

Shades Of Green

■ OPINION

Our second cross-country vacation was just the break I needed. With my daughter in Australia for at least a year, we flew out to Los Angeles to see her off and drive her car back to Orlando. Our 3,500-mile journey through winding canyons and across windswept deserts and prairies was a reminder of just how great it is to be an American.

We drove one way to California in the 1980s through the Sunbelt, seeing the Alamo, Carlsbad Caverns, the Painted Desert and the Grand Canyon. Now we were going to see the Heartland.

As a geology major, I had always wanted to also see the National Park “canyonlands” like Zion, Bryce and others in Utah. Our itinerary would traverse I-15 and I-70 with side trips crammed in along the way, including Dodge City, Kan., and the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America headquarters in Lawrence, Kan.

There were no red states or blues states, just United States. But they were colorful indeed: deserts of tan and white; mountains, mesas, buttes and canyons of red, purple, blue, green, gray and yellow; prairies of dark green alfalfa and cream-colored wheat stalk stubble; light and dark green leaves of hardwood forests and miles and miles of freshly tilled fields planted in wheat, corn and cotton. Driving in snow flurries in Vail Pass, Colo., was a different April experience.

The limestone, sandstone and slate cliffs that towered above us in Utah and Colorado told the story of ancient seabeds now thrust up thousands of feet that were slowly being sculpted by the forces of erosion. When you see ancient ocean floors literally touching the clouds, man’s influence on the planet is put into perspective.

Wildlife sightings were welcome as we noted mule deer, prairie dogs, chipmunks, turkey, pronghorn antelope, Steller’s blue jay and ring-necked pheasant. The No. 1 predator appeared to be vehicles, although we did see scores of hawks everywhere we went. Three of the six pheasants I saw were roadkill, with possums and skunks topping that list.

From the Mountains To the Prairies

BY JOEL JACKSON



A TRIP THROUGH
THE HEARTLAND
EXPOSES A NATION
FILLED WITH GRACE
AND CHARACTER

Strangest signage encountered was a couple of billboards in Kansas saying, “We’ve got land, water and power. We need people.” And the mile markers in Missouri were oddly overkill. Many states have mileage markers every mile. But in Missouri, the “Show Me” state, there were mileage marker every two-tenths of a mile. I have to wonder about that taxpayer expense.

Gas prices were higher in California and Florida than anywhere else. The cheapest was \$2.57 a gallon in Kansas, or maybe it was Missouri. The lack of traffic in Utah, Colorado and Kansas was welcome, but a malfunctioning cruise control made for tired, cramped legs.

The only other hitch came when we overshot Salina, Kan., trying to make a few more miles that day after visiting Dodge City. We pressed on only to find no room at the inn in Junction City. Seems the next day was the spring scrimmage game for Kansas State, and there wasn’t a room to be had. We had to press on another hundred miles to Topeka. That was a long day.

Best “down memory lane” moment was Tunica, Miss. My wife, Susie, lived in Tunica for one semester in the eighth grade. It was 1958. We found her house and her father’s old garment factory, now a warehouse. The publisher of the local Tunica Times knew her father by name, partly because her dad built the factory for Susie’s dad. Small world. Many residents still work the land, but a large number are now in the gaming industry. Tunica is the No. 3 gaming destination behind Las Vegas and Atlantic City.

We drove through 10 states to get back to Florida, and each reach region had enough similarities and unique differences to make it a memorable journey — even the second time around.

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