

Southwest Loop

Last January, my wife asked me what we should do for the kid's upcoming spring break. Money was tight as always and, with retirement looming, we didn't feel like breaking the bank taking a long trip. So what to do? Skiing, camping, visiting relatives, going to the beach and a trip to Disney all crossed our minds but images of crowded airports flashed through my mind. Also the feeling of being herded like a pack of sheep onto tight airplanes with no sense of freedom just crushed me. It struck me then that too often I fly from the center of one American city to the center of another wistfully looking out the window at all the wonderful countryside I'm missing.

While I was still musing about the topic, my kids put in the Cars DVD and we settled in to watch a family flick for the evening. When it was over, the kids headed off to bed leaving me alone with my thoughts. I happened to notice that the DVD came with a documentary from the producer about the making of the movie. In it the director talked about how, before the advent of the interstate highway, people would go on "car trips" and see the crazy sights along the way. It wasn't the destination, it was the trip ... the getting there that made the trip special. The director actually took his animators on a trip along the old highways to get a feel for the mood of the smaller towns on the way. Some of the characters he met along the way inspired the characters used in the movie.

Our "final" Southwest Loop Itinerary

1. Leave Friday after work
2. I-10 West to Fort Stockton – Night 1
3. Turn north towards Carlsbad on 285N through Pecos
4. Visit Carlsbad Caverns
5. Continue to Roswell NM to investigate the Aliens – Night 2
6. Continue North to I-40W into Albuquerque – Night 3
7. Route 66 in downtown Albuquerque
8. On the fly, we added Petroglyphs National park & the Atomic Museum
9. Petrified Forest/Painted Desert
10. Meteor Crater
11. Flagstaff – Night 4
12. Drive north on 89 to South rim of Grand Canyon
13. Return to Flagstaff – Night 5
14. I-17 south to Phoenix/Mesa to visit Grandparents – Nights 6&7
15. I-10 east to Tucson
16. Pima Air Museum and Boneyard at Davis Monthan AFB- time permitting
17. I-10 East to Las Cruces
18. Hwy 70 NE to White Sands National Monument (time permitting)
19. Hwy 54 down to I-10E home. Night 8

It struck me then, that in our modern day hurry we've lost something important. We rush through traveling as if it were a total inconvenience rather than part of the adventure. We fly because it's quicker not because we actually enjoy it. We minimize the time spent between the cities and miss the beauty in between. We don't even bother to socialize on planes because the trip is so short we know we only have to "deal" with these strangers for a couple of hours at most. We don't take the time to learn their stories and add them to our experience base and we are poorer for it. We can pour our hearts out to people we've never met on the internet but can't hold a simple conversation with people seated next to us. It occurred to me I might be treating my family the same way.

After watching the movie I felt very nostalgic. As an over 40 year old, I remembered taking vacations with my parents, always by car since we couldn't afford to fly. We'd drive from our home in Pennsylvania to places like

Gettysburg, Valley Forge, Washington DC or Cooperstown. Then it hit me. I got a wild hair and asked my wife “how about we take a road trip?” Needless to say she was a hard sell but she didn’t shoot it down immediately although I thought her say something like “not another mid-life crisis thing.” I had the opening I desired and asked for some time to put something together that I could run by the family.

Being a digitally minded middle-ager I immediately pulled out my map, laptop, mapping software, TomTom GPS, and internet connection then set about planning what I hoped wouldn’t turn into another Griswolds movie.

At that time, we had lived in Texas a little over two years but hadn’t had much of a chance to explore the Southwest much. We had camped many of the local state parks and really enjoyed ourselves but I wanted something a bit different. The words “not the destination but the getting there” echoed through me throughout the process. I was determined we’d travel and see a lot, maybe even, perish the thought, learn something!

I had some brief knowledge of the sights along I-40 in the SW US having driven across the country with my Grandparents after my Freshman year of college. My Grandparents were the type that paid AAA to make them a “trip-tic”, basically a series of strip maps only showing a few miles either side of the planned route. And my Grandparents stuck to it like glue. The whole way across the United States we’d see signs for all sorts of cool stuff just a few miles off the trip-tic but we had to stay doggedly on the designated path. Only once when I really, truly begged did they grudgingly allow a brief excursion up to the south rim of the Grand Canyon where we stopped at one and only one, overlook for a quick 5 minute peek. All the while they were asking “why do you want to see it, it’s just a hole in the ground”, which was, of course, technically true, but it’s a REALLY BIG hole in the ground made by a rather small unassuming looking river over millions of years. Don’t get me wrong, I love my Grandparents dearly but realize now that their idea of traveling and mine don’t have much in common.

You have to understand how important this was for me because I had grown up on a small farm in rural northeastern Pennsylvania and hadn’t been able to travel much outside the confines of the state while growing up. I truly thought I’d never again have a chance to see this part of the world. Luckily, later in life, while reporting to California for my first Air Force duty station I made the trip once again across the country and took some time to visit the sights along I-40 that we had previously missed. Now, as a father of two, I wanted to share those sights with my children and perhaps live out some of the things I had missed with my own parents. I was determined that I wouldn’t let that happen to my family. I didn’t want kids to say later in their lives “we drove by once but couldn’t stop”. No, this would be different. “It’s not the destination but the getting there!” But how to go about it?

I knew I-40 west of Albuquerque passed by some amazing sights - the Petrified Forest/Painted Desert, Meteor Crater and Grand Canyon to name just a few. These gave me a rough idea of how far I wanted to go. A quick check on Mapquest (or what ever your favorite mapping software is) told me that it was about three days there at a reasonable speed. That placed the Grand Canyon as our furthest point. The real question was how to get there - what routing to take? The easy answer was to hit the interstates and get a move on but again this wasn’t about making good time, it was about having a good time, slowing down and seeing things

I chose instead to hit the websites of the states between San Antonio and the Grand Canyon. Each state has its own Office of Tourism website touting its scenery and popular travel destinations. (For example: <http://www.arizonaguide.com>) I took my time compiling a list of all the cool sounding stuff from each state and plotted it on my map. I pulled my kids in and got their inputs on what they thought they’d like to see. Of course, the list was way to big to see in one trip, but it was a start. We included sites that were historical, cultural, natural and whimsical. We coded sites based on “must see” or “like to see”.

After plotting our list on the map, I was able to literally eyeball a reasonable set of roads that took us near a good percentage of our desired sites and that hit all of our “must sees”. Unfortunately, we had to prune some fun things out like Billy the Kids hangouts and such but they will still be there for another trip! Using the mapping software I worked out the timing between each major point and saw we had enough time to get around the loop in the allotted time. I then padded it by two days so we could do extra stuff along the way that might pop up. Using the times between sights, I ball parked a rough outline that left plenty of time in between for rest breaks, food breaks, and that ended each day near a “large” town so there’d be plenty of motels to stay in. However, I didn’t make one single reservation at a motel along the way because I didn’t want to be tied to a timeline. This was about the getting there. If we decided to stay an extra day somewhere or go see the largest ball of twine west of the Mississippi we could, without messing up all the reservations.

Armed with this info I approached the family for the sell. My family actually thought it was a cool idea. I had printed out information from the internet on all the major stops along the way so they could read ahead and it really sold them on seeing it all. My wife asked how close we'd get to Mesa, Arizona, where her Grandparents live and as it turned out we could pass right by, so we factored in an extra day to see them. That sold her. As for the kids, well, my daughter, a budding young photographer planned to take her stuffed frog, aptly named "Ribbit", along to get pics of him at all the points along the way as a "Where in the world's Froggy" kind of thing. My son packed his video games and I thought he was going to keep his head in them the whole trip but soon he took an interest in the sites and views. He soon put away his games for good and seemed to be enjoying himself very much and began to take an active participation in our adventure.

After work Friday we set off. While on the road we made a game of it. We sang goofy songs and played silly games - the alphabet game and the license plate game. We talked, read books, read about the next stop or sat quietly enjoying Gods majesty as displayed in the grandeur of the American Southwest. Having had a geology class in college, I bored the kids with geology lessons about the topography and geology of the region we were passing through. Good thing I brushed up on the internet!

In the second through tenth hours of the trip we realized just how big Texas is as I swore the odometer at times rolled backwards!

Predictably and almost immediately we had to start changing things. We rolled into Fort Stockton very late Friday to find out that with the increased oil prices, the oil industry was again booming in western Texas and there wasn't a single room available in town. So, we pressed on into Pecos where there was one room available.

We truly played things by ear, adjusting our agenda as we felt necessary. When Roswell, NM, had less to see than we thought, we pressed into Albuquerque for the night. We discovered that Albuquerque had much more to see than we originally thought and added the Petroglyphs and National Atomic Museum to our agenda since we were running a day ahead.

Above all, we met wonderful people all along the way, many of whom were roughly following the same southwest loop as us. From these folks we learned some tremendous things. One man in particular, gave us a tip to take Alt 89 out of Flagstaff to Sedona, AZ, which turned out to be a spectacularly beautiful drive through the mountains and valleys of the Coconino National Forest. I highly recommend it as a diversion! If I were to do it again, rather than press straight home from White Sands as we wound up doing, I'd spend a night in western Texas and visit the Caverns of Sonora to break up the final travel day.

As a vacation, it was wonderful! My family still talks about the trip, how we had a snowball fight on the south rim of the Grand Canyon, how silly the alien lamp posts looked in Roswell and how we went sleigh riding down the dunes at White Sands. Recently my son was studying erosion in school and took in photos that we took of the Grand Canyon to depict erosion visually. What greater example could there be? We truly made some life long memories and in the process knocked some items off my "bucket list"! I know for a fact that my family and I will plan another trip like this one. A few destinations come to mind immediately - Yosemite, Death Valley, Yellow Stone and Mount Rushmore to name a few.

If you have any stories of your own awesome trips, please share them with me at bray.james@sbcglobal.net. See you on the road!