River and Mobile Bay.

We spent 3 nights at the Silver Slipper Beachfront RV Park in Waveland MS. This is a bare-bones park with no amenities at all, unless you call the Gulf of Mexico an amenity. We had a beautiful concrete pad site with a view of the Gulf. No cable TV, but we pulled in a few channels from Biloxi. We very much liked this place and would return again.

One of our free days was spent traveling to New Orleans, as reported in the preceding post. The other

day was spent, mostly, at the nearby [Silver Slipper Casino](#). I played slots for over two hours and broke even (as the old joke goes... it is a good thing that I broke even because I needed the money). In the evening both Jett



Our site

and I went and I lost \$26 but she won \$91. A good night at the casino made even better because we went to the buffet. I had to think twice because it was pricey: nearly \$30 each. But we needed a good meal and, hey, we were up, so what the heck. Imagine my surprise when I was told that the buffet would be free for us - we had been randomly selected for a free meal. A good night at the casino made even better. The best part of the buffet was the made-to-order funnel cakes for dessert. Yum!



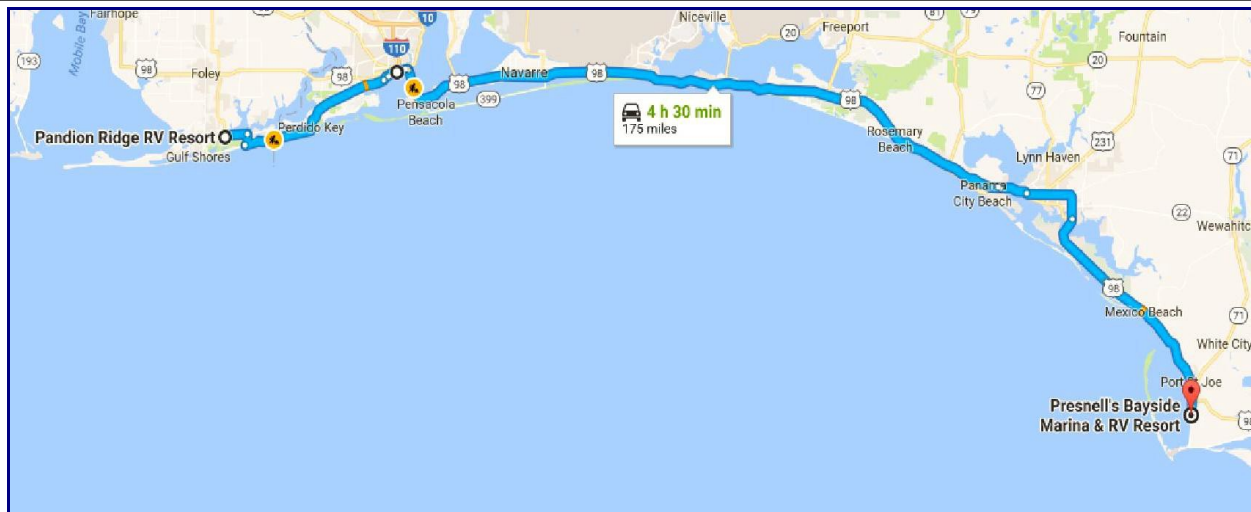
Sunset over the RV



Funnel cake

STE3 Hop 6: Orange Beach AL to Port Saint Joe FL

16 Nov 2017



STE3 Hop 6

176 miles via AL 161, AL 182, FL 292 and US 98. Cumulative tow miles: 1083. Truck miles: 281. Cumulative truck miles: 1501.

Jett hated this route. I chose it because it was mostly on US 98 which I liked a lot, based on my experience on more southerly sections. It also cut about 40 miles off the route initially suggested by Google. So range was not an issue, but time was - this route was about 4.5 hours long, approximately 15 minutes longer than the

suggested route. I decided to take it, knowing that it would have a lot of traffic lights. It certainly did. Jett was just about jumping out of her skin after about 100 red lights.

But I still liked the route. Major portions of it were very scenic as it hugged the coastline. And even the cities were interesting. I had never been to Pensacola or Panama City Beach. It was a long trip, but an interesting one.

I enjoyed our two nights in Orange Beach, too. I was drawn to the area because it is where my mother came the only times she went south in the winter. She seemed to like it very much, so I wanted to see it.

My impression? Both Gulf Shores and Orange Beach are beautiful beach towns. The beaches are white and wide - and, in November, virtually deserted. Gulf Shores seems like more of a community, a real town. It has some nice restaurants and shops, including [The Diner](#) where we had a very fine dinner on the second night. My shrimp and grits was delicious. Recommended.

I took a day trip along the shore east of Gulf Shores. I didn't learn a lot other than the area had a lot of RV parks, mostly very small (which we wouldn't consider for a winter stay as it would just be too cold), a lot of beautiful white sand beaches and some very nice beach houses that would be a fine place to spend a week or two in the summer.

Our home in Orange Beach was the [Pandion Ridge RV Resort](#), a new RV park conveniently located between Orange Beach and Gulf Shores. The facilities were among the finest we have seen - wide concrete pads on very long pull-through sites, a beautiful office and pool and very nice bath houses and laundry rooms. The staff was very professional and the landscaping was beautiful. We would stay here again, no question.



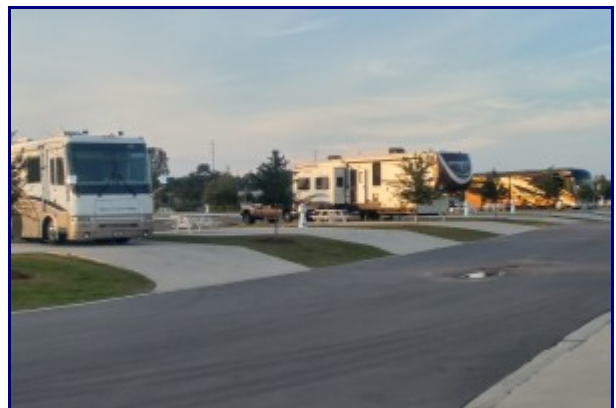
Shrimp and grits at The Diner



Beach near Ft Morgan



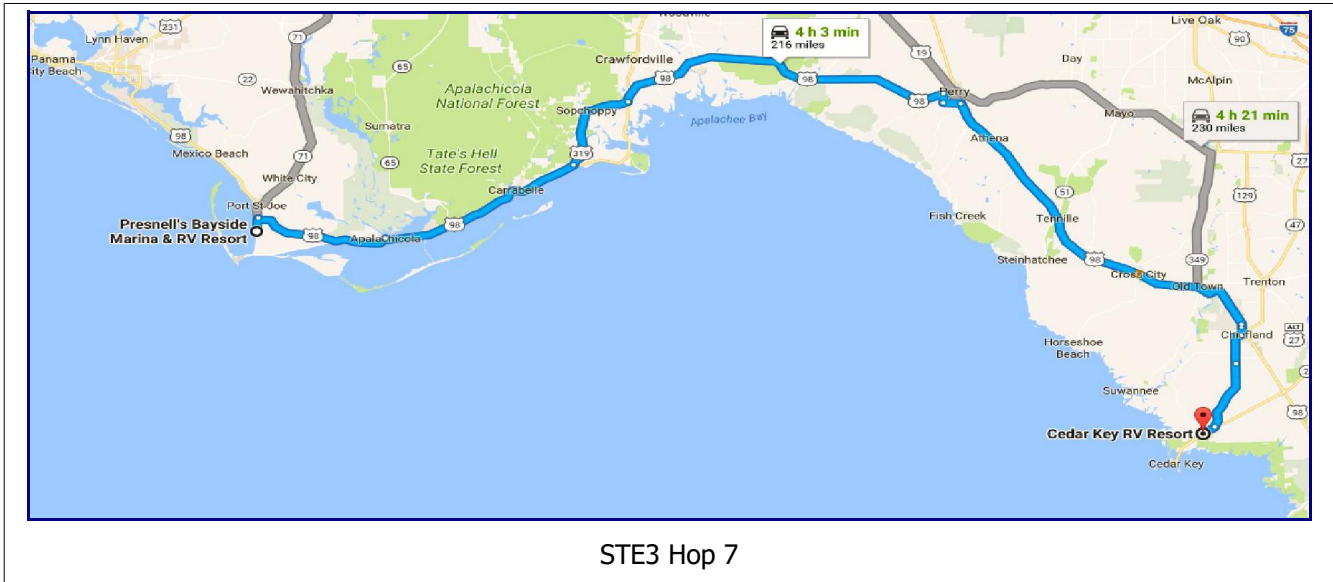
Beach houses



Our site at Pandion Ridge

STE3 Hop 7: Port Saint Joe FL to Cedar Key FL

18 Nov 2017

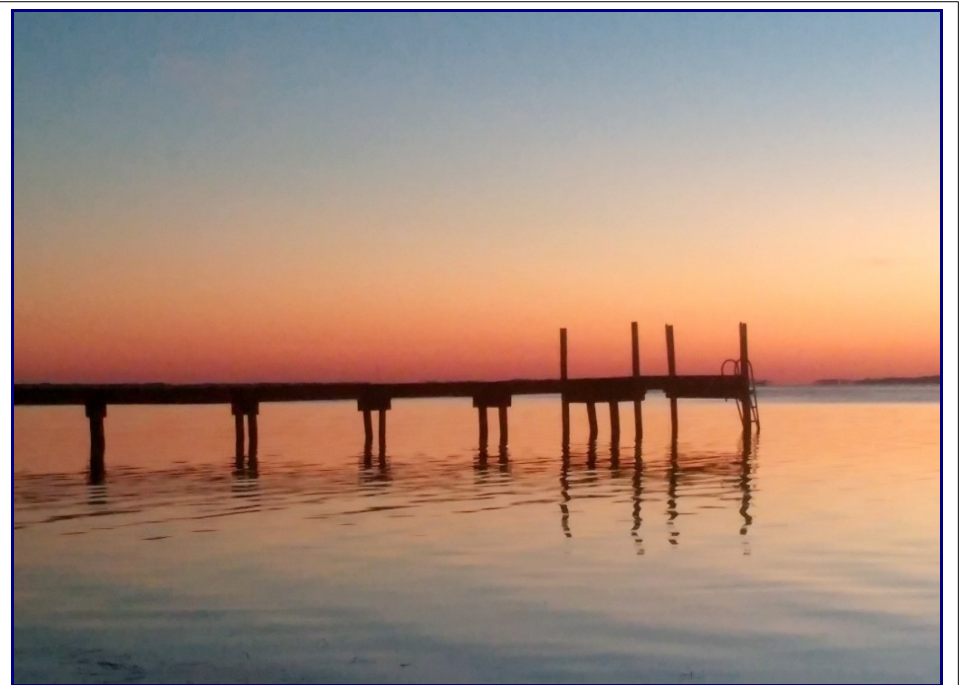


217 miles via US 98, US 319, FL 345 and FL 24, with a refueling stop. Cumulative tow miles: 1300. Truck miles: 269. Cumulative truck miles: 1770.

Usually our refueling stops occur about 150 to 180 miles into the hop. This one occurred 24 miles into the hop. Why? Because the one diesel pump at the one gas station within 5 miles of our Port Saint Joe home was hit by a truck and put out of commission. So I was forced to find a place to refuel while towing the rig. I hate to do that, especially when the route does not include an interstate highway with a large truck stop.

Well, I found a Marathon station in Apalachicola that was actually pretty easy to get into and out of. The only other problem on the hop was that I thought I took a wrong turn when I got onto US 319 because that road took us due north for about 10 miles. I didn't recall a northerly jog and figured the GPS was taking us on a longer (but faster) route. It wasn't. The route did, in fact, include a northerly jog.

The rest of the trip was uneventful and only moderately interesting. But the day was beautiful and the traffic was light, so we traveled mostly under cruise control. I like that.



First sunset

Our home in Port Saint Joe was [Presnell's Bayside Marina and RV Resort](#), on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. We had a back-in site with unobstructed water views on two sides - arguably the most beautiful view in our 5 years of travel. Would we stay here again? Hell, yeah!

The best thing about that campsite? The view. Particularly the sunset view. I got some wonderful photos.

We dined on our last night in Port Saint Joe at the [Sand Bucket](#), a very laid-back BBQ place just down the road. My pulled pork was very good, but the real star of the meal was the homemade potato chips. Just spectacular.



Our site



Pelicans at sunset



The bay in daylight

STE3 Hop 8: Cedar Key FL to Sarasota FL

20 Nov 2017

184 miles via FL 24, US 98, I-75 and FL 780. Cumulative tow miles: 1484. Truck miles: 205. Cumulative truck miles: 1975.

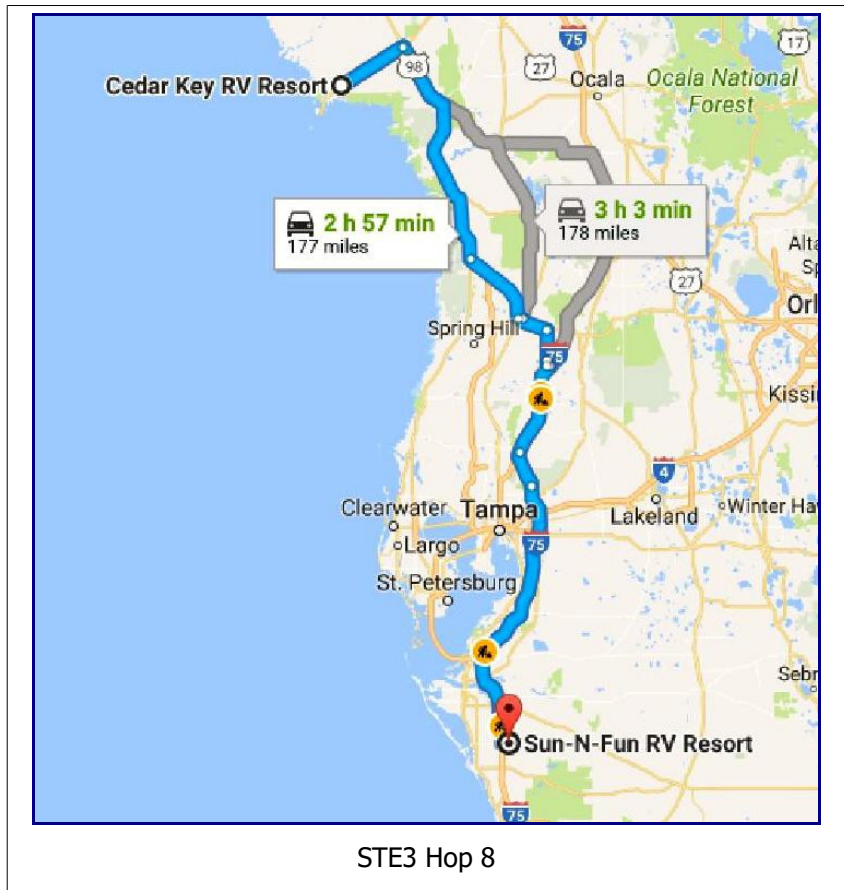
Our penultimate hop (I love that word!). It was a 3-hour jaunt, the first half on US 98 and the second half on I-75. It is a route we have traveled before and the weather was cloudy with occasional drizzle, so it was mostly a matter of covering the miles while we listened to our audiobook.

But there was one minor incident. At a stoplight in Crystal River a guy in a pickup pulled up next to me, motioned me to roll down my window and informed me that our left rear stop lights were not working. We pulled into a parking lot a few blocks later and checked it out. Sure enough, no brake lights on the left side. I jiggled the umbilical and they came back on. That was a first - running a successful light check before starting

but having the lights fail anyway.

Our home in Cedar Key was the [Cedar Key RV Resort](#). This was a very nice medium-sized park with nice landscaping and a LOT of dog owners. Rusty met a lot of canine friends. Our site was a very spacious pull-through at the end of a row, so we had an unobstructed view of woods out our living room window. Good cable TV. Daily pickup of both trash and recyclables. We liked this campground and would return.

I made a quick trip into Cedar Key itself, about 7 miles from the campground. Not very interesting. A nice beachfront town, but ho-hum. I saw nothing there that would make me come back.



STE3 Hop 9: Sarasota FL to Naples FL

25 Nov 2017

124 miles via I-75, FL 84 and US 41, with a slight detour near the Ft Myers airport. Cumulative tow miles: 1608. Truck miles: 128. Cumulative truck miles: 2103.

Thus endeth the Second Trip East (STE). The last hop was short and almost uneventful. The minor event was a stop to check the sewer hose in the bed of the truck which appeared to be working loose. It was fine, but the exit I took did not allow me to get back onto I-75, so I had to detour down the local airport access road to reach the next on ramp. No big deal.

Our one night in Sarasota was at the [Sun-N-Fun RV Resort](#). I tried to book a night at another Sun Communities property but it did not have a pull-through available, so the reservation clerk - shared among all Sun properties - took it upon herself to find one nearby at the Sun-N-Fun. It was just an overnight, so just about anything would have been fine, but I am glad we got to see Sun-N-Fun. The word that best describes this place: incredible.



Lawn bowling

Our site was very nice - long and wide, great cable TV. But it is the facilities that distinguish this campground. A huge pool, with a very large waterslide, a poolside bar and an adjacent restaurant. Tennis courts, pickleball courts, lawn bowling, horseshoes, mini-golf and shuffleboard. A covered playground. Activities buildings galore. Woodworking, watercolors, fitness center, card rooms, crafts. Just incredible.

And very, very expensive. We finally found a place more expensive than Gulf Waters. A premium RV site for January runs nearly \$2300.

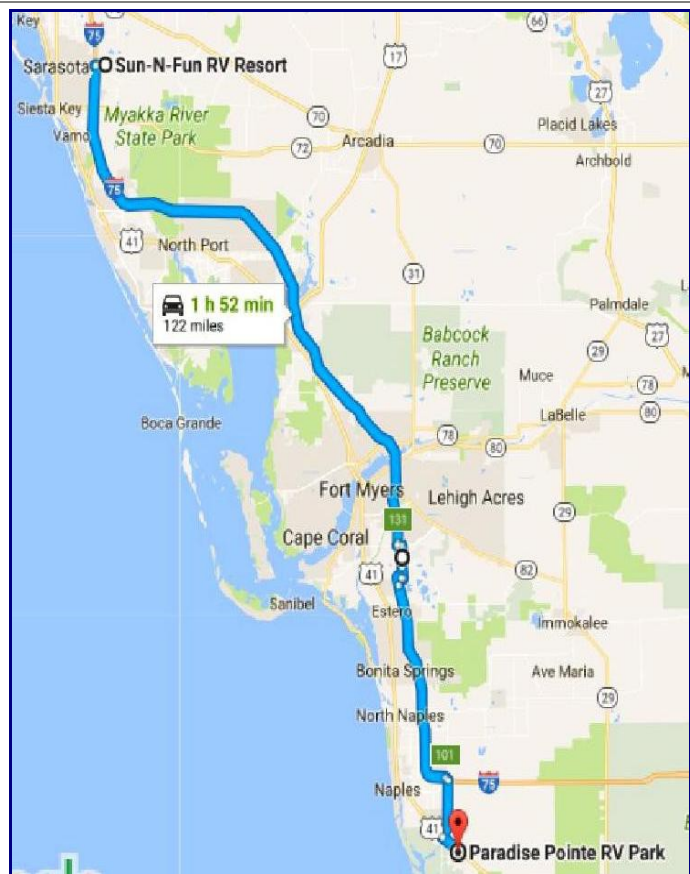
So we made it to our winter home. Over 9,000 miles of travel in 111 days. It will be nice to be able to stay put for a while.



Shuffleboard



Covered playground



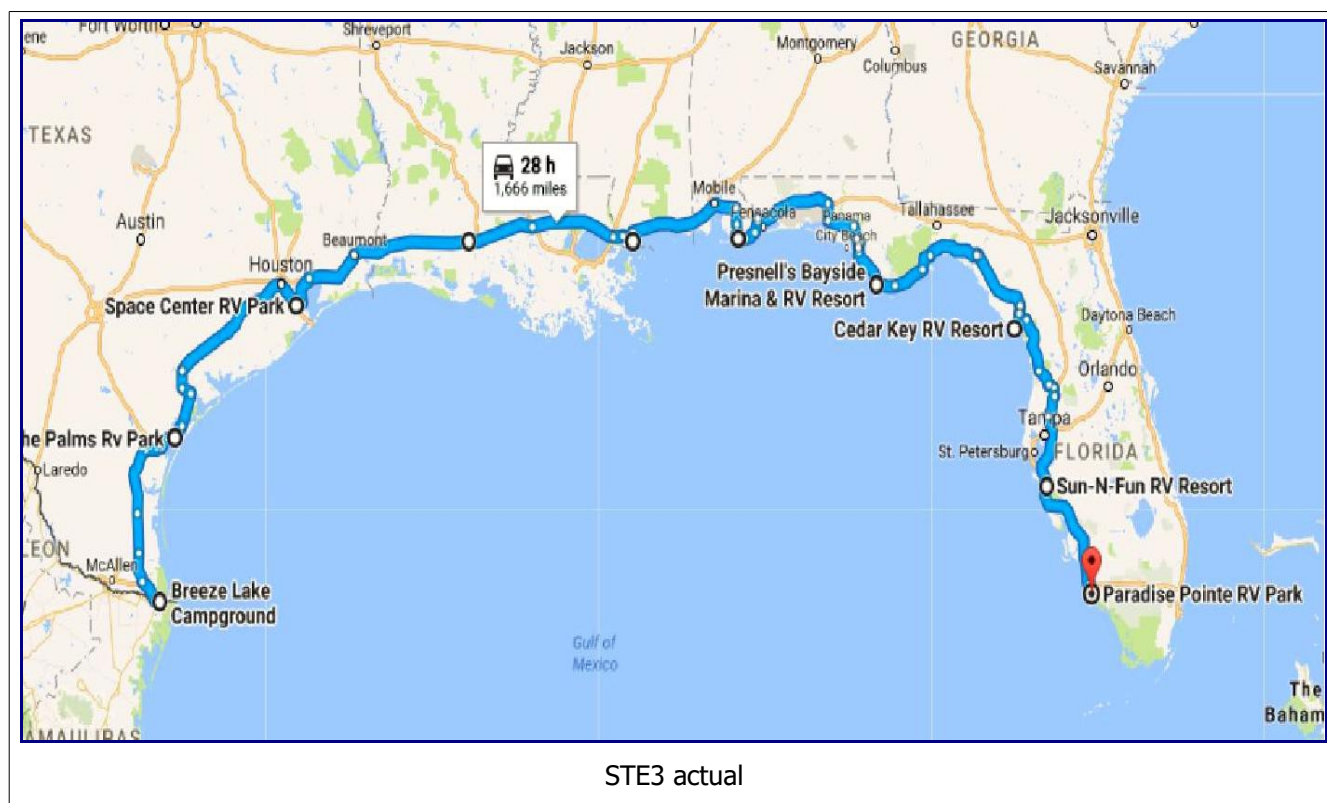
STE3 Hop 9

STE3 wrapup

30 Nov 2017

By the numbers:

- 9 hops
- 16 nights
- 1608 tow miles
- 2103 truck miles
- \$687.65 in campground fees (\$42.98 per night)



The actual route included two stops that differed from the plan and had some minor detours and changes in route, but otherwise went as planned.

Highlights:

- The [Johnson Space Center](#) in Houston. A fascinating tour and museum.
- The [Silver Slipper Casino](#) and Beachside RV Park in Waveland MS. The beachside RV site was beautiful and we won money at the casino.
- Our day in New Orleans.
- Gulf Shores AL. A nice town, a nice beach and a nice dinner at [The Diner](#).
- Our Gulf-side site at [Presnell's Marina and RV Resort](#). Beautiful sunsets.

Lowlights:

- Brownsville TX and the entire south Texas area. I had high hopes for this area, both as a place to visit and as a place to spend a future winter. But other than the rates, which were very low, we did not see any RV parks that we liked very much. South Padre Island was a huge disappointment and neither Brownsville nor any of the nearby towns offered anything of interest.

"Sycamore Row" by John Grisham

17 Dec 2017

[Dell Mass Market, 2014](#)

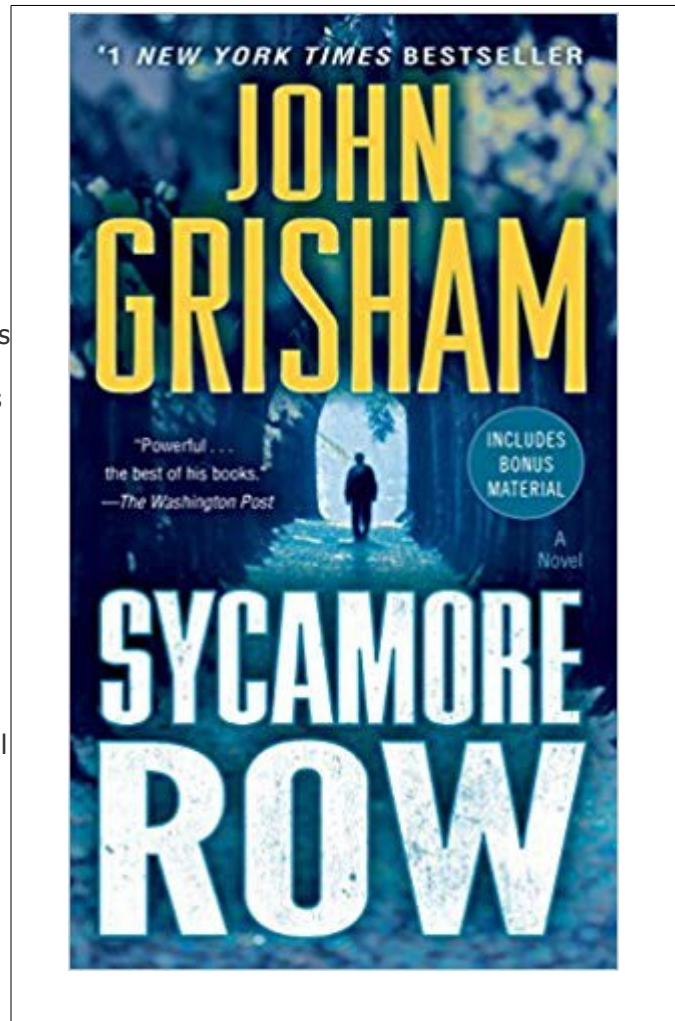
Yes, it has been quite a while since I posted my last book review. My primary excuse is that I have been busy traveling over 10,000 miles. But John Grisham deserves a share of the blame, too. *Sycamore Row* is long (637 pages in this edition) and it moves slowly. It took me a month to get to the point where it grabbed me at all.

The story is that of a terminally ill white man who hangs himself. But before committing suicide he wrote, in longhand, a 1-page will leaving 90% of his estate to his black housekeeper. He also wrote 2 pages of instructions to the lawyer of his choice - a local guy named Jake Brigance - in which he stated, in no uncertain terms, that he did not want either of his children to get a penny and that he wanted his holographic will defended at all costs, knowing that it would be challenged.

There was no question why he would want to disown his children - they were unlikable and were not close to him, even as he spiraled downhill to his death. The real question was why did he leave most of it to a housekeeper that he had known for only 3 years. And that, folks, is mostly what those 600+ pages are about, along with the courtroom circus that ensued. Because the estate was valued at over \$24 million, an inheritance that would make the housekeeper not only the richest black person in the county, but one of the richest persons of any race in the county.

I won't spoil it for you and the answer is, indeed, a little surprising. But I will fault Grisham for taking too long to get to the point. This would have been a better book if it had been 400 pages.

5 out of 10.





Snoozing after a long trip out west



Hurricane Irma damage at Paradise Pointe



Our patio at sunset, with damaged trees

