



OurWanderYears 2015

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Cover photo: The new rig, with the Yaris and the newly painted truck at Seminole Campground, North Fort Myers, Florida, December 2015.

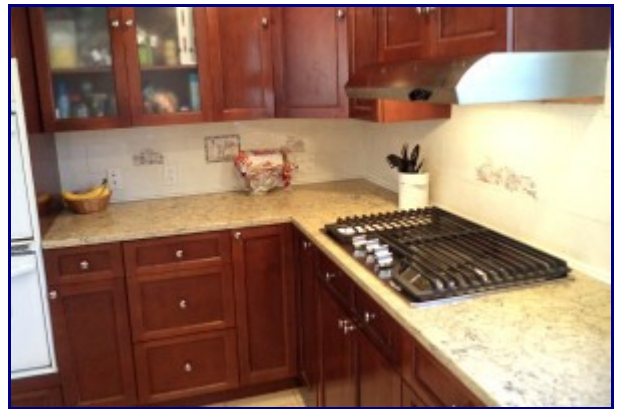
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So not Florida

29 Jan 2015

Because the house did not sell in the fall, we committed to staying in Massachusetts for the winter, living in the house and working on a series of minor improvements and repairs. And one major upgrade: replacing the countertop with beautiful new quartz.

We missed Florida. We missed the weather and we missed the camaraderie of our fellow RVers at [Seminole Campground](#) in North Fort Myers. We compensated for the camaraderie by having local friends and family, but there is no way we could compensate for the weather. Massachusetts winter weather sucks, unless you can hibernate or enjoy skiing, neither of which applies to us. But at least, until this weekend, we had very little snow.



New countertop

I had spent a total of maybe 15 minutes shoveling and throwing down salt.

That all changed on Monday, with the arrival of Winter Storm Juno. It stormed for 36 hours and produced about 26 inches of snow. My shoveling total increased to about 4 hours.

This is so not Florida.



Drifts



Shoveling the walk



Rusty in snow



Obstructed view

Trolling for miles

16 Feb 2015

My Visa account got hacked in early January. The hacker did the "can't remember password" thing and managed to guess the answers to my (so-called) security questions, then changed my password. I was notified by email that my password had changed, but didn't read the message until nearly a day after it happened. I immediately called and informed the company that the password change was NOT authorized. They immediately canceled the card and I was relieved to see no unauthorized purchases. I thought I had dodged an identity theft bullet.

However...

When I got my new card and logged in for the first time - about 5 days later - I noticed that my miles had not transferred. I called the company again and they assured me that the miles would appear, but might take a few more days.

Fast forward...

I accessed my account yesterday with the thought that I would redeem some miles for airline tickets I had recently purchased. But the miles were not there. Third call to Visa. The miles were gone - looted by the January hacker. 55,000 miles used to buy \$500 in Best Buy gift cards and 49,000 miles transferred to another account. Over \$1000 stolen. I guess thieves no longer need the card; they can just take the miles.

Visa said I will get the miles back. Meanwhile they have added another layer of security to my account.

But someone out there has acquired some fine electronics at Best Buy, courtesy of Visa.

Snowiest? Coldest? Why not both?

2 Mar 2015

We have just put the month of February, 2015, into the record book here in Boston. And what a month it was! Yes, it was the snowiest month since meteorological record keeping began in 1891 - some 124 years ago. It obliterated the old record of 44.5 inches with a new total of 65.5 inches - 20 inches more than any other month. Ever.

And none of it has melted because the month was the coldest February ever, second only to January, 1934, as the coldest month Boston has ever witnessed. And I can say I was here to see it.

I can also say I wish I wasn't.

"You guys don't do shit around here"

14 Mar 2015

We have had a brutal winter here in New England. Record cold, record snow. I have spent countless hours shoveling the driveway and the sidewalks. And once, early in the winter, I shoveled the street in front of my house, to make room for someone - a guest or a neighbor - who might need a place to park. I gave up on that after the third 2-foot storm. It just got to be too much, with no obvious benefit to me.

Meanwhile, my across-the-street neighbor, who has a pickup truck with a small plow, carved out a space in front of my next-door neighbor's house. He also did not keep up with the snow, but was able to 4-wheel over the ice to park there. However, because of the shoddy plowing job, his car juttied out into our narrow street, creating a hazard. I would not have been able to get my truck past his truck, should I have chosen to drive it rather than leaving it parked in the driveway. But, more to the point, there was no way a fire engine could have made it down the street.

But I didn't say anything.

Last Friday we were visited by Jett's two sisters. When I arrived home from work I found their car in the driveway. I looked for a spot on the back street, but, finding none there, decided to park in the empty space semi-cleared by my neighbor.

In Boston proper, it is a time-honored tradition that he who shovels out a parking space "owns" the space for some period of time - typically two weeks. Ownership is claimed by putting a "space saver" - a chair, small table or traffic cones - in the space. Those who ignore this ownership marker risk having their vehicle vandalized.

But even Boston limits this quasi-private ownership of public space. Making allowances for the extremely harsh winter, Boston allowed these space-savers to remain in place nearly a month. But about two weeks ago the city announced that space-savers were verboten and would be collected by the DPW.

I have rarely seen any space-savers in use in my suburban town, primarily, I think, because space is not so precious. My neighbor never used a space-saver and, in any case, the few seconds it took him to carve out the space with his plow hardly earned him any ownership rights. The question, in my mind, was why he didn't carve out a few more since it was so easy.

Anyway, back to Friday. As Jett, her sisters and I were discussing take-out options, we got a knock on our door. Jett answered. It was our neighbor, whom we have never met, who introduced himself by saying "You are parked in my spot!" Jett was taken aback, but stood her ground, bless her heart. She denied that he had any right to the public space. But he asserted that it was "his." Jett fetched me.

To me - without bothering to introduce himself - he again belligerently asserted his ownership of the space. I said "Are you serious?" - not quite believing that anyone could seriously be claiming ownership after such a long time. He said that he had "dug out the spot" (a small lie since he had done no digging at all), then, without even waiting for my response, said "You guys don't do shit around here."

I was stunned. And furious. After all, I had cleared my sidewalk after every storm (which is more than some on the street could claim) and have worked diligently at keeping the property looking good. Who was this guy and what was he talking about? Didn't matter, really. As he stomped down my front steps I followed him, cursing him along the way.

I had planned to find another space after leaving to get the take-out, but as I watched him rearrange the cars in his driveway (yes, he could have parked off-street but was too lazy to move the cars around), I lost whatever vestige of sympathy remained.

When I came back with the food, I parked again in the disputed spot.

I may go out and clear it a bit more. Then put down a space-saver.

Jerk.

Carnival Breeze – Days 1, 2 and 3

2 Apr 2015



The Breeze in Aruba

Jett and I are midway through a 9-day (8 night) Caribbean cruise on the *Carnival Breeze*, one of Carnival Cruise Line's biggest and best ships. Our itinerary includes stops in Grand Turk (Turks and Caicos Islands), La Romana (Dominican Republic), Curacao and Aruba. After the winter we have had, we felt the need to get some Caribbean sun.

But, if the first two days are any indication, we will be disappointed. It has been cloudy and cool, with a few rain showers sprinkled in, so to speak.

We started the trip by getting up Friday morning at 3:30am and driving to Providence for a 7:30 flight. Why Providence? Because we could get a Southwest flight

to Ft Lauderdale from there. Now, mind you, the *Breeze* docks in Miami. But - travel tip alert - it is often much cheaper to fly to Ft Lauderdale which is just 35 miles from Miami. There is even a train that connects the airports. My original plan was to fly into Ft Lauderdale and take that train to Miami and then get a taxi to the cruise terminal. But Carnival made it easy on us by offering a bus from Ft Lauderdale. So we flew into Ft Lauderdale Friday, stayed overnight at the airport Ramada Inn, then took the Carnival bus to the ship Saturday morning. Easy peasy. And we saved over \$600 in airfare by doing it that way. Yes, we had the cost of the hotel, but that was because we always fly in a day early - we got stuck once with a 16-inch snowfall and missed some of our vacation, so we vowed then that we would always get to our destination a day early. We figured that if there was ever a year where an early spring snowfall could delay us, it would be 2015.

It also turned out that Miami was having a huge music festival last weekend and hotel rooms for under \$500 were non-existent. Just another reason to pick Ft Lauderdale.

It was sunny and warm when we arrived at the Ramada and we had drinks and lunch at the poolside bar. We were starting to unwind, getting our heads into vacation mode (which was somewhat difficult because we were anxiously awaiting word on an anticipated offer to purchase our house - but that's another story). Then it clouded up, the rains came and the temperature dropped 15 degrees. It seems that the jetstream, which had been dipping south along

the US east coast all winter, bringing all that snow to Massachusetts, had followed us down to Florida. Everyone commented on how unusual it was to be that cold in March. Well, we have heard THAT before. It wasn't the weather we wanted, but at least it wasn't snowing.

It was cool - 70ish - when we boarded the ship. There were occasional sunny breaks, but mostly it was cloudy, cool and breezy. We wore our hoodies as we got familiar with the ship.



FLL, waiting for the bus to the ship



The pool area at the Ramada Inn



The colorful atrium

The *Breeze* is the largest cruise ship we have ever been on - about 1,000 feet long with a capacity for about 3,700 passengers, served by a crew of 1,400. That is over 5,000 people living on this floating city.

It was built in 2012 and still has a fresh feel. It is colorful and very tastefully decorated. It has a 9-story atrium with glass elevators. Lots of restaurants, bars, several pools, a spa, a mini-golf course, basketball courts, a jogging track, kids activity areas, two dining rooms, a shopping arcade, a mega-video screen above the main pool and, of course, a casino. It also has a wonderful water slide and a ropes course.

We have a balcony cabin on Deck 11 - one level above the Lido deck (with the pools and the buffet). It is a good location as we can get anywhere pretty quickly. And we are just steps from the main smoking area - a critical space for Jett. It was one of the smaller balcony cabins we have had, but it meets our needs. Everything works.

Speaking of smoking, Marlboros on the ship have a price tag of \$28 per carton. Read that and weep, Massachusetts smokers.

Day 1 was basically a day to get familiar with the ship and our dinner companions. We dine at 8:15 with four

other couples: a career army couple now stationed in Virginia, a couple from northern Mississippi, a couple from Alabama and a couple from Texas. Yes, we are the only Yankees in the bunch. I don't know if the South will rise again, but it will certainly go cruising.

Day 2 was a day at sea and it was very cool and cloudy. Jett and I aren't big pool people, but it probably would have been warmer in the pool than on the breezy deck. The high was around 70.

Day 3 was our day on Grand Turk. Or was supposed to be. It was so windy that morning that the captain declared that it was too dangerous to dock, so we just waved at the island

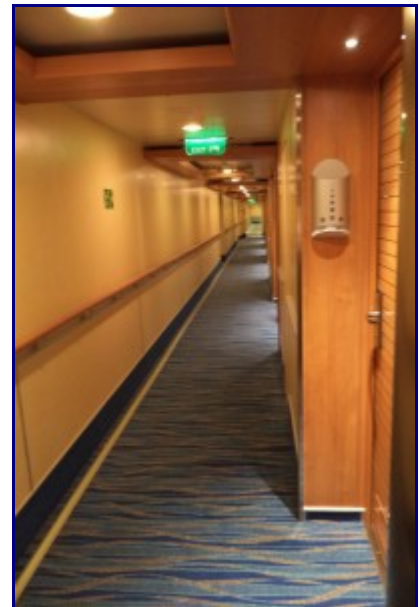
and moved on. That was disappointing as we had a snorkel excursion scheduled and were looking forward to seeing what is, by all reports, a beautiful (but small) island. But snorkeling on a windy day is never fun, so it is probably best that we didn't do it. We have another snorkeling trip planned for Aruba.



Our cabin



Our balcony



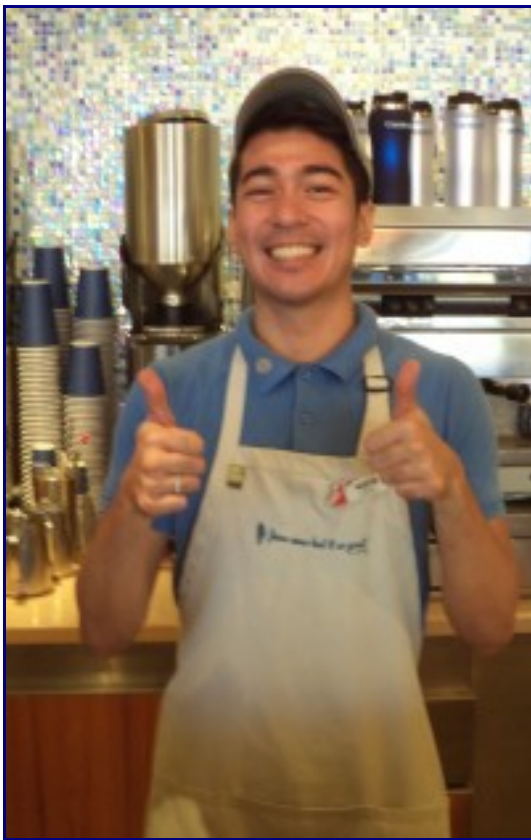
Our hallway

We were pretty certain, when we boarded the ship, that there would be a coffee bar on board. Jett needs her coffee in the morning and I need Jett to have her coffee in the morning. Jett without coffee is not pretty. The coffee in the dining rooms, though adequate, was not the high-quality brew that she loves. And no cappuccino in the dining rooms. But by the end of Day 2 we had not found it and I was getting seriously worried. Fortunately, on Day 3 we discovered its location. In retrospect, it should not have been such a mystery as it is in exactly the same place on the *Breeze* as it was on the *Valor*. This one was manned by "Martin," a very cute barrista from the Philippines. By the end of the cruise he and Jett will be BFFs.

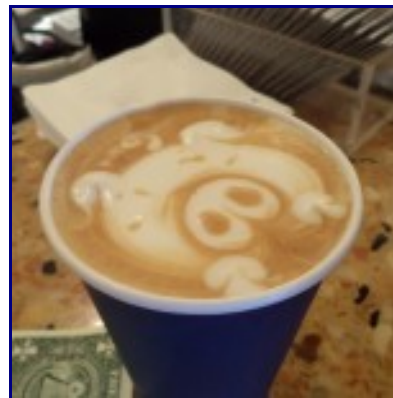


Our vanity area

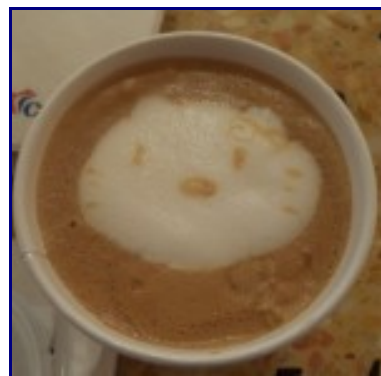
It turns out that Martin is very skilled at foam art - drawing pictures in the foam topping a cappuccino.



Martin



"Piggy"



"Hello Kitty"

Days 4, 5 and 6 are all days in port: La Romana (D.R.), Curacao and Aruba. If it isn't too windy.



"rita" (aka "reta")



Theater stage



Theater seating



Dining room



Wine dispenser



Outdoor smoking lounge

Carnival Breeze – Day 4 – La Romana

3 Apr 2015

We finally got to dock at a Caribbean island on Day 4 of our cruise. And it was one of the places we have never been: the Dominican Republic. Specifically, [La Romana](#), a port on the southeast corner of the island and the third-largest city in the DR.

We had been told not to expect too much - no shopping, no scenic vistas, no beautiful beaches - so we weren't disappointed when we docked in an industrial area, across the channel from a very old merchant ship and with a nice view of a factory with black smoke billowing from the stacks.



Docked in La Romana

But the sun was shining and it was warm, so we were eager to explore.

Most of the people who disembarked at La Romana had booked a Carnival-sponsored excursion. There were excursions to [Altos de Chavon](#), a replica medieval Italian village, or a remote beach. Having no interest in either replica villages or long bus rides, we took a bus into beautiful(?) downtown La Romana. There was a large native crafts bazaar there. We bought some souvenirs from some very aggressive vendors, wandered a few blocks in an unsuccessful attempt to find a realtor, just to see what kind of property was available, then returned to the ship.

We won't be returning to La Romana anytime soon. The best thing about La Romana? It's not as crappy as Belize City.

Jett had a good night at the casino, winning over \$150. I was also up for a while, but outstayed my welcome, finishing down about \$70. But a net win for the night. Probably our first win ever on a cruise ship. We also stayed awake past 3am - another cruise first.



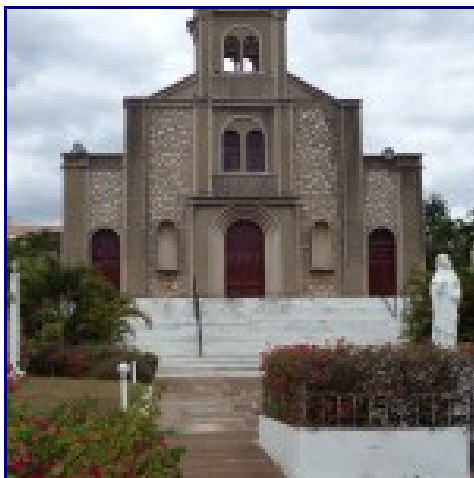
Nathan's hot dogs at the dock



Jett with feral dog



Crafts bazaar



Interesting church



Luis Tiant

Carnival Breeze – Day 5 - Curacao

17 Apr 2015



The *Breeze* at night

Curacao was another first-time visit for us. It was an unusual docking as we were ashore late - departure was 10pm. That gave us a rare view of our cruise ship at night.

I had seen the photos of the colorful buildings along the harbor in Curacao and seeing them in person didn't disappoint. But I was not prepared for the drawbridge. I am talking about the [Queen Emma Bridge](#), a floating pedestrian drawbridge that spans the harbor - a distance of over 500 feet. Rather than lifting to let a ship pass under, it pivots on the far end until it hugs the shore, then, when the ship has passed, swings back again. Think matador.



The Queen Emma Bridge

At the time we docked I was vaguely aware of the existence of a bridge across the harbor, but thought that it was for automobile traffic. Jett and I tried to get a taxi to downtown, but the dispatcher looked at us like we were crazy (ok, he actually looked at us like we were stupid, but I'm trying to maintain my dignity) and said that we would be better off walking - about a 10 minute stroll. When I later realized that automobiles must go several miles further than a pedestrian to get to the same place, I understood. Not only was walking cheaper and healthier, it was also faster.



The Queen Emma, opened

So we strolled. And just as we started across the bridge, bells started ringing and the gate closed. I figured that something was going to happen, but didn't know what. I certainly didn't expect the bridge to swing like a garden gate. Then, when the bridge started moving, I wondered how long we would be delayed in getting downtown. This was one of those moments when it pays to be a lemming, because the (sizable) crowd started moving, en masse, upstream. We joined the flow and found a ferry waiting, just past the point where the end of the fully opened drawbridge came to a rest. We hopped on board and, in about 5 minutes, were deposited on the opposite shore.

Curacao is Dutch, but in many ways it reminded me of Bermuda, a very British island. Both have colorful buildings, both are very clean, both have very civil drivers and both have no night life. We had a beer and a coffee (I will let you decide who had which) and wandered about a bit shopping and looking for a post office. But at 6pm the place shut down. Never mind that 3,000 affluent cruise passengers were in town and eager to spend.

We were not ready for a full meal, but if we had wanted a bite, then I could have had the barracuda. I was tempted to order a plate, just to see what it was like, but, like rattlesnake bites, it will have to wait.

While we were in downtown, the [Star Clipper](#) docked. This is a very cool cruise ship. We will have to look into booking a future trip on it. It is very photogenic.



Barracuda on the menu



Downtown, from the opposite shore



More colorful buildings



Star Clipper



Star Clipper



Star Clipper and Breeze



Twilight



Yup, it's Curacao



Cafe



Painted cow

Carnival Breeze – Day 6 – Aruba

19 Apr 2015



A rare Sparky-and-Jett photo

Aruba was the one destination on the itinerary that we had visited before. We are probably in the minority as we are not enchanted by the island. We found it windy, bustling, overbuilt and visually uninteresting - it is basically a sandbar with big hotels. The beaches, while very nice, are not noticeably better than beaches that can be found on dozens of other islands. All of which explains why we chose to spend our Aruba time on a snorkeling excursion.

The snorkel boat was the *Mi Dushi* - "my sweet" in the local Dutch dialect. We traveled for 40 minutes to get to the first snorkel site, then visited two more before returning to the *Breeze*. Total excursion time: 5.5 hours - long enough to get a serious sunburn, which we did. I fried my face (I have gone through 3 layers of skin since the end of the cruise) and even burned my scalp. But I had only minor burns elsewhere. Jett got a nasty burn on the tops of her feet - very painful - but apparently was smarter about protecting her face as she did not peel at all.

I obviously should have been smarter about the Aruba sun. In April the sun in Aruba is about as intense as it



About to board

is anywhere on earth. I knew this; I just didn't apply the knowledge. Or the sunscreen.



Preparing for snorkeling



Pirate ship

Anyway, it was worth it, I guess. The snorkeling was superb. The first and third sites were in shallow water with good light and lots of colorful fish. The second site was over a German freighter, scuttled by its captain at the start of World War II when he learned that it was going to be seized by the Dutch.

I snorkeled with a T-shirt - a smart decision which probably saved my back. It also made me easy to spot in the water. I had an underwater camera with me and will add some of those later, if they turn out to be interesting, but it was old technology (film) that requires processing.

We had to endure a very long line when reboarding the ship. I am not sure why the process was so much slower in Aruba than elsewhere. It was very windy, but the ship and its gangways did not seem to be moving much. Yet they were letting only a few people board at a time. Even as the 4pm departure time approached, the line snaked down the quay and into the terminal. So we were a few minutes late pushing off.

But with two sea days ahead, who cared?



Sparky in the water



Leaving Aruba

Carnival Breeze – Days 7, 8 and 9 – At sea and in the Everglades

26 Apr 2015



Beautiful sunset

We like ports of call, too, and shore excursions, but one of the best things about cruising is sailing along on the sunny open ocean, with nothing to do. Having two long, lazy days at sea to end this cruise - with beautiful sunsets - was just fine with us.

The final days of a cruise - especially days at sea - are an opportunity to do all the things that you planned to do when you boarded, but somehow never got around to it. Things on that list for me this time:

- play mini-golf
- do the ropes course
- have sushi
- have a burger at the popular poolside burger joint
- get a hot dog from the hot dog cart
- check out the "Serenity" adults-only lounge
- catch an after-dinner show
- listen to "Woodstock Generation"

"Woodstock Generation" was one of the bands that played daily on board. We caught fragments of their repertoire when we passed their venue - most often the lounge area adjacent to the coffee bar, which we frequented. They struck me as being a very talented cover band, with a front singer that could do a credible job of channeling Janis Joplin. But, like the ropes course, the mini-golf the Serenity lounge and the hot dog cart, I never did check them off my list. I don't feel bad about that; it leaves something to do next time.

The hot dog cart is classified as a "good try" - I twice tried to get there, but never found it open. I am not sure it was ever open on this cruise, so I will give myself partial credit for that one. In any case, I did manage to get a very good hot dog - with sauerkraut, of course - at the deli.

The hot dog was good, but the burger was great. We had marveled at the long lines at this poolside stand throughout the cruise and had made some snarky comments to each other on how an American tourist just couldn't survive without a burger, regardless of how many other international dining options were available. But, after tasting one, I withdraw all snarkiness. This burger was damn good. One of the best I ever had. Way better than the pricy one I had in Curacao, and totally free. Waiting in a long line would definitely be justified.

I also sampled the on-board sushi. I was not blown away by this fare. It was good, but not great. And it cost me \$15 as the sushi joint, unlike the burger joint, was not free.

We also did not make it to an after-dinner show on the last two nights at sea. Frankly, the entertainment on this cruise was not great. We saw about 20 minutes of the "Divas" show - a tribute to female singers - and walked out. It just wasn't very good. Other shows involved juggling. Not our cup of tea.

So how did we pass our days? Well, we did stop by the casino from time to time - long enough to make our



Delicious burger



Sashimi meal



Brave Jett

cruise casino experience a net loss, which was expected - but we also spent quite a few very pleasant hours on the smoking side of the promenade deck playing canasta. I didn't think I would ever say this, but I am beginning to enjoy canasta. Beating the Canasta Queen (aka Jett) once in those two days was a highlight of these final days of the cruise.

We also bought some more cigarettes on board and then spent way too much time trying to figure out how they were going to complicate our disembarkation. We heard conflicting stories - from other passengers and from an internet search - as to whether the 5 extra cartons (we are each allowed to bring one carton back into the states) would be taxed or confiscated. I even stood in a long line to ask Carnival staff that question. Their unsatisfying answer? It is up to the discretion of the customs inspector. I guess if he is having a bad day he can just take the cigarettes.

We were taking a shore excursion in Miami - an airboat ride in the Everglades - so we were prioritized for disembarkation (which was one reason why we booked the trip - the other being that we had lots of time

to kill). So whether it was because we got off early, or that we looked like nice folks, or that the inspector got laid that morning, the result was that we were waved through customs, with our 5 extra cartons of Marlboros intact.

The airboat trip was interesting. We learned a lot about the Everglades and saw a few alligators in the wild. We also saw a show about alligators and tried to grab a bite at the ridiculously overcrowded cafe, but instead just hung out, enjoying the beautiful weather and speculating how the business could make a lot more money on busy days like this by putting a couple of food carts - and maybe an ice cream stand - outside. No charge for the advice, guys.

Our flight was not until 8:30pm and the bus dropped us off at the Ft Lauderdale airport at 1:30, so we had some time to kill. I read some and then got the laptop out to check emails. That is when I discovered that the seemingly harmless drop of the computer case when we were getting off the bus resulted in a cracked screen. Damn! It still worked, but I couldn't look at the upper left quadrant of any maximized page. So I reduced the size and started researching how to replace the screen. Another story for another day.

We also tracked down a coffee place where we bought some not-very-good and outrageously expensive coffee and pastries. And we played some cards, napped a bit and watched lots of sunburned folks (like me) getting ready to go back to their real lives.

Our uneventful flight back to Providence deposited us - at midnight - into rainy 38-degree New England "welcome back, sucker" weather. Great to be back.

Yeah.



Airboat



Gator on the hoof

Practically homeless

17 May 2015

We sold our house in Medford MA on Friday. Jett shed a tear as she locked the door for the last time. My eyes remained dry, but even I had to acknowledge the significance of the event: for the first time since 1978, I do not own a residence. We are now back in our RV. The plan is to stay in MA until October, then... we aren't quite sure. But we will **NOT** be spending the winter in the north. We have lost all interest in shoveling snow.

Moving was more difficult than it should have been. Most of our few remaining pieces of furniture went to my son and Jett's brother. But I was surprised that it took one 24-foot U-Haul truckload and two "Beverly Hillbillies" pickup truckloads to get the job done. Plus we have a small (5x5x8) storage unit filled chock full. For a house that felt empty, we sure had a lot of shit.

Then there was the little matter of my truck. "Big Red", the GMC 3500 that had taken us to Florida, Oregon, California and Texas with nary a hiccup, threw a shoe a couple of weeks before the close. A bearing in the engine froze, causing the serpentine belt to snap, which in turn caused a catastrophic loss of control over steering and braking. Fortunately, this catastrophic failure occurred in our driveway, which is about the only place it could have happened without putting lives at risk. Very lucky. But the repairs were in excess of \$1500.

Then, on Sunday, May 3 - five days before the closing and while I was hauling Patience to the Minuteman Campground, to prep it for the trade-in (yes, we have upgraded our rig - more on that later), the GMC threw another shoe. This time it was a brake line failure - another loss of braking, this time while towing a 14,000 lb fifth wheel. I managed to get the RV to the campground, but the truck was leaking fluid badly by the time I got there. I got some brake fluid at the nearby Citgo. The comment from the clerk: "This is your lucky day; this is our last can." I didn't feel lucky, though I have to admit to a modicum of relief at not killing anyone (including myself). With Jett following in the Yaris, I managed to gingerly get the GMC to the dealer's lot - some 20 miles where I tried very hard to not use the brakes.

Cost of the second repair this month: \$1,873. That is over \$3,000 in truck repairs in one month. Plus I had to hire a guy to haul the Open Range down to Camping World in Berkley MA and pick up the new RV. Cost: \$320.

I think I have sprung a leak in my wallet.

On the day before the closing, Jett discovered a screw in the right rear tire on the Yaris. So as she was doing the last-minute cleaning, I was with the Yaris down at the local service station, getting the tire repaired. That was only \$20, but the cumulative effect was much larger. I really felt physically battered by all of the problems we had in these last two weeks.

But we got it done. We are out. We are, in practical terms, homeless.



The Medford house, last day

A lifetime on a laptop

31 May 2015

For those (few) readers who have noticed that I haven't blogged lately, the reason is this: my laptop died. Yes, the Dell T5510 in which I had just invested about \$100 to replace the screen and power cord decided that it was time to give up the semiconductor ghost. I used it in the morning, took it into the office but didn't use it, and when I tried to use it that night at home it was just flat out dead. Wouldn't turn on.

Panic.

One of the side effects of a life lived on the road, in an RV, is an increased dependence on one's computer. Jett and I are, of necessity, nearly paperless. All of our financial records, along with emails and various supporting applications (e.g., GPS map downloads) reside on the laptop's hard disk. Losing the use of the laptop brings many aspects of RV life to a grinding halt.

I am not a complete idiot. Of course I back up that hard disk regularly, but the most recent backup was about 10 days prior to the crash. Losing even 10 days of records is not a great option. I suspected that the problem did not involve the hard disk and that the data were probably recoverable. So while I looked for a new laptop, I asked Jett to stop in at Best Buy and see if they could transfer the disk to an external drive. But, for reasons I still don't understand, they were either unable or unwilling to do that; instead they wanted to download subsets of files based on some utilitarian categorization. They asked questions like "what email client do you use?" I tried to get through to them that they shouldn't care; I just wanted the entire contents of the disk transferred. They tried to patiently explain that I would need to reinstall software (which I knew) and I tried to patiently explain that I didn't care. We never did get to a point of understanding, so I instructed Jett to walk out and I proceeded to find an independent contractor to do my bidding.

For the cost of a 2TB disk (\$103) and a disk-to-disk copy job (\$75) I was able to successfully recover the contents of the disk. Then the real work began: reinstalling and reconfiguring the software. Fortunately, I had the foresight to save the downloads of the most recent versions of Quicken and Thunderbird (or perhaps benefitted from my failure to clean up the Downloads directory) and was able to reinstall everything that I use regularly from the recovered disk. The hardest part was reconfiguring the folders on Thunderbird. That took some research and hard work.

All told, I probably spent over 20 hours, spread over a week, on recovering my files and getting the new laptop (a Toshiba) into a functioning state. There are probably a few things that remain to be done. For example, I just recovered the Garmin GPS update software today. But I am once again up and running and this post is proof of that.

One thing I decided to not recover was my Windows 7 operating system. The new Toshiba came with Windows 8 already installed. I probably could have overwritten it with Windows 7, but decided to get with the program and "upgrade" to Windows 8.

It isn't much of an upgrade, folks. I had to spend several hours figuring out how to disable some of the Windows 8 "charms" which I found to be less than charming. They were so annoying that I was contemplating returning the laptop and finding one with Windows 7 instead. But now that I have de-charmed Windows 8 it is tolerable, though still very unfriendly. I am beginning to understand why Apple is so successful.

The end of our Patience

1 Jun 2015



The Open Range, traded in

We loved our Open Range fifth wheel, a.k.a. "Patience." But some of the reasons that made it right for us - the bunkhouse to house the grandchildren being at the top of that list - are no longer relevant. And it was relatively dark and had a number of maintenance issues - most notably the slide cable unreliability, the persistent blowouts and the leak in the bunkhouse slide - that made it a less-than-ideal place to live. With the sale of our house we felt justified in looking for an upgrade.

So what kind of RV would be better? Well, we were still committed to a fifth wheel as we believe they provide the most comfortable and economical living space of any RV type. We also needed the one-and-a-half baths; Jett would divorce me if I asked her to live in an RV with just one bath. Those were the only "must haves" but there were a lot of other desirable characteristics which could be boiled down to this: more living space. We wanted something that was more comfortable for full-time RV living than the Open Range. Something brighter and cheerier. Maybe a larger refrigerator and a ceiling fan. More storage. A real sofa on which I could nap. Comfortable seating for four in the "living room" and at the table. Better outside lighting. An automatic leveling system. Hydraulic slides (with no cables!). Two air conditioners.

Also, based on some models we had seen at an RV show, the "front bath" layout was very attractive. By putting the full bath in the front of the RV, the space wasted by the hallway was eliminated and the bathroom became much larger and more comfortable.

So I started by constructing a list of fifth wheel models with a bath and a half with the full bath up front. There were about 10 such models. I then conducted a nationwide search for used RVs from this list. And I found...

nothing. Well, almost nothing. I did find some used ones in Minnesota and Oregon and maybe a few in Texas. But I wasn't about to travel 2,000 miles to buy an RV.

One of the reasons for the dearth of used RVs of this type is that they didn't exist prior to the 2012 model year, which meant that an owner would have to have held it for less than 3 years to be for sale used now. I suspect that the few who had these models liked them and didn't feel like dumping them so soon.

So I looked for new 2015 models. And found... damn few in New England. But [Camping World of Berkley MA](#) had two Heartland Bighorn 3875FBs in stock. So we decided to go take a look.

Of course we fully intended that it would just be a scouting expedition, but the trip down there was over 60 miles, so we weren't eager to make many of those trips. Between some aggressive selling and the model selling itself, we were hooked. So, in late March, while the Open Range was still buried under tons of snow, we signed the contract, trading in the Open Range for the amount we owed on it.

We took possession on May 6, hauling the Open Range down to Berkley and hauling the Bighorn back up to Littleton. And that was the end of our Patience. I hope it finds a good family.

The photo is our last view of Patience as she sat in the Camping World parking lot. I felt more emotion leaving her than I did leaving the house that I had owned for 10 years. So many memories...

I could try to describe our new RV, but I will instead suggest that you find a YouTube video (e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsfkBR5ILT4>). The model shown here is not identical - we have stainless steel appliances, for example - but it is very similar.

I can tell you that it is as nice as it looks.

Executing the swap was an ordeal. More on that next.

Our new Heartland BigHorn 3875FB

26 Jul 2015

Yes, we traded in Patience - our Open Range 399BHS - in favor of a brand spanking new Heartland Big Horn 3875FB. We plan to travel for at least 3 more years and, with the sale of the house, felt justified in upgrading to a unit that better fit our current needs. We don't have a separate bunkhouse bedroom for guests now, which was great when the grandkids visited, but was used too seldom to justify the use of that space. We opted for a unit which provides a larger, more comfortable living space for Jett and me.

Our new home has just one bedroom, but it equipped with a king size bed and a better TV - the two things Jett needs for a good night's sleep. It has a bath-and-a-half, as did the Open Range, but the full bath is more spacious (and is, in fact, larger than the main bath in our house) and the half bath is much more comfortable (and with more storage) than the old one. The kitchen boasts a full-size side-by-side residential refrigerator and a larger convection microwave. The living room has a full-size sofa which is great for napping, two wonderful recliners and a very nice 46" television with Blu-Ray DVD player. There are more windows, two air conditioners, LED lighting and outlets everywhere. The storage is amazing, both in the living area and in the basement. The main slides are hydraulic (no more snapped cables!), the stabilizers are hydraulic and self-leveling and the electric umbilical is on a powered reel. Rather than wrestling with a stiff power line on a cold morning, I can now just press a button! Ah, heaven!

All-in-all, we are very happy with the layout and the general living comfort of the new RV. To see what I am talking about, view this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKLsKUVIQvk>.

But...



Our new 3875FB

The "initial quality" of the workmanship has been a disappointment. The very first time we dropped the hydraulic landing legs, one of the hydraulic pistons leaked. In the two months since that day we have encountered the following problems:

- All three sinks have leaked. One leak was due to poor sealing of the under-counter sink, one was due to a faulty coupling on a cold water line and one was due to a loose drain seal. We really didn't expect to be dealing with numerous plumbing problems in a new vehicle.
- Two hinges have detached from the cabinet doors.
- The rear window (by the sofa), if opened, cannot be closed without pressure from outside.
- The Dyson cordless vacuum cleaner was DOA.
- The LED lights over the recliners flicker.
- There is a ripple in the kitchen linoleum, due, we think, to an object being caught under the main slide before it reached the dealer.



Hydraulic leak

We are currently working on getting these issues fixed (and, in fact, are "homeless" because the new unit is back at Camping World being worked on), including the complete rupture of the hydraulic line that occurred when we lifted the landing jacks for the trip to CW. Heartland, to their credit, has been very understanding and

cooperative. The service at Camping World, by comparison, has been abysmal. We have been on the receiving end of rude receptionists ("The service department looks busy right now so they probably won't answer the phone. Call back later.") and service staff ("I don't have the Heartland number here. Just Google it."). We can never get a straight story from CW. When asked about the linoleum, we were told that it was a discontinued item (hard to believe, but true) and that Heartland had recommended that they cut a patch out from under the sink (untrue; Heartland says that would never recommend such an action). We were later told the replacement linoleum had arrived. Also untrue. And when the replacement Dyson arrived, they wanted us to come down to Berkley (round trip 150 miles) to pick it up rather than spending the \$20 it would cost to ship it to us. They finally relented and shipped it, but only after telling us how they were making this special effort just for us.

Gee, thanks.

Now they have received the second set of keys (the unit came with just one set) and, unbelievably, are balking at mailing them to us. A security issue, they say, at which Heartland scoffs.

When we bought the Big Horn we also purchased the optional "protection package" from CS - about \$2,000 worth of coatings for the exterior paint, the interior carpets and other "soft surfaces." But we can see no evidence that these coatings had actually been applied. When we asked what proof they could give us that the work had actually been done, they said we had the receipt. We had to explain that we know what we paid for, we just wanted to see proof that we had received what we bought. They quickly - too quickly, we think - volunteered to reapply the protection.

Jett is insisting that she be there to watch them apply the protection this "second time."



Our ex-RV

Meanwhile, the Open Range is still available at CW Berkley. If anyone needs a well-loved and widely-towed fifth wheel, go talk to the people at Camping World.

But if they offer you a "protection package" just say no.

Yes, I am still alive

6 Sep 2015

Thanks for asking.

I have not posted to my blog since July 26 - 6 weeks! But I have been busy. VERY busy. Mostly with work and our rental property, but also with planning our future.

Just to catch you up on our plans: we are heading to Florida for the winter. We will be there from mid-November to mid-April. After that... not sure, though most likely we will be back in New England somewhere. We have committed to attending the National Escapade in Essex Junction, VT, from July 24 to 29, 2016. But the rest of the summer... dunno.

This uncertainty is due to my intent to retire at the end of September which meant that being in a place where I could commute to Cambridge was no longer a requirement. I had already informed my boss of my intention but had not yet given notice. But that plan is now moot because on Tuesday, 4 weeks to the day before I expected to retire, I was *laid off!* Before you cry for me, Argentina, understand that this is actually a huge boon as I am

receiving 9 weeks of severance, plus a cash-out of nearly 3 weeks of accumulated vacation time. I was expecting to get the vacation cash-out (though I was planning to take some vacation days this month) and also expected 4 more weeks of pay, but the layoff gives me 5 weeks of pay that I wasn't expecting. Sweet!

I suppose it is possible that the company did this because it benefitted me, but more likely it is because it is a huge corporation that simply wasn't aware of my intentions. Don't know, don't care. I will take the money and run.

It also means that I don't have to work in September. To me this is the same as getting an additional 4 weeks of PTO - another huge boon! I have a long list of tasks that need to be completed before heading south and I was worried about finding time to do them all. I am no longer worried.

We did not sell our rental property and have not yet found tenants for the 2 empty units, so getting that situation stabilized in my most urgent concern. I will probably be spending at least 4 days on site there in September, painting, fixing, cleaning and interviewing. I also have a number of financial and RV-related chores. But I now have time for all of them.

The trip south is planned for 41 days and includes a week in Bushnell, FL, which we will use to establish Florida residency. As of early November, we will no longer be Massachusetts residents! For me that will be the end of a 48-year residency.

Early retirement in name only

20 Sep 2015

I was laid off on September 2. It is now September 20. So I have had 18 days to settle in to the "do nothing" lifestyle. Except that, so far, retirement has been more demanding than work. Every day has been busy from dawn to dusk. Much of my time has been devoted to transitional tasks - getting insurance set, completing my layoff paperwork, getting our investment property positioned for remote ownership and prepping for the trip to Florida.

The preparation work includes planning the route - with great attention to low clearances as our new rig is about 13' 5" at the highest point, which is almost 8" taller than Patience - and booking RV parks. I also adjusted the height of the hitch. We traveled for 3 years with the old rig using the lowest (of 4) height settings on the hitch, but were never able to get it to ride level; Patience was always "nose up" which put extra weight on the rear axle. Which, in turn, contributed to the blowouts that we experienced. The new rig, on the other hand, is definitely "nose down" at the lowest setting, so I (with great trepidation) adjusted the height of the hitch. That involved removing the 4 humongous bolts that hold it together, lifting the top portion and re-bolting. The trepidation came from the knowledge that any screwup could literally be fatal, to ourselves or others. Or, if I damaged any of the bolts, I could leave the rig in an untowable state until repaired. But it turned out to be pretty straightforward. It is now at the second-from-the-top setting; the top setting was so high it prevented me from closing the top on the bed of the pickup. At this setting the rig still rides a bit nose-down, but much less so. It should be fine.

So now the truck is fully prepared for the trip and the RV is nearly so. I want to re-pack the basement to discard some unused items and to free a little storage space. And I need to check the tire pressure one more time, as I do before each trip. But then, two weeks from today, we will be on our way. 41 days (with 12 travel days) and just over 2,000 miles to Florida, to arrive November 14.

There, maybe, I will find that "do nothing" lifestyle.

A farewell to Boston

24 Sep 2015



Fenway Park, of course

We will soon be leaving the Boston area, which I have called home for 48 years, and don't know when we will be back again. Boston's farewell present to us has been spectacularly beautiful September weather, so when I went into Boston for a dental appointment yesterday I took the opportunity to wander around and take some photos. I have also included some photos from the family gathering in August during which - what does this mean? - I took almost no pictures of family but quite a few of Boston. The August gathering featured a trip to Fenway for a game between the Red Sox and the Mariners (won by Boston, 22-10), a lunch at [Jacob Wirth](#) and a walk through downtown Boston, Faneuil Hall Marketplace and the North End.

The walk through Boston included stops at the site of the Boston Massacre, a few moments watching break dancing near Faneuil Hall, free cannoli and champagne in the North End and a beer at a cafe near the TD Garden to cap it off. A very fine day, indeed.

I may as well include September 2, the day I got laid off. I celebrated my "misfortune" with a fish sandwich and beer lunch at the Kinsale Pub, near Boston's City Hall. Another fine day in all respects.

Yesterday, before and after my dental appointment, I wandered through the Back Bay and South End neighborhoods. It was a picture-perfect day for photos and I captured some of the more dramatic buildings in Boston.

Thanks for the memories, Boston. And the nice weather.



Layoff lunch



Kinsale Pub



Granary Burial Ground



Entering the North End



Boston Public Library



Arlington St Church



Trinity Church



First Baptist Church



Commonwealth Avenue



Public Garden

A farewell to Cambridge

24 Sep 2015



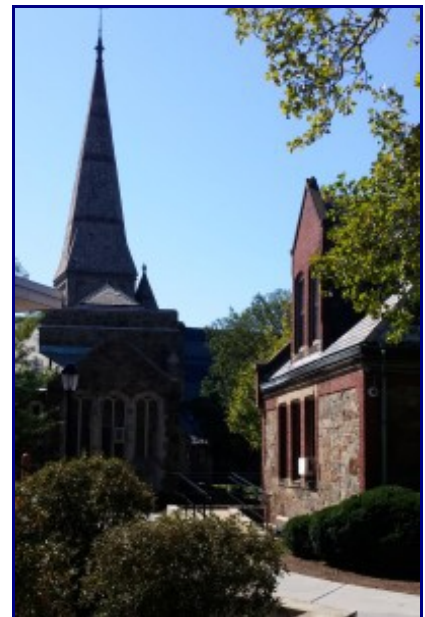
My breakfast spot

If you are familiar with the Boston area, you know that Boston and Cambridge, though physically adjacent (separated only by the Charles River), are miles apart in atmosphere and attitude. Often called the "People's Republic", Cambridge is a left-wing paradise while Boston is more blue-collar. Hence I will bid a separate farewell to each.

Though I spent very little time in Harvard Square as a student, I thoroughly enjoy the place now. After dropping Jett off at Mt Auburn Hospital for a minor medical procedure, I walked the mile to Harvard Square to have breakfast and enjoy yet another beautiful



Harvard dorm

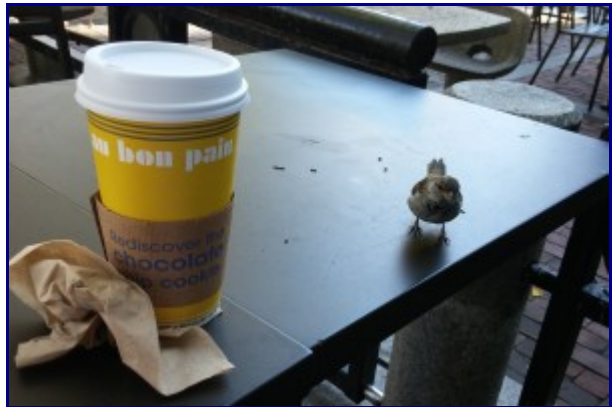


Divinity School

September day. I got a coffee and a chocolate croissant at the *Au Bon Pain* at the Holyoke Center, just across Massachusetts Avenue from the main entrance to Harvard Yard, and spent a very pleasant hour reading, accompanied by a very friendly sparrow.



Breakfast



My breakfast buddy



Harvard Yard



Lesley College



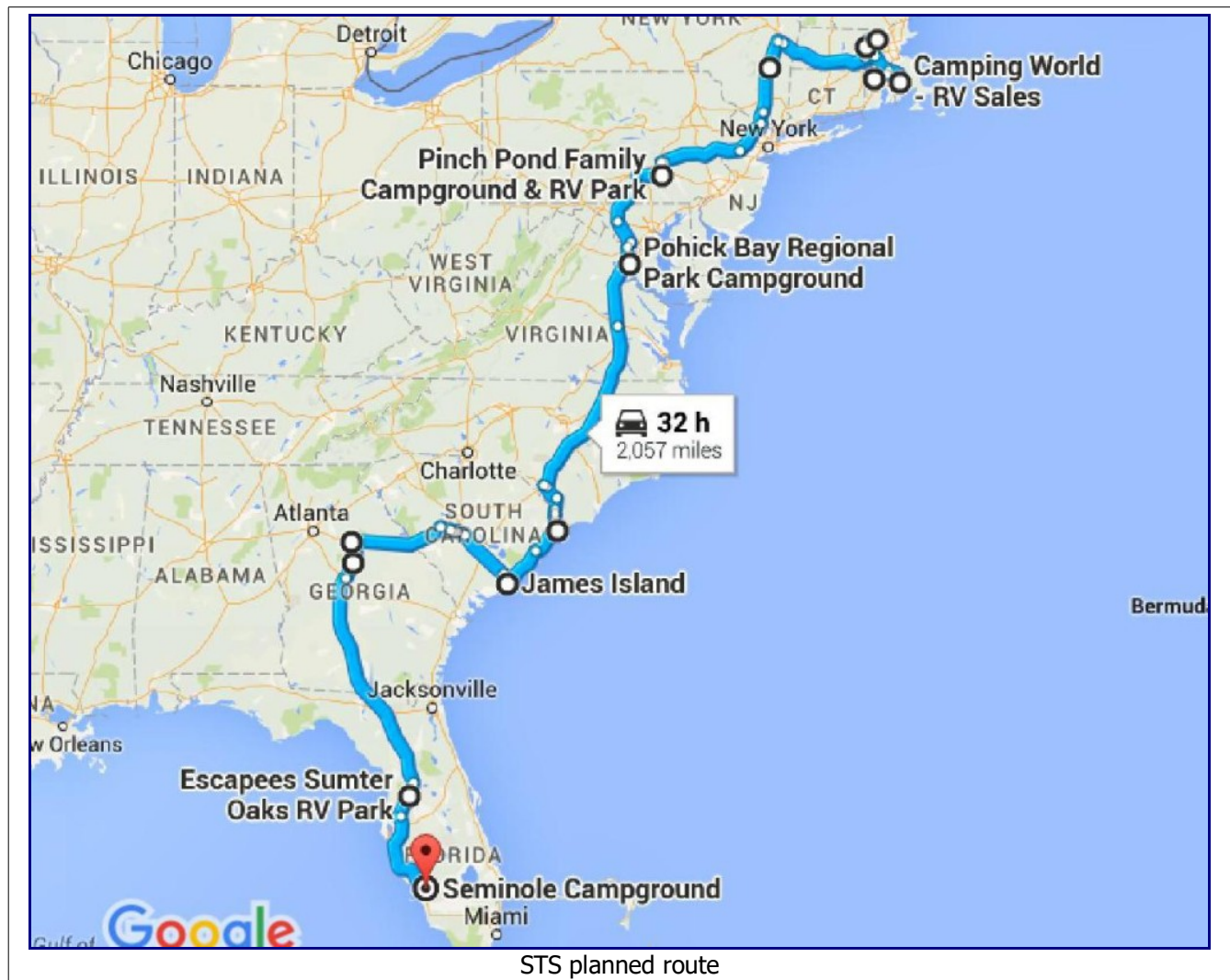
Boathouse on the Charles

After breakfast I took a stroll through Harvard Yard, then through the Divinity School area and Lesley College before heading back to Mt Auburn Hospital by way of Mt Auburn Street. I snapped some shots of the striking buildings and bucolic parks in the area.

A perfect day. A very nice stroll through the People's Republic.

Second Trip South (STS) plan

29 Sep 2015



In 5 days we will embark on our second trip south, to Florida. This will be the first long-distance journey we have taken since getting off the road to sell our house in the fall of 2014. And our first trip in our new Big Horn. I am looking forward to it. Jett, as always, is apprehensive.

The trip will be just over 2,000 miles and will feature long (5 days or more) stays in Pennsylvania, Virginia, South Carolina and northern Florida. There will be other shorter stops along the way for a total of 41 days, including 12 travel days.

The trip will begin with a one-night stop in Rhode Island, just to add that state to our map - the only state we will add on this trip. Then 3 days in a hotel while Camping World tries to finish the repairs that they didn't get to earlier in the summer. I can't say I am looking forward to that - 3 days in a hotel room with dogs, especially since it now appears that those will be three *rainy* days.

We then spend a few days in upstate New York where we will visit Watervliet - one of Jett's childhood stomping grounds - and, perhaps, the site of the Woodstock Festival. Then down to Pennsylvania Amish country for 5 days, a week in Virginia visiting Jett's sons, a few days in Myrtle Beach (right on the beach!), a full week in Charleston, a few days in Greensboro, GA, visiting some old friends, and a full week at the Escapees Sumter Oaks RV Park in Bushnell, FL, where we will establish Florida residency.

Then on to North Ft Myers for 5 wonderful, warm winter months. After the brutal winter we suffered through last year, that will be a welcome change.

I will blog as we go. Stay tuned.

The best-laid plans...

4 Oct 2015

The plan for the Second Trip South (STS) was to leave for Rhode Island tomorrow (Sunday) morning. But it ain't gonna happen.

Over the past week, I had noticed hesitation when I pressed the accelerator on the truck. It had happened just a few times. But yesterday, on the way back from Worcester, the "check engine" light came on. That had happened earlier in the summer as well and it was diagnosed as an "engine misfire" and extensive testing found nothing wrong. I chalked it up to bad fuel that time and thought it might be the same this time.

But I certainly did not feel comfortable embarking on a 2,000-mile journey towing a 15,000-pound fifth wheel with a "check engine" warning light illuminated. So, this morning at 8am, I drove 30 miles to the dealership where I had bought the truck - with only one slight acceleration hiccup along the way - and had them run some quick diagnostics. I can't recall exactly what the computer codes (there were 2) were, but neither was "engine misfire." The diesel guy had a theory that it involved a faulty emissions control valve and had given the valve a few taps with a hammer to see if that might loosen a possibly sticky valve. He said that it helped one "underflow" (whatever that is) measure a bit, but it remained very low. He recommended valve replacement, but was unable to do it today as I did not have an appointment and they were operating with a Saturday skeleton crew. He did say that it was highly unlikely that I would break down on the first leg of the trip, which was just 120 miles. So I made an appointment to return the truck on Tuesday (while the RV was in the shop for its scheduled repairs) and started home.

But I only got 2 miles. The valve tapping had converted the "intermittent" acceleration problem into a constant and severe acceleration problem that was accompanied by a cloud of black exhaust. It was immediately obvious that the truck would be incapable of hauling our fifth wheel 120 miles. I was uncertain that it could even haul its own smoking carcass back home. So I returned the truck to the dealership, rescheduled the repairs for Monday, called Jett to pick me up and went home to change our STS plans.

There will be no overnight stop in Rhode Island, the repairs on the RV will be pushed back to Tuesday and we will probably lose one night in NY as well.

And we had to extend our stay at Minuteman by two days, which was easier said than done. Another RV had been booked into our site for Sunday, so the owners had to juggle several reservations to allow us to stay.

But they didn't have a lot of choice - I have no truck to move the RV.

Not a good start to the STS.

Flooding

6 Oct 2015

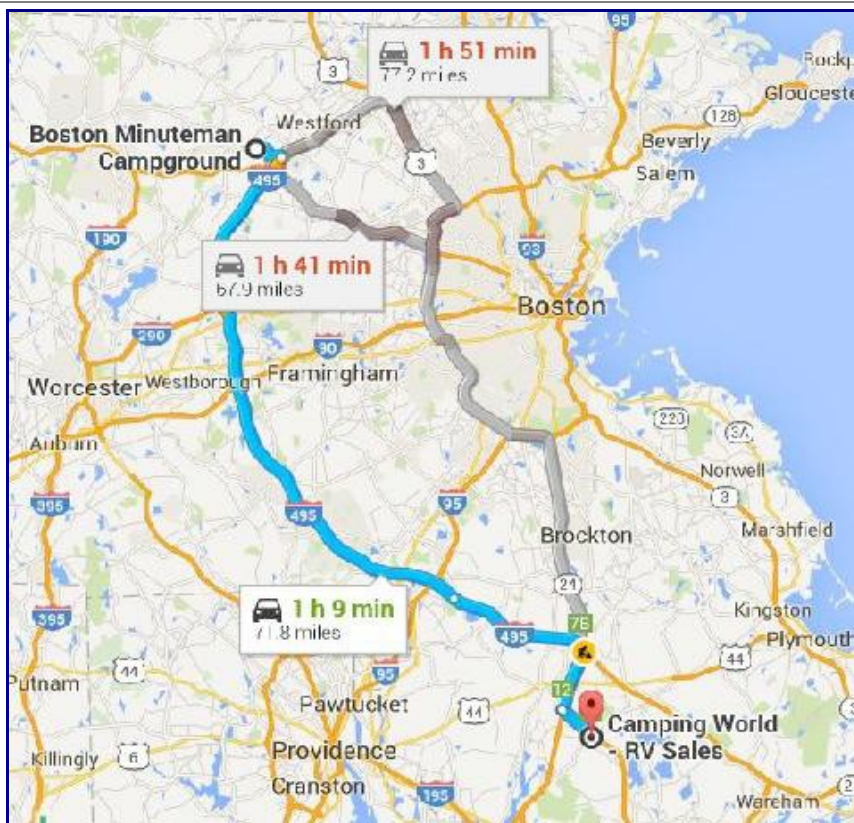
We haven't yet departed on the STS - the truck is still in the shop, with no promises yet on when we will get it back. So I will have to hire an RV hauling service to deliver it to Camping World, to get the repairs underway. Then we will have both the truck and the RV undergoing repairs simultaneously. Good times.

Meanwhile, two of the primary destinations of the STS - Charleston, SC, and Myrtle Beach, SC - are suffering through a "1,000-year flood." At this point I can't be sure we can get to either place. Or, if we can get there, whether the campgrounds will be operational.

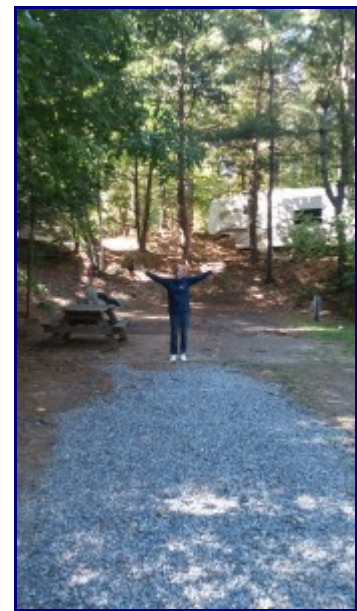
This is a hell of a way to start a trip.

STS Hop 1: Littleton MA to Berkley MA

7 Oct 2015



STS Hop 1



Jett in vacated site

72 miles, primarily via I-495

The STS has, belatedly, begun. But not exactly as planned. The first hop - to deliver the RV to Camping World for a second round of repairs - was accomplished by a paid hauler because the truck is still in the shop for repairs.

So we are now in a cheap hotel - the Comfort Inn in Seekonk, MA - just biding our time until we have a rig again. We have some confidence that the RV will be ready on Friday but the truck... at this point I am just not sure. I thought it would be a simple replacement of an emissions valve, but at last word they were planning on replacing 3 emissions-related components, at a cost just north of \$1,600.

So, between the cost of the hauler and the price of the truck repairs, the STS has cost us about \$2,000 before we started.

Ouch.

We had some plans to tour Providence and Newport while we were here, but we have both come down with colds. I don't know how much interest we will have in anything. I may spend the day re-routing around the Carolina flood zone.

Anyway, here is the last photo of the RV in Littleton and (above) a photo of Jett in the vacated site.

The STS is off to a very rocky start. We have to hope that it gets better.



Comfort Inn, Seekonk, MA



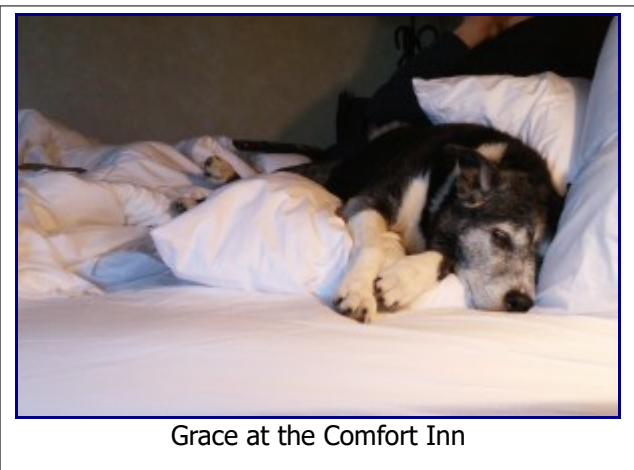
Site 67 in Littleton

Three days of misery

11 Oct 2015

The STS has gotten off to a rocky start, to say the least. We canceled one NY reservation because I didn't like the reviews - with the loss of a \$50 deposit - and had to cancel the second NY reservation when the truck failed on us and delayed the trip - at a loss of \$167 (all 3 nights because it was a "holiday weekend"). Then we had to hire a hauler to get the RV down to Berkley, MA, for repairs (\$260) and spend 3 nights in a hotel (\$265). And, to complete our misery, we both came down with nasty head colds.

There is nothing good to say about spending 3 days in a hotel, with dogs, sniffing and sneezing, except, perhaps, that the dogs seemed very comfortable on the bed.

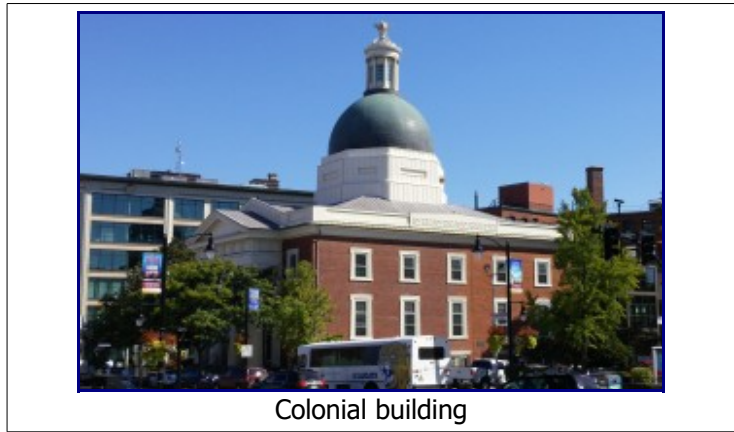


Grace at the Comfort Inn

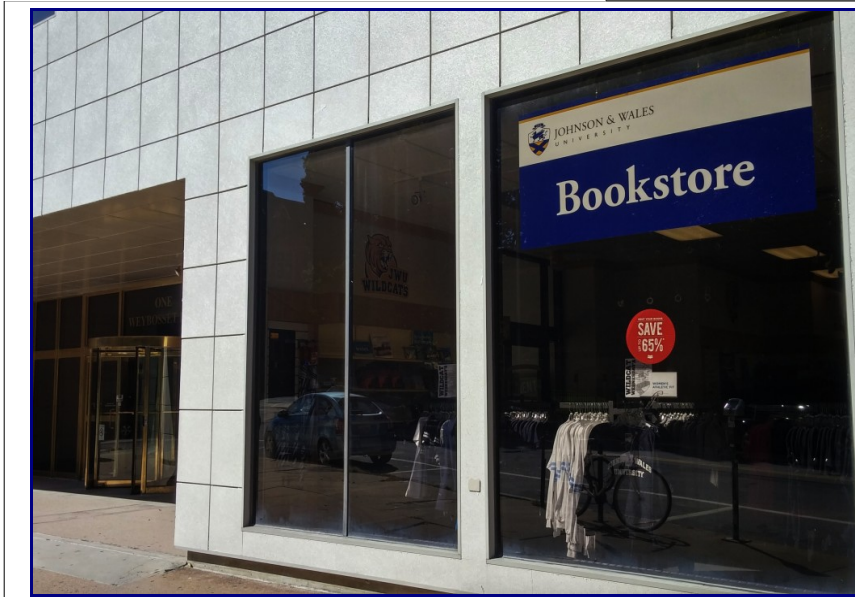
We had originally planned on spending a day visiting the mansions in Newport, but the colds killed that. We did rally enough to take a day trip into Providence, the highlight being the search for the Johnson & Wales

bookstore (Jett's son had attended J&W), which was surprisingly difficult to find. Our GPS deposited us a mile from the actual location. I had to use my smartphone GPS to ferret it out. But we did get to see more of the city than we had expected. And, as cities go, it was very pleasant with some interesting buildings. We also found a downtown urban park that we liked.

We got the truck back on Thursday (almost \$1,200). So, before the STS started in earnest, we had spent almost \$2,000.



Colonial building



J&W bookstore



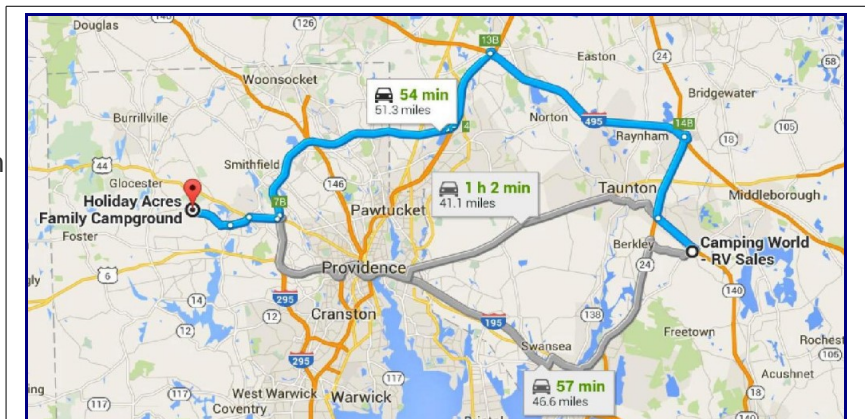
Providence park

STS Hop 2: Berkley MA to North Scituate RI

11 Oct 2015

51 miles via MA 24, I-495, I-95, I-295 and US 44.

This was a very short hop, but a crucial one. It was our first test of hauling with our repaired truck using the adjusted hitch setting (raised for a more level ride). Fortunately, all went well.



STS Hop 2

We picked up the RV at 4pm on Friday and had it safely on the site at [Holiday Acres Family Campground](#) by 5:30pm. In a steady rain. More misery. I coughed my way through the setup, then collapsed in front of the television - which had no reception, so we watched a movie. The lack of television reception was a surprise as the campground is less than 50 miles from the major Boston channels and is only a few miles from Providence. Even when we were in the desert and the mountains we managed to pull in a dozen or more channels. But that was with the old rig. This doesn't bode well for using the antenna in the new rig.



Hitching up at CW

Verizon service was marginal as well. Uploading the photos for this post took over 10 minutes.

But the bottom line is: we have a functioning rig, we are out of the hotel and we are on our way to Florida.

Where maybe we will shake these colds.

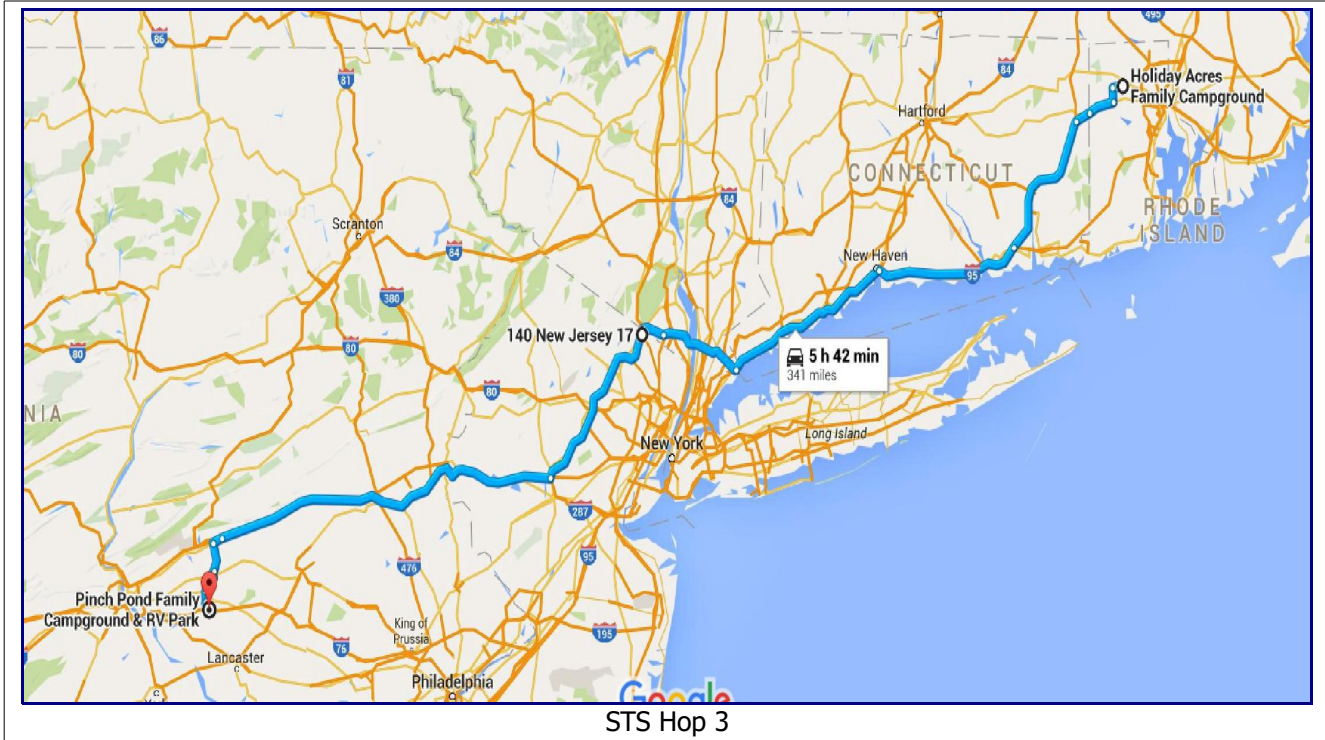
I don't think I mentioned that I got the truck painted before we left MA. I could have painted just the red quarter panel that needed it for \$800 or the entire truck – in a color of my choosing – for \$1500. I opted for the full paint job and chose GMC's "Champagne Blush" for the color, to more closely match the BigHorn's color scheme. It turned out to be slightly lighter than I expected, but I am pretty pleased with it overall. What do YOU think?



Rainy setup at Holiday Acres, featuring the newly-painted truck

STS Hop 3: North Scituate RI to Manheim PA

13 Oct 2015

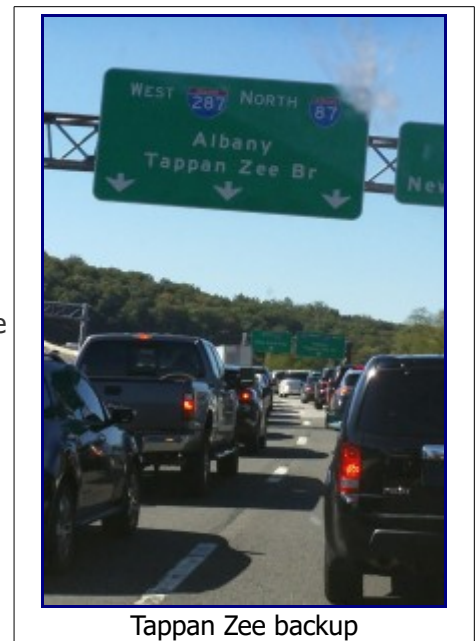


341 miles via I-395 (CT), I-95, I-287 (NY and NJ), I-80 and several PA routes, with a refueling stop in northern NJ.

This hop was much longer than originally planned and way beyond our usual daily limit of 240 miles (which is our towing range on a single tank of gas). But we were forced into this by the delay last week with the truck repairs. Faced with a long day of travel or the ordeal of rescheduling the rest of the trip, we opted for the long day.

And a long day it was. Google estimated the travel time to be under 6 hours, but with traffic, a lunch stop and a refueling stop, it was just over 8 hours.

Fortunately, it was a fine fall day. The sun was bright and the colors were coming out, particularly in CT. But getting past New York is always an ordeal, no matter which route is taken. We chose the Tappan Zee this time because it was the shortest route and we had no reason to think that the delays there would be any longer than at the GW. We were delayed maybe 30 minutes with traffic approaching the bridge. Which completely dissipated halfway across. The bridge is being replaced and the ongoing construction, with more than a dozen massive cranes, is a sight to behold. And, apparently, drivers were beholding because the traffic sped up as soon as we passed the largest crane.



The refueling stop was more of an adventure than it should have been. I selected the US-17 exit off of I-287 as a refueling stop because there were several large service stations there. Getting off and getting refueled was



Huge crane

easy, but getting back on was difficult, primarily because I got confused between US 17 North and South and did a tight left turn onto South which was (1) a mistake and (2) resulted in me running over a curb. I feared blowing a tire, but did no apparent damage. But then I had to find my way back onto US 17 North, to get to I-287 North so I could get to I-287 South. Confused? So was I.

The second adventure was the loss of the GPS. It just froze on us as we were approaching our exit off of I-80 in PA. Our destination was still 20 miles away and the printed Google directions suggested that we would be traveling on some fairly small roads. I had checked the route for low clearances in Google, but liked having the GPS (which issues warnings for any bridge of less than 13' 6"). But the GPS just flat out froze. We couldn't even turn it off. So we unplugged it and hope that it would run down the battery quickly.

It didn't. We had to navigate the last 20 miles from the map alone. It wasn't as difficult as I feared, but Jett was a nervous wreck (and still sick with her cold) by the time we got to our site at [Pinch Pond Family Campground](#). After setting up - and unjumbling everything (there were some nasty bumps on I-80) - she went straight to bed.

Holiday Acres Family Campground, North Scituate RI

We spent two nights at [Holiday Acres Family Campground](#) in North Scituate RI. The days were not pleasant, primarily because we both had colds, so Jett pretty much spent two days in the RV. I was out for much of the day on Saturday to play softball (we lost 2 of 3, unfortunately) but had dog walking responsibilities, so I got to look around the campground a bit.

This campground reminded me a bit of the [Circle Cg Farm Campground](#) in Bellingham MA which is not a flattering comparison. We dislike Circle Cg in part because the sites are unpaved (and some are just plain dirt), the roads are somewhat narrow and many of the sites are occupied by old, decrepit trailers. Holiday Acres had a large number of long-term residents (some sites had picket fences and hardwood decks) and a smattering of decrepit trailers. But it also had better facilities and a more pleasant pond than Circle Cg, so I rank it a bit above. But it still isn't a place that I would recommend highly.

But it did provide a place to rest up for the trip. And, most importantly, got us a 31st state on our map.

17 more to go...



Holiday Acres pond



Restrooms/laundry



Campsites on open field

Manheim PA and Pinch Pond Family Campground

16 Oct 2015



Our site at Pinch Pond

We stayed at the [Pinch Pond Family Campground](#) in Manheim PA for 5 nights. The original plan was to use the

campground as a base for exploring the area - Hershey, Harrisburg, Lebanon, Lancaster and the Pennsylvania Dutch countryside. However, the time was mostly spent recuperating from our nasty colds. Only on the last day did we venture out for some sightseeing.

Manheim PA area

[Manheim PA](#), is a small (about 5,000 residents) town on the fringe of the Pennsylvania Dutch region. I drove into the town one evening early in the stay searching for food and beer. I didn't find either, despite a fairly extensive search. The downtown area is occupied almost exclusively by Civil War-era housing and a few small shops and restaurants, most of which were closed by the time I got there (around 7pm). I settled for some ice cream (not bad) and hot pocket sandwiches (disgusting) from the only convenience store I could find.

Between this failed shopping trip and the rather nasty approach to the RV Park (which was more remote than I expected - Jett called in "Deliverance country"), my initial impressions of Manheim were less than favorable.

After Googling for supermarkets (2) and using GasBuddy to find service stations selling diesel (2), I set off the next day on another shopping trip. This one was more successful as I found a nice shopping plaza with a [Weis](#) market, a CVS pharmacy, a liquor store and a Chinese restaurant. I got some Chinese food from [China One](#) (pretty good) and staples (yes, fried chicken is a staple with us) from Weis and tried to get beer from the liquor store. But apparently liquor stores in PA sell only liquor and wine. I asked the owner who sold beer in Manheim. He gave me a tired look, reached over and grabbed a printed sheet which he handed to me. It gave directions to the one-and-only beer distributor in Manheim.

I guess he had been asked that question before.

Yesterday we sallied forth with the intention of going to the Camping World in Harrisburg to see about repairing/replacing our GPS. But I am trying very hard to get my Medicare fully arranged before my medical benefits run out and had some questions about Part B. I noticed that there was a Social Security office in Lebanon, which was pretty much on the way to Harrisburg. So we stopped there first (after a quick stop at the local Harley-Davidson dealership to get a gift for Jett's son and Burger King to try their chicken fries - which did not impress us).

I love small-town federal offices. Not only did I get to speak with a representative within 30 seconds of my arrival, she had me signed up for Part B within 5



H-D, Iron Valley



Schaefferstown house



Village Farm Market

minutes. Sure beats working my way through the cattle pen at the Boston office. Or even the SSA website.

Because the GPS was working flawlessly, we changed our plans and decided to spend a couple of hours wandering through the Pennsylvania Dutch countryside. It was a beautiful fall day and the farms were picture-perfect, as always. We stopped for a few minutes in [Shaefferstown PA](#), which has the distinction of being the first town in the US to have a public, gravitational water system. It also has some very nice old houses and churches.

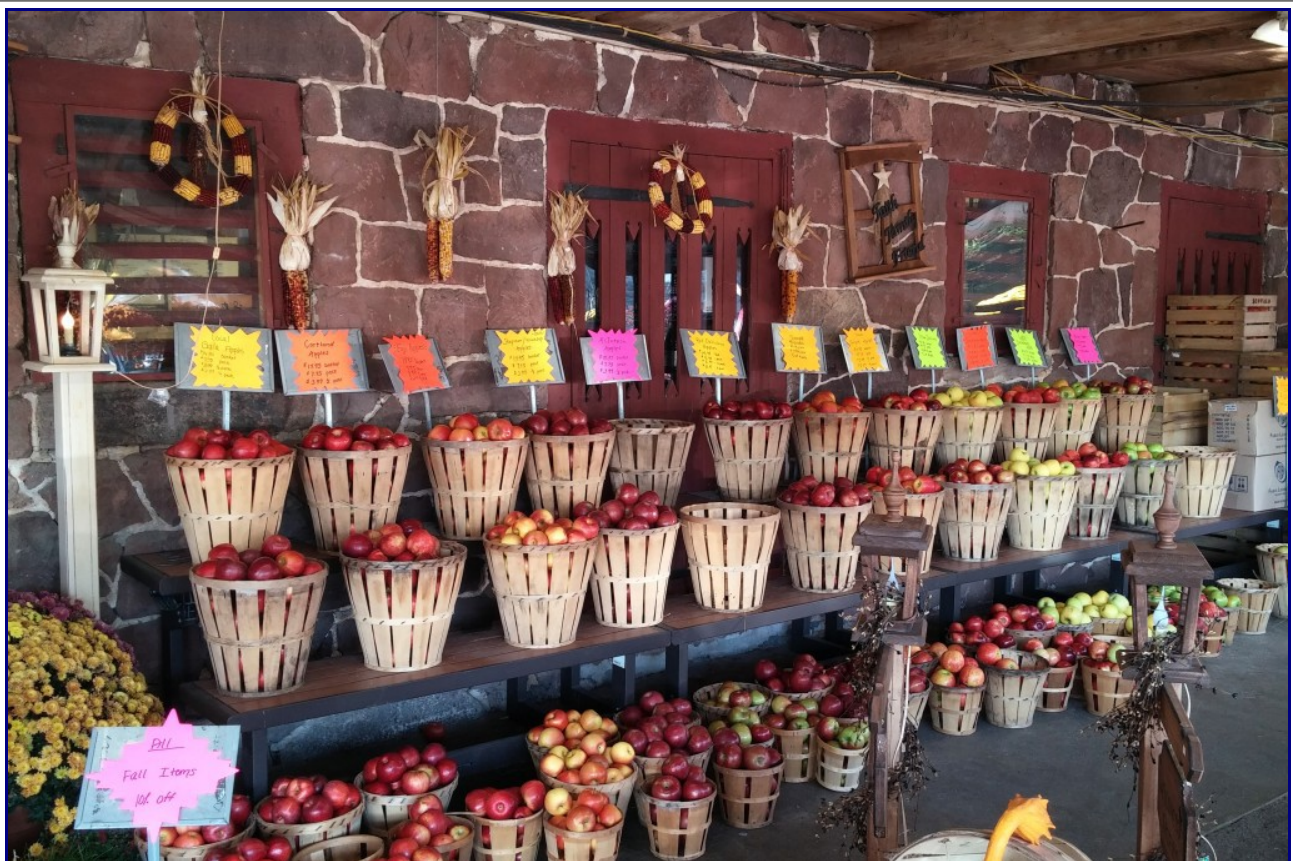
The highlight of the day was a stop at the [Village Farm Market](#) in Ephrata PA. This would appear, from the outside, to be a typical side-of-the-road farmer market. But it is much more than that. It has, among many other things, a wide variety of caramel corn (I chose the chocolate and peanut butter variety), homemade pies (we got half of a shoo-fly pie), a deli with local meats and cheeses (we got some turkey breast), a cooler filled with homemade soups (chicken rice and cream of potato) and salads (7-layer dip), alongside fresh fruits and vegetables. Most unexpectedly, it had a freezer filled with homemade single-serving and family-style meats (roast beef and chicken pot pie) and vegetables. I also got a bag of the local kettle-style potato chips.



Schaefferstown church

The prices were surprising. In a good way. Everything was more than reasonable. The turkey breast was \$6.99/lb. The 2 pounds of roast beef was \$14.95. The potato chips were \$1.59.

And everything we have tried so far has been superb. Recommended!



Village Farm Market

We gassed up on the way back to Manheim, in preparation for our trip to VA today. We also stopped at Weis again where I noticed the buggy parking sign. Proof that Manheim is, in fact, in Pennsylvania Dutch country.

Pinch Pond Family Campground

The campground site was suitable for our purpose, which was, primarily, recuperating. The office and common areas were very nice. The laundromat was clean with new machines. There were lots of trees and a scenic pond. However...

We had a few issues with the park and its rules. When we initially set up we were shocked to discover that the site was so uneven that the "auto level" feature had to completely lift the wheels on the left side to do its job. Worse, the sewer was located so far to the rear that I had to use three hoses to reach it. And the sewer pipe was so elevated that the drop from the RV was less than a foot - not enough to properly drain our tanks. We parked the truck at the rear as there was more open space there than in front. And more room to park the truck.

The next day we got a knock on the door. An employee requested that we move the truck. Parking in the rear of the site is not allowed, he said, because the road there is "only an access road." I failed to see the logic, especially since the truck was completely off the road. Moreover, there was absolutely no visual difference between the front and rear roads - both were gravel. I didn't argue, but it did solidify my decision to move the RV further back on the site, to get a better draw (and a shorter connection) to the sewer.

Another problem is the noise. Much of the park borders I-76 and the road noise there is constant. That was not a problem at our site; we had the other problem: the adjacent sportsman's club and the constant gunshots. It drove the dogs nuts. Both were, much of the time, shaking with fear. This was not a fun 5 days for the dogs.

The park does have a scenic pond (which, unfortunately, is next to I-76) and there is a campfire always burning near the office. But, overall, I would rate this as one of the less enjoyable places we have stayed.



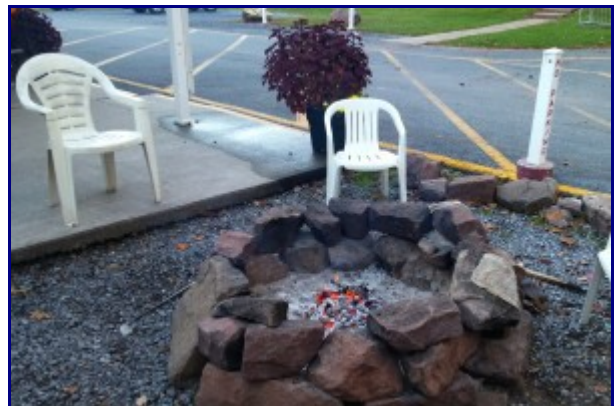
Buggy parking in Manheim



The lifted left tires



Office and closed pool



The constant campfire



The pond

STS Hop 4: Manheim PA to Lorton VA

17 Oct 2015

161 miles via I-76, US 15, I-270, I-495 (MD and VA) and I-95.

This was, for the most part, a familiar trip on familiar roads. We have done it before, most notably on our GTW way back in 2012. US 15 in MD is memorable as the site of our very first (and very traumatic) blowout.

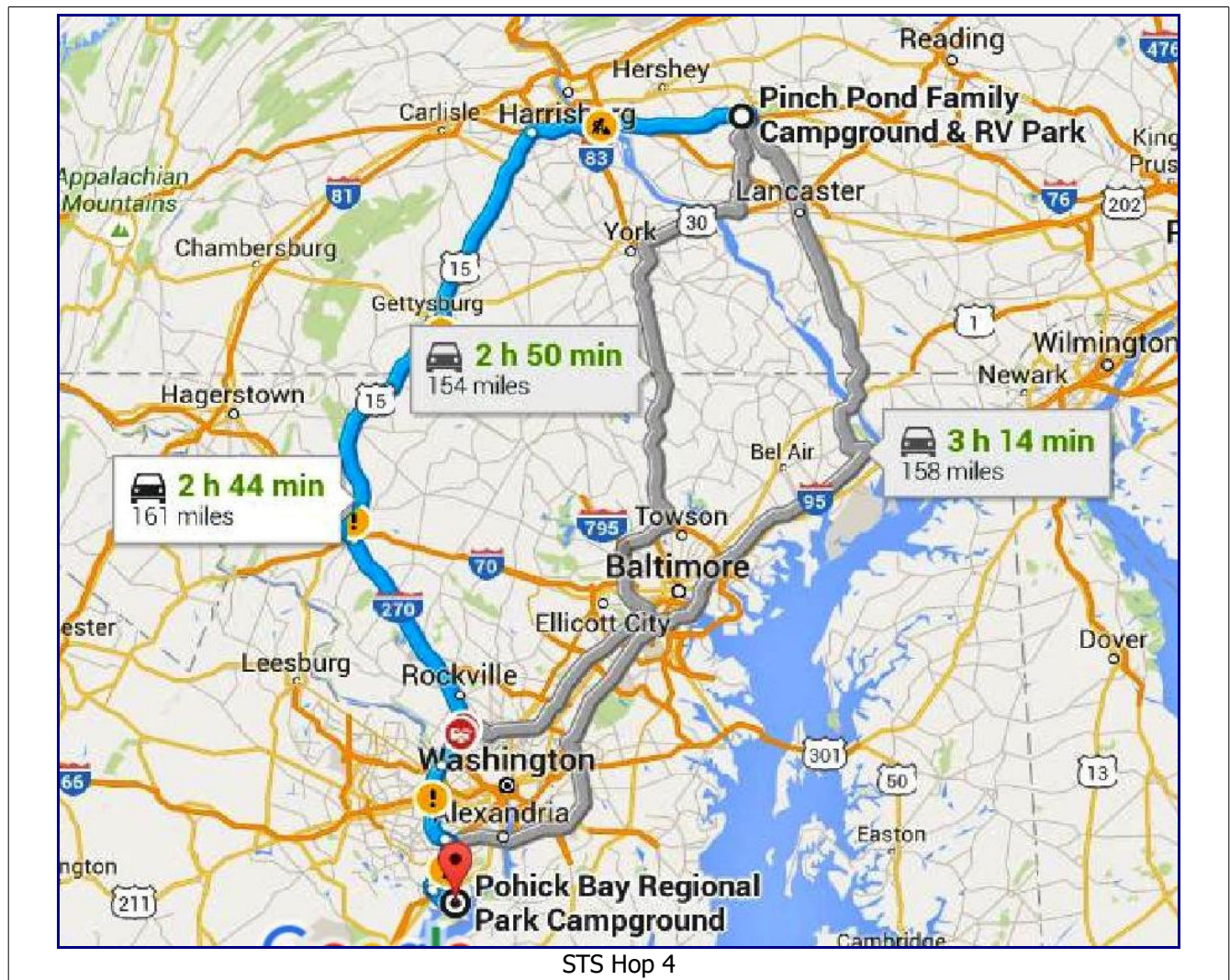
No blowouts this trip, thank goodness. We encountered the usual heavy traffic in and around DC, which is never fun. But, all in all, a pretty uneventful hop.

Except for getting out of Pinch Pond. Apparently the expected exit route from our pull-thru site was down the hill, through the woods and up the other side. But both Jett and I had walked that route and it was narrow, with rutted dirt roads and overhanging trees. We opted instead to try to make a tight right turn. We made it, but not before the campground authorities had rolled up to us in a gold cart and chided me for doing it wrong. I told them that I had no interest in the roundabout exit route and they reluctantly let me proceed.

They were probably saying "good riddance." Same as us.

Getting into our spot at Pohick Bay Regional Park was also more difficult than I expected. It was tight and had a few trees that got in the way. But with the help of the neighboring campers we made it.

Now if we can just get out next Friday...



Boo to you, too

17 Oct 2015

The [Pohick Bay Regional Park Campground](#) is really into Halloween. Besides having a Halloween-themed scavenger hunt this past weekend, they also sponsored a campsite decorating contest. Which our neighbors won, hands down. They put a lot of effort into building a little Zombie town on their site, populated by 4 animated zombies, a very scary animated clown and a supporting cast of moving spiders, crocodiles and snarling dogs.

Our grandson, Zachary, loved it. And, to the best of our knowledge, didn't have any nightmares.



Brain-eating zombie



Contortionist zombie



Zombieville

An introduction to the pumpkin patch lifestyle

22 Oct 2015

When I was a kid Halloween was a one-evening event. You dressed up in some wacko costume, grabbed a large shopping bag and went out - without adults - and extorted as much candy booty from your neighbors as time and upper body strength would allow. Followed by a week of sugar overdosing.

But now Halloween appears to be a month-long event, with all sorts of decorating activities (I previously described the contest here at the campground), Halloween greeting cards and pumpkin patch experiences. Even the public schools get involved. My grandson, Zachary, had a field trip last week to a pumpkin patch extravaganza. Apparently it had a variety of fall-themed carnival-style activities and opportunities to purchase hot cider and pumpkin-flavored treats.

So schools that have banned birthday cupcakes now put kids on a bus to buy pumpkin cupcakes. Make sense to you? Not to me.

But I digress. What I wanted to describe was my own, personal, introduction to the pumpkin patch lifestyle. I accompanied Zachary (who apparently had not overdosed on pumpkins on his field trip) and his dad to a small pumpkin patch event in Woodbridge VA. It wasn't much as festivals go, but it was a cold day and we didn't want to stay long anyway. It did offer a bouncy house, a tractor-pulled train ride and a hayride. It also had a really cheesy maze which took about 2 minutes to navigate.



Zachary and dad

We also got to warm inside the concessions trailer which was owned and operated by Uncle J, a friend of

Zachary's dad.

So, yes, it was fun. But I still don't quite see the need for expanding the Halloween experience. That one night was plenty for kids of my generation.



Tractor train ride



Cheesy maze

Manassas

23 Oct 2015



The turning point

In case you didn't know, I am a bit of a Civil War buff. I think Ken Burn's [Civil War series](#) is the best documentary I have ever seen. I have visited about a dozen Civil War battlefields and think Gettysburg is one of

the 5 most interesting places in the US.

So it is a little surprising, given the dozens of times I have visited northern Virginia, that I had never visited the battlefield(s) at Manassas. Or, if you prefer, Bull Run. But Wednesday was picture-perfect and I took the opportunity to knock that item off of my bucket list.

Manassas/Bull Run was the site of two battles: [First Manassas](#), which had the distinction of being the first major battle of the war (and the one which gave "Stonewall" Jackson his moniker) and [Second Manassas](#), about a year later, which was a major Confederate victory and is considered to be the "high point" of the Confederacy. Both were important Civil War battles, but I think First Manassas is the more interesting, from a tactical perspective. And the battlefield is a little more compact and can be explored on foot. Which was what I did on Wednesday.

One of the fascinating things about First Manassas is that it was a spectator battle. Dozens of DC citizens made the 25-mile trip to witness what they expected to

be a quick Union victory. When it turned into a day-long battle and, eventually, a rout of the Union army, the spectators found themselves running for their lives, amid the troops doing the same, back to DC. I wanted very much to see the battlefield, to get a sense of what they witnessed that summer day in 1861.

What the Confederates saw was the Union army approaching from the north - the view in the photo here. I assume the spectators were also to the north, probably arrayed along what is now US 29, which runs east/west in this photo. The road rises to the east and much of the battle could probably be seen from that vantage point.

The battle was initially an artillery battle. Each side had about a dozen cannon, positioned only about 300 yards apart. The Union army held the higher ground for much of the day, but the Confederates had the advantage of being shielded by trees. At the right side of the Union line (left side of the Confederate line), the forces were less than 150 yards apart.

Another distinction of First Manassas is that it had the first civilian casualty. An elderly bedridden woman was killed when the Union army shelled her farmhouse, thinking it housed rebel troops. The house (see right) is still standing.

For reasons that are not obvious, the Union deployed two cannon at that side of the line and positioned them to fire at the Confederate artillery, completely ignoring the Confederate infantry less than 200 yards away. The Confederates at that location were wearing blue uniforms, probably because the army had not yet fully standardized on gray as the color for Confederate uniforms. In any case, the Union batteries, when they saw them approaching, assumed they were friendly. They realized their mistake too late and the two cannon were captured. There was additional fighting back-and-forth, but this capture of the federal cannon is widely regarded as the key turning point in the battle.



View to the north



Farmhouse

If the Union army had won this battle it is possible that the Civil War would have been shorter - and much less bloody - than it proved to be. To think that such momentous things hinge on the accidental color of some uniforms... fascinating.

The photo below is a view of Henry House Hill, which was "ground zero" in this battle. And a very nice place to stroll when the sun is out and no cannon balls are exploding.



Henry House Hill

Gunshots, acorns and drag racers

23 Oct 2015

Answer: gunshots, acorns and drag racers.

Question: what noises have kept us awake in the last 3 campsites?

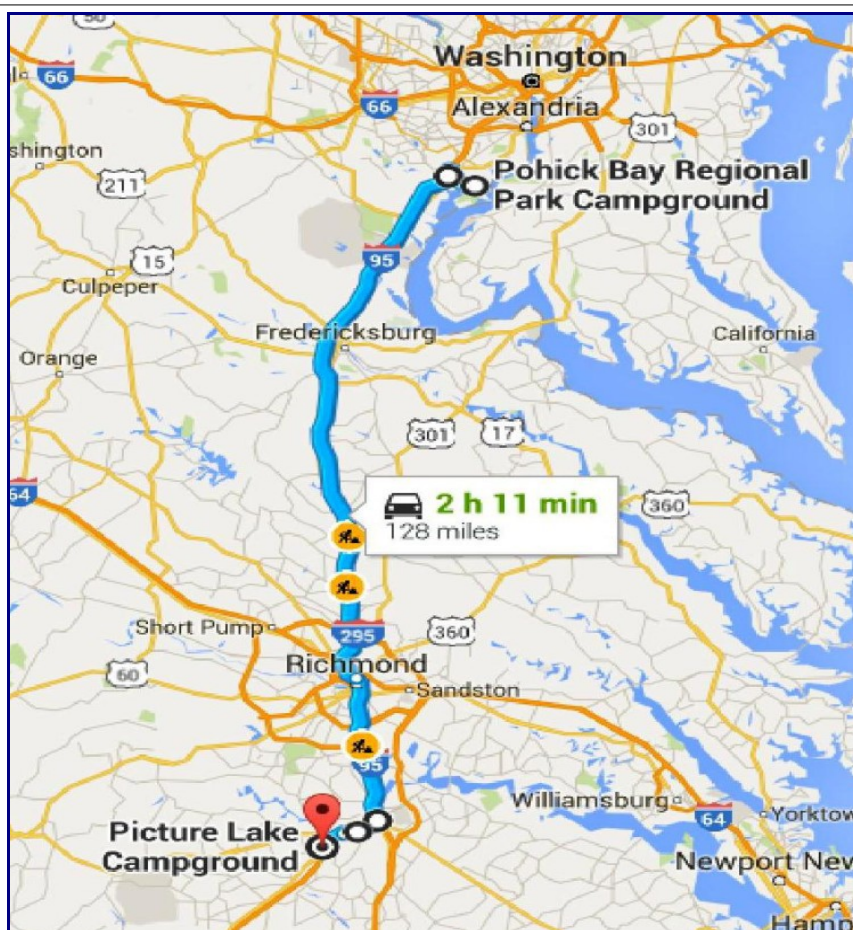
Explanation: I told you about the shooting range near us at Pinch Pond. That was followed by 7 nights of staccato acorn explosions (at least they sounded like explosions) on the roof of the RV at Pohick. Now we are at [Picture Lake Campground](#) in Petersburg VA (more on that later) and we are adjacent to a drag racing speedway.

They say the racing will be over by midnight.

Good, because I need some sleep.

STS Hop 5: Lorton VA to Petersburg VA

24 Oct 2015



STS Hop 5

128 miles, mostly via I-95.

This was not the hop that was planned. We had to abort about 100 miles short of our intended destination (Wilson NC) when the "check engine" light came on just north of Petersburg VA. Accompanying the light was an alarming loss of power: I had difficulty maintaining 45 mph going uphill.

As I had experienced similar symptoms just prior to the start of the STS, I was pretty sure it was an emissions control problem. I was also pretty sure that I could continue for a short distance. I was also totally sure that I had to get the problem diagnosed immediately. As the time was 2pm on a Friday, I knew I didn't have much time to make that happen.

So, a quick rerouting. We found a campground about 14 miles away, called them to make sure they had a spot for us and gently, gingerly, made our way there. The 15-minute

rest did the engine some good and we made it about halfway before the symptoms reappeared. Another 10-minute rest fixed the problem again and we made it without further difficulty.

We checked in, quickly unhitched, got a recommendation from the office for a local shop that could take a look and ran the truck over. Unfortunately, the shop did not have diesel experience. But in the short (less than a quarter mile) trip to the shop, the "check engine" light turned itself off. The shop gave me the number of the local GMC dealer and I called them but they said they couldn't diagnose anything if the check engine light was not on.

So I returned to the RV park with good news/bad news for Jett: the "check engine" light was off and no one knows why. She insisted that I take a test drive and stress the engine (as much as it can be stressed when not hauling). I drove 25 miles and the truck performed flawlessly.

So Hop 6 is now 300 miles, with a truck of dubious health. Should be an "interesting" day.

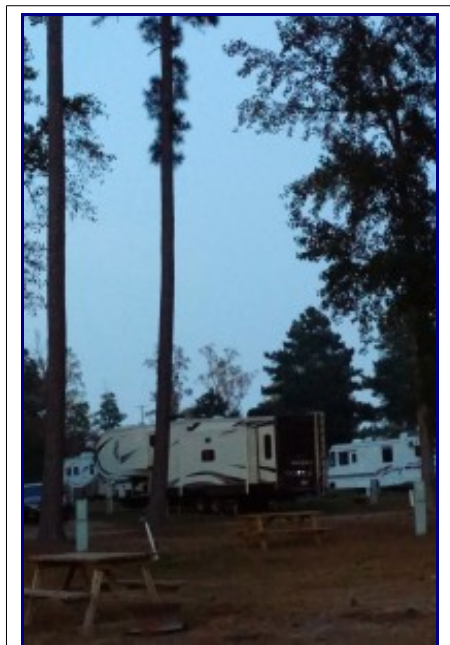
When we first had the problem, I read the manual and it suggested that I check the fuel cap. Apparently a not-tight-enough fuel cap can cause emissions control problems. So I tightened the cap and it is just barely possible that that caused the light to turn off. Wishful thinking? Probably.

Anyway, wish us luck.

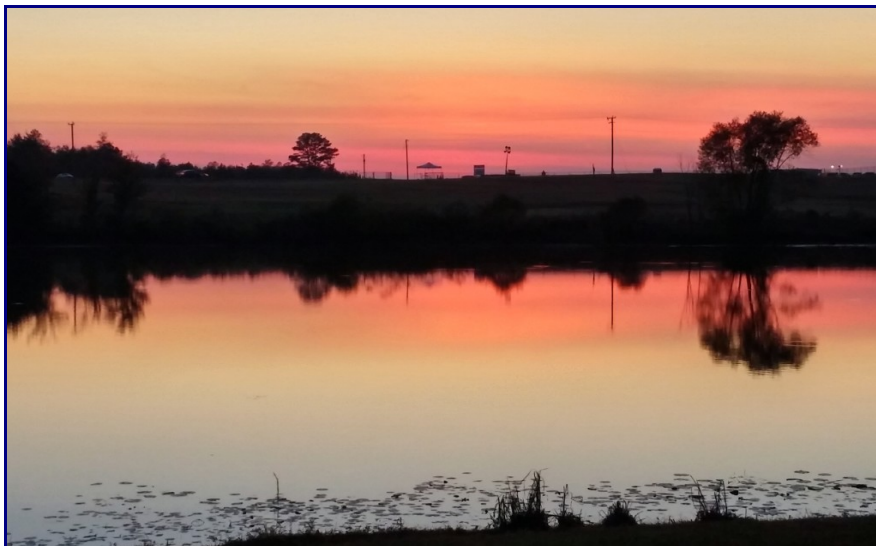
Picture Lake Campground

[Picture Lake Campground](#) was an emergency destination, but it has high ratings from Good Sam. From our limited experience, it is overrated. The sites are bare dirt and not level and the facilities (playground, volleyball court, restrooms) are ordinary at best. It does have a somewhat picturesque lake (which looked even better in the sunset - see below), but the ambiance is marred by the presence of the [Virginia Motorsports Park](#) on the opposite shore. If there were loons in the area, their calls were completely lost amid the roar of the drag racing engines. Apparently the speedway has racing only on weekends. But it was Friday.

Lucky us.



Our site on Picture Lake



Picture Lake at sunset

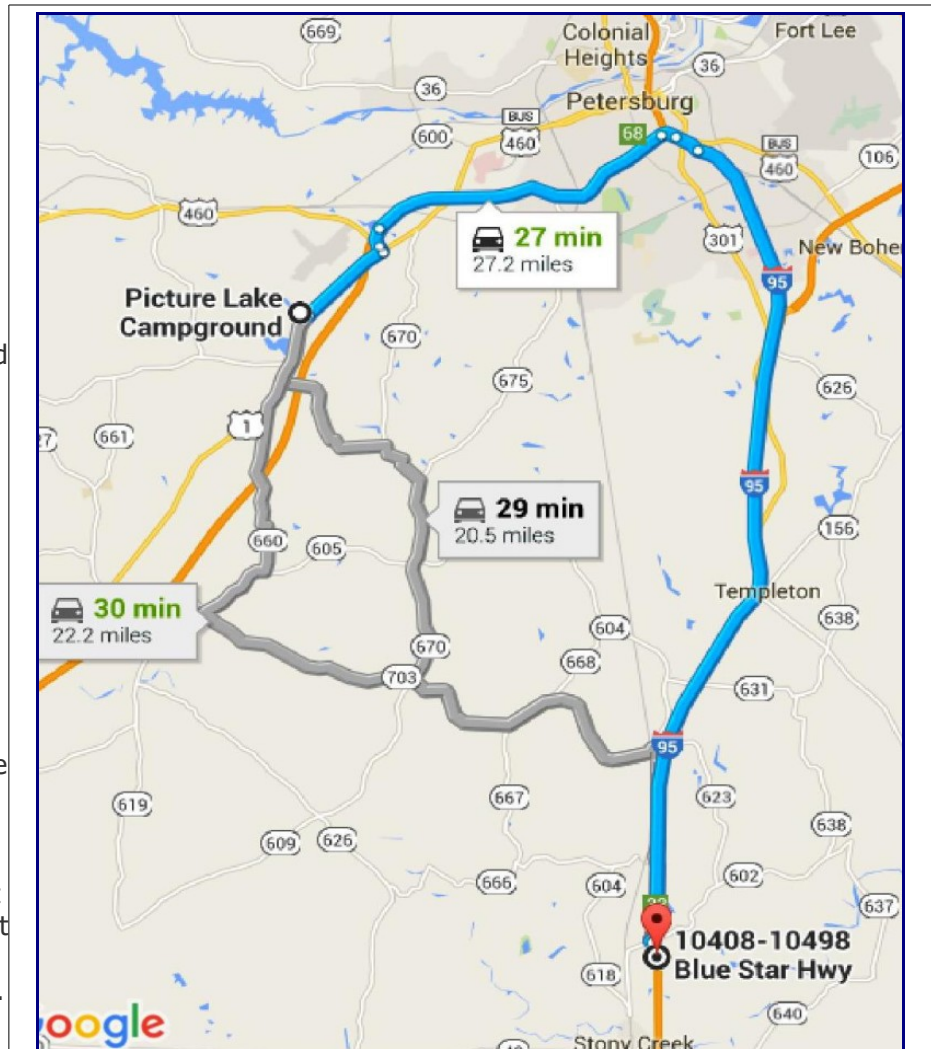
STS Hop 6: Petersburg VA to Stony Creek VA

25 Oct 2015

27 miles via I-85 and I-95.

Well, you guys obviously did not wish hard enough. We made it just over 10 miles into our planned 300-mile trip before the "check engine" light reappeared. We limped (which turns out to be exactly the right word - more on that later) to a truck stop just north of Stony Creek VA. I phoned Good Sam Roadside Assistance and they were almost no help at all. What I needed was a diesel mechanic and all they could offer was a tow.

We quickly concluded that we were going to be stuck in rural Virginia for the weekend unless we could find a mechanic. So we decided to check into the nearby Hampton Inn and use that as a base of operations. We parked the RV in the corner of the parking lot, checked in for 2 nights and set about finding help for the truck. We quickly determined that the nearest GMC dealer was about 15 miles away and arranged an appointment for Monday morning. Then I started calling around, hoping to find a local mechanic who could at least diagnose the



STS Hop 6

problem. I figured if I arrived at the dealer with a diagnosis in hand it would speed things along.

I found a tow/repair company about 6 miles away that claimed to offer 24/7 roadside assistance. A call to that number wasn't answered but I thought it might be worth a trip to the address to see if I could scare up some help (driving the truck without the RV was no problem at all - the truck ran fine when not stressed). I had a bit of difficulty locating the company and in fact stopped first at a place across the street. There was a mechanic there working on a diesel truck - a good sign - but he said he dropped his diagnostic computer and would be unable to determine my engine code. He sent



The truck at Carter's

me to Johnny's Tow Service across the street. Which was closed. But a call to the number on the tow truck there yielded a referral to Chester, down in Stony Creek. I called Chester and he told me to come down and he would take a look.

Chester Carter is the proprietor of [Carter's 1 Stop](#) towing service and truck repair emporium in [Stony Creek VA](#) which was a town of 202 souls in 2000. And it looks like it may have gone downhill since then. The tiny town is littered with vacant and crumbling buildings. It had a creepy feel, to be honest. With Halloween approaching and the truck very unwell, I began to wonder if there was any escape. Even the Hampton Inn was empty. Would Jack Nicholson appear?

Chester was a man of few words. And when he spoke it was in a quiet, mumbled Southern drawl which my Northern ears had to strain to understand. He went straight to work and pretty quickly diagnosed the

engine code: P1295 which suggested that one of the fuel injectors had lost electrical connectivity. He poked around the engine for an hour, cleaned some connections and, after interrupting work on my truck to change a tire on an RV - which I didn't mind since he was helping a fellow RVer in need - we took the truck on a 30-mile test drive during which the "check engine" light stayed off.

I paid him about \$250, which I thought was fair, and went on my way. I had spent nearly 4 hours watching Chester work (and learning quite a bit about my diesel engine). Chester said that Chevy/GMC diesels were prone to loose connections on certain fuel injectors - especially injectors 2 and 7 (my problem injector). The clip holding the electrical connection to the injector could corrode and work loose, causing the kind of problem I was seeing. Specifically, as soon as the computer detects a problem it puts the engine into "limp mode" which somehow protects it from severe damage, but severely diminishes the power, which lets the truck "limp" to a place to be repaired. He said he had tightened the clip on #7. All of which sounded plausible, but I had very little confidence that he had actually fixed the problem. But I figured that the diagnosis alone was worth the price.

The plan is to do a test drive with the RV in tow Sunday morning and, if successful, head to Myrtle Beach. If unsuccessful, we will move to a campground, deliver the truck to the GMC dealership Monday morning and then cool our heels until they are done with it. In the latter case we could be stuck in Stony Creek for days.

Maybe until Halloween.



Abandoned grain storage in Stony Creek

STS Hop 7: Stony Creek VA to Myrtle Beach SC

27 Oct 2015

302 miles via I-95, US 117, I-795 (through Goldsboro NC), I-40 and US 17, with a refueling stop near Sharpsburg NC.

It is true: the night is darkest before the dawn.

The plan was to do a 20-mile test drive, hauling the RV, around 8 am. If the check engine light came on we would book 2 nights at a campground in Emporia VA, near the GMC dealership, and put the truck in for repairs Monday morning. In that case we would have to cancel the entire 3-day stop in Myrtle Beach (one day of which was already canceled) and at least one day in Charleston.

If the check engine light remained off, we would head to Myrtle Beach, with fingers crossed.

The check engine light came on 3.5 miles into the test drive.

So we canceled Myrtle Beach, booked the stay in Emporia and, with very heavy hearts, loaded the RV, checked out of the Hampton Inn and headed out for the 15-mile trip south. I figured we could "limp" there at 40 mph on US 301. But when we left the Hampton Inn parking lot the truck exhibited a whole new level of sickness: I could not get it above 15 mph. We drove about a mile, then pulled over in a parking lot next to Chester's other shop location (which we had visited briefly on the test drive Saturday). I opened the hood, pushed (ineffectively, I am sure) on some connectors, then sat back to wait for 10 minutes in the hope that the truck would recover enough to make it the 15 miles.

At that point I was more down than I have ever been in our years of travel. We were looking at a potentially extended stay in a small town in Virginia, without transportation, with expensive repairs likely and with Myrtle

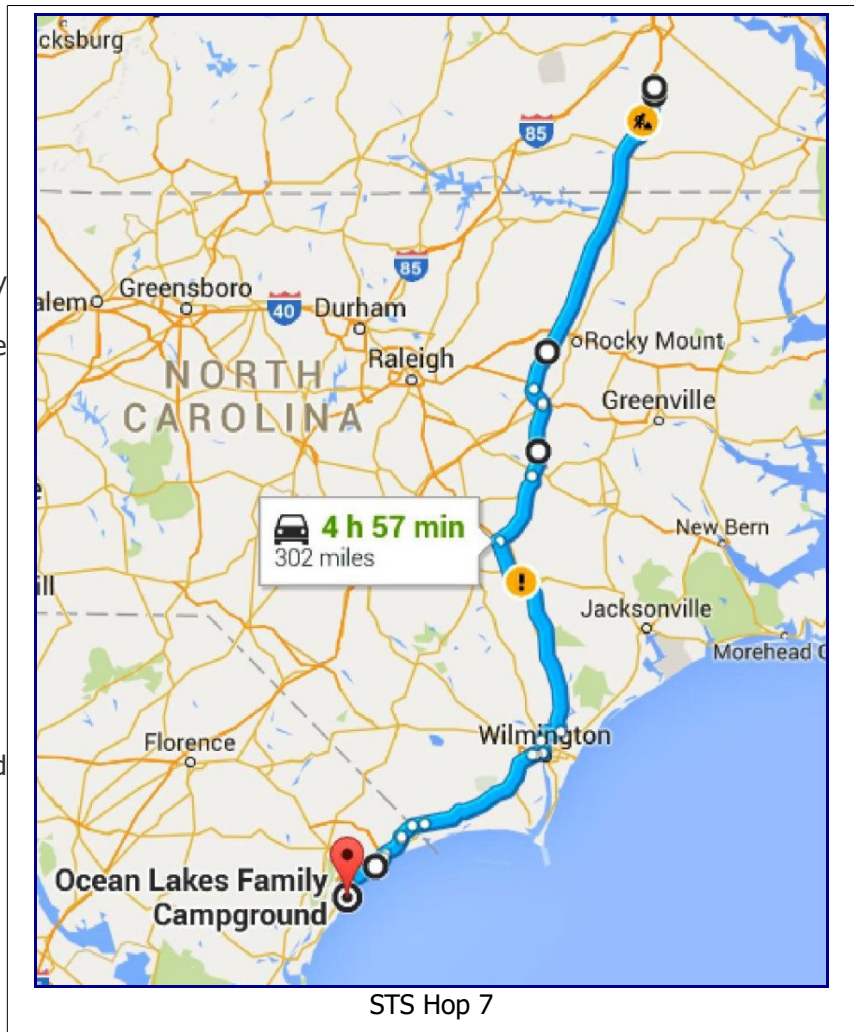
Beach - one of the stops I was most looking forward to - canceled. This was even worse than that awful, rainy weekend in Knoxville in 2012. I was in a black, curse-our-fates mood.

Then Chester pulled up.

He asked how the truck was behaving (stupid question, I thought), but told him that the truck was worse than ever. He offered to run the diagnostics again. I wasn't wild about the idea, but because the truck was acting up in a different way I thought it might have a different code. So I said ok, realizing that this might boost the total diagnostic cost to over \$400.

We limped to his shop less than 2 miles away. Jett took the dogs for a long walk. I watched Chester perform the diagnostics again (same code), then dig into the engine doing God-knows-what. Then we went on a test drive, hauling the RV. I was a bit nervous letting Chester haul our home, but he said he had a lot of truck driving experience and "this was nothing."

20 miles. No check engine light.



STS Hop 7



Chester in the engine

I asked Chester what he had done. He said he had tightened the #7 fuel injector connection - the same thing he had done on Saturday - but was "more aggressive" this time.

I wasn't completely convinced that the problem was fixed, but as we had just successfully completed the same test drive that I had failed at in the morning, we decided to push for Myrtle Beach. As Chester put it, if we made it to Exit 11 (the Emporia exit) without the light going on, we should "put the hammer down" and keep going.

I waited until we reached North Carolina (over 30 miles) before calling to cancel our Emporia reservation and to un-cancel our Myrtle Beach reservation. Then we put the hammer down and kept going.

We made the entire 300-mile trip without incident (which I regarded as a minor miracle), set up at our site at [Ocean Lakes Family Campground](#) just a few feet from the beach (we have an ocean view!), then sat back and lifted a toast to Chester Carter, who saved not only the day but the entire week.

And, hard to believe, his additional charge for fixing the problem? Zero. Free. Gratis.

Chester - you are my new hero.

Ocean Lakes Family Campground, Myrtle Beach SC

29 Oct 2015



Campsite at Ocean Lakes

We planned originally to stay 3 nights at [Ocean Lakes Family Campground](#) in South Myrtle Beach SC. But we lost a day due to our truck problems. Then the forecast turned bad - the day we were scheduled to travel to Charleston was to be windy, with heavy rain. It is never fun to tear down/set up in the rain. And since Charleston was a flat daily rate rather than a weekly rate, we didn't lose any money by cutting the stay there short.

All of which is why we ended up staying 4 nights in Ocean Lakes.

This is a HUGE campground - nearly 4,000 sites total, with 863 campsites (the rest are houses that are individually owned, with many available for annual lease). Besides the beautiful beach, the campground has five small lakes (hence the name). Amenities include a take-out restaurant, a huge camp store, a laundromat with over 100 machines and wash-and-fold service, a recreation center, a video arcade, two pools - one indoor, one outdoor - and probably a lot of other stuff that we never saw because we did not tour the entire property.



Our "ocean view"

This campground is top-rated by Good Sam and I can't dispute that assessment. The sites are level, with large concrete pads and lots of room for slides. The cable is outstanding with over 100 channels. There is daily curbside trash pickup. If there is a dog park I didn't see it, but there are many places to walk the dogs (including on the beach, off season) and biodegradable poop bags are provided. There is a playground and a beautiful elevated public deck, both right on the beach. The beach has soft sand and is swimmable. Overall, a very nice park. And we had an ocean view!

The only bad thing about the park: the water is terrible. It ruins a cup of coffee.



Beach grass



The elevated patio



The beach playground



The laundromat



One of the rental properties



The outdoor pool



The indoor pool



The Ocean Lakes beach

STS Hop 8: Myrtle Beach SC to Charleston SC

29 Oct 2015

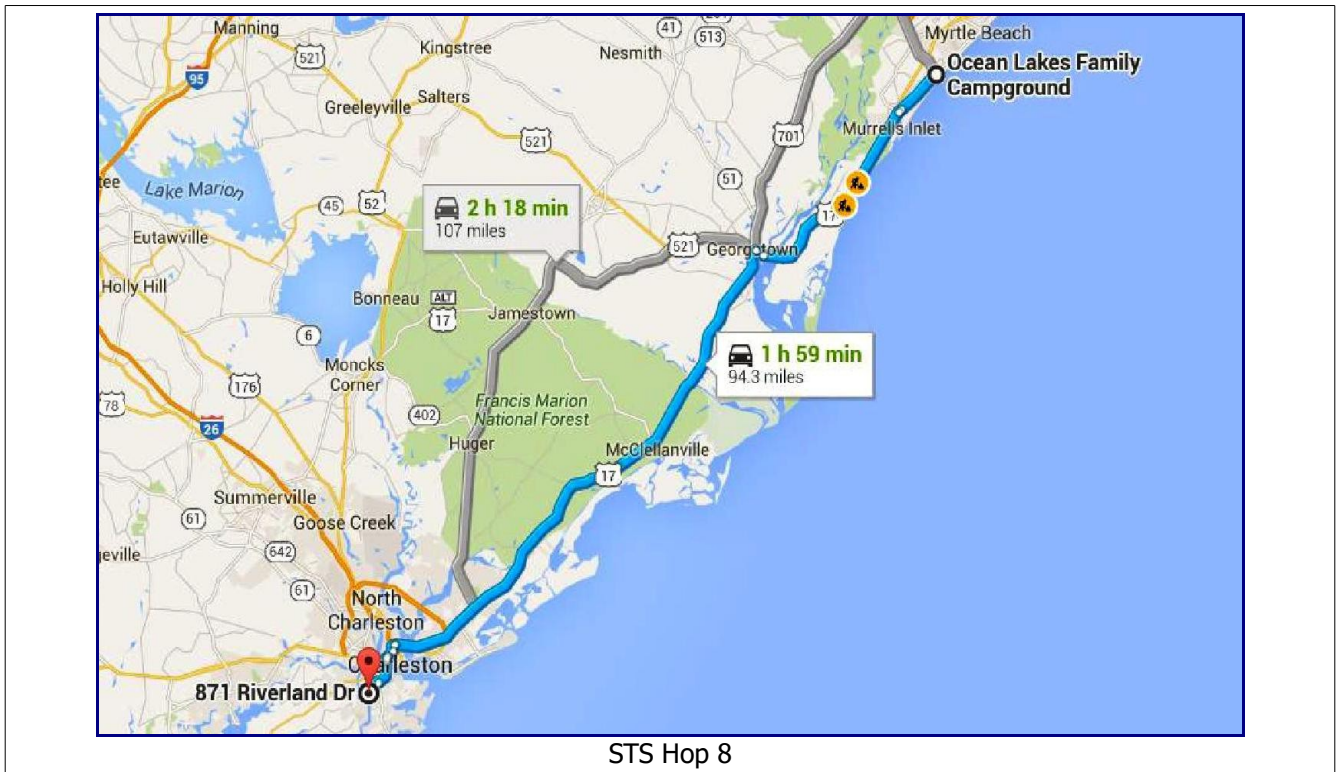
94 miles via mostly US 17.

The only thing difficult about this trip was ignoring the GPS when it told us to make a U-turn.

I don't know what is going on with our (relatively) new Rand-McNally GPS, but on the last two hops it has insisted that we make a U-turn when none was needed. And the GPS was set to "avoid U-turns". Makes no sense.

And there was a tight right turn about a mile short of [The Campground at James Island Park](#). We ran a tire over the curb, which seemed to be a better choice than colliding with the traffic waiting at the light. But the tires tolerated it well and we made it to our destination in just under 3 hours. That is an average of about 30 mph which is very slow for a trip with no stops. But US 17 has a lot of lights and about a dozen construction zones. About the only good thing about the route was that it was flat.

We will be in Charleston for 5 days. The weather promises to be good and James Island Park looks very interesting. Should be fun.



The Campground at James Island County Park

3 Nov 2015

We **LOVE** Charleston. We have already resolved to return for a longer stay. We need to invest at least another week to explore it to our satisfaction. I will follow this post with several more about the city. This one is focused on our home for the past 5 days: [The Campground at James Island County Park](#). It is a relatively small campground - about 100 sites - on James Island, just over the Ashley River from downtown Charleston. It was about a 10-minute drive to the center of the city. Very convenient.

And very comfortable. The sites are **HUGE**. The photo on the right shows our site (#29). We not only had room for the RV and the truck, but could have parked about 7 more cars on the site (there is more room in front that you can't see). This is possibly the largest campsite we have ever had.

The park itself is huge - probably over 500 acres. It has, besides the RV campground, a primitive (tenting) campground, at least four shelters which can be used for group activities, athletic fields, a fishing dock, a climbing wall, a meeting/game room with a lending library and a large office staffed by very friendly park employees.



Site 29

It also boasts one of the largest and nicest dog parks we have seen anywhere. It may rival the dog park at Balboa Park in San Diego in size. And, unlike, Balboa's dog park, it has beaches where dogs may swim. Needless to say, Grace availed herself of the opportunity to take a dip. Multiple times. Rusty did not.

The park is also host to the "Festival of Lights", a holiday tradition in Charleston. The park roads are lined with hundreds of figures outlined in lights. Some are animated. Most are relatively small, but some are huge - like the 25-foot tall owl that marks the entrance to the campground. The festival was just getting set up - it doesn't official open until November 13 - but portions of it were lit every night we were in the campground, as the setup crew tested the lights. The owl was lit every night. It was impossible to miss the entrance to the campground.

This was a great place to stay. If you are coming to Charleston in an RV, this is the place!



Grace taking a dip



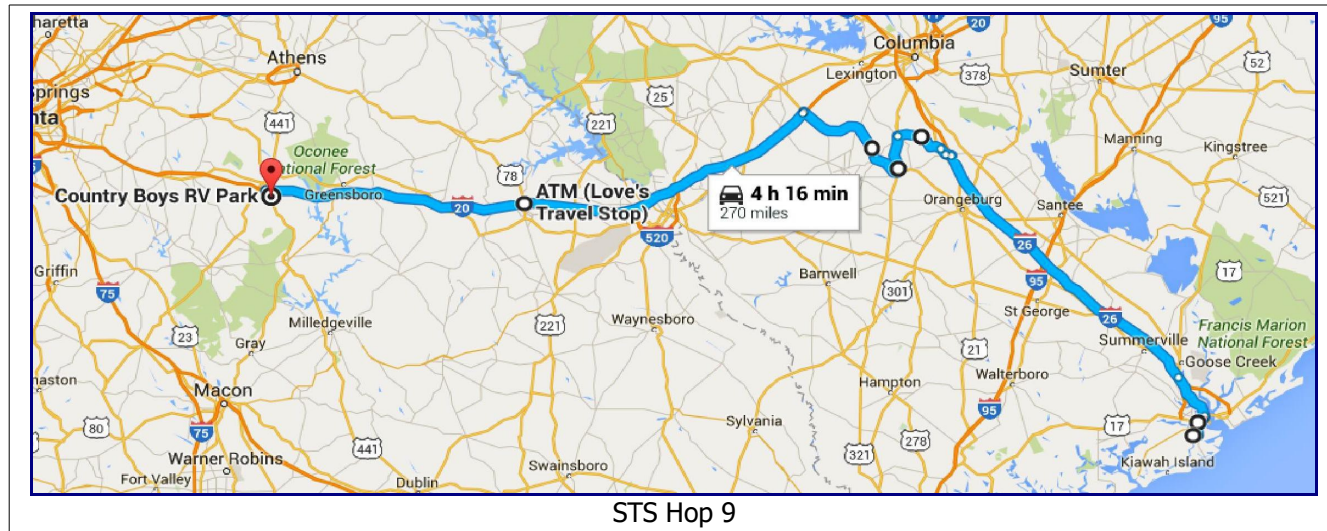
The dog park from the opposite shore



The owl at the campground entrance

STS Hop 9: Charleston SC to Madison GA

4 Nov 2015



270 miles via I-26, SC 6, SC 178, I-20 and US 441.

This was supposed to be a 256 mile hop, but we got embroiled in a battle between Google and our Rand McNally GPS. Usually when I plan a route with Google the GPS agrees with it, more or less. Not this time. When we got underway and made it to I-26, the GPS told us that we would be exiting after 43 miles while the Google route had us staying on I-26 for over 80 miles. We decided to stay on I-26. In retrospect, this was probably a mistake.

Even after we exited I-26, onto SC 6, the GPS continued to disagree with Google. We tried to follow the map directions but got confused somewhere along the line, then switched to the GPS which routed us on a very roundabout path to I-20. The net result was that the route became 14 miles longer than planned.

In a driving rain.

This was not one of the more enjoyable hops in our journeys.

Fortunately, the rain pretty much stopped before we did, so we set up in a light drizzle rather than a downpour.

Charleston harbor tour

5 Nov 2015

During our five days in Charleston we took two sightseeing tours - a combination bus tour of the city, a boat tour of the harbor and a walking tour of a historic mansion, and a "black history" bus tour that focused on the parts of the city that figured prominently in the slave trade and other major incidents in black history. This post is only about the harbor tour. Another post (or two) of the land tours will follow.

The harbor tour was a narrated 90-minute circuit of the harbor. The highlights were (1) Fort Sumter, (2) Fort Moultrie, (3) Patriots Point and (4) the striking [Arthur J Ravenel Jr bridge](#). The bridge is beautiful and looks like the big brother of the Zakim bridge in Boston. It is an impressive entrance to the city, but is even more impressive from below.

[Patriot's Point](#) is a tourist destination that includes hotels and various attractions, the most obvious of which is the *USS Yorktown*, a WWII aircraft carrier. It is now a floating museum which includes, on deck, numerous aircraft, most of which have nothing to do with naval warfare. We didn't tour the *Yorktown*, but it is an impressive sight from the harbor.



[The Yorktown](#)

To balance the *Yorktown*, the opposite (Charleston) side of the harbor has a passenger cruise terminal. The cruise ship in dock that day - the *Carnival Fantasy* - is as imposing as the *Yorktown*. In fact, it is both longer and has a much larger displacement than the *Yorktown*. Obviously, shipbuilding technology has come a long way in 60 years.

[Fort Moutrie](#) - which was difficult to see from the harbor - is more interesting for its role in the Revolutionary War (it kept the British out of Charleston) than in the Civil War (it was a fort abandoned by the federal troops before the shelling of Fort Sumter began, then was one of three place from which the shelling originated. It is interesting because it was, in the Revolutionary War, made of dirt and palmetto logs. This simple construction proved to be impervious to the British shelling and forced the British to attempt a landing behind the fort, which was also repelled. This was, arguably, the first American victory of the Revolutionary War.

The "highlight" of the tour, if you can call it that, was [Fort Sumter](#) which has an iconic place in American history as it was the site of the first shot of the Civil War. We could have taken a tour of the fort, but I assumed - correctly - that the structure there now bears



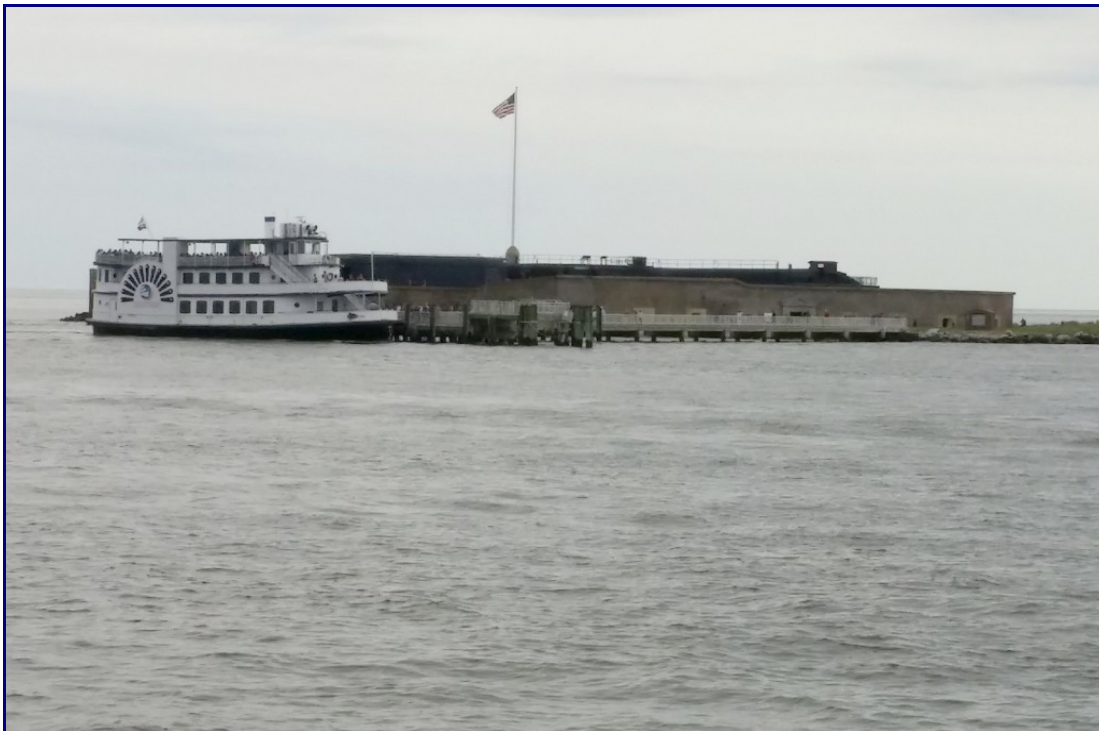
[Arthur Ravenel Jr Bridge](#)

almost no resemblance to the fort that was on the site in 1861. Three months of bombardment tends to destroy stone structures. Still, it was interesting to see the site and to get a feel for the geography (which has not changed).

It was a worthwhile investment of 90 minutes of our time. But not a "must do" if you go to Charleston.



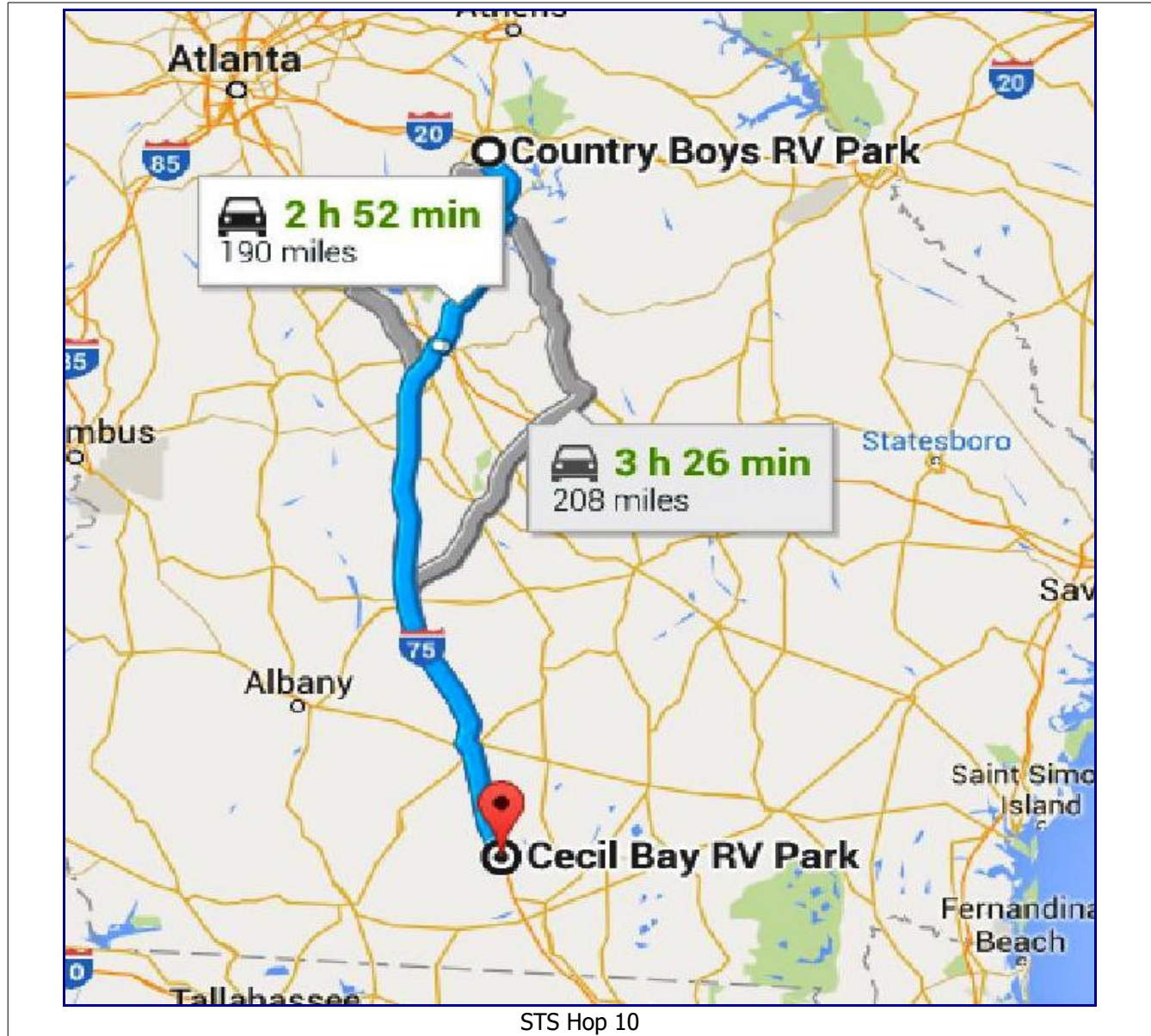
Carnival Fantasy



Ft Sumter

STS Hop 10: Madison GA to Cecil GA

7 Nov 2015



190 miles, mostly via US 129 and I-75.

There was no epic GPS/Google battle on this one; it was a pretty simple trip down US 129 to Macon where we hooked up with I-75. The geography was mostly gently rolling hills and the weather, though overcast most of the way, didn't produce much rain. Just a few sprinkles, which was a nice change after the wetness of the past week.

The biggest change was the temperature. The forecast high for Madison yesterday was 77, which was 10 degrees above normal. The high in Cecil was 89. And very humid.

I think we have arrived in the Deep South.

Country Boys RV Park

We stayed at [Country Boys RV Park](#) in Madison GA for 3 nights. My expectations of this place were low because it seemed to be the best of the bad bunch that were within driving distance of our friends, Steve and Elaine, who lived in Greensboro. I would say the park exceeded my low expectations. The roads were newly paved, the sites were gravel, but were large and level, and the hookups - including the 32-channel cable - were more than adequate.

But the park was trashy. It appeared that about 75% of the sites were occupied by permanent residents, some in RVs more than 20 years old.



Country Boys RV Park

I would rate this a 6 on a 10 scale. It would have been higher if not for all of the derelict RVs.

Charleston bus tours

7 Nov 2015

As mentioned previously, we LOVE Charleston. The city claims to be the most popular tourist destination in the US, if not the world. I don't have any references to back that claim and it has some tough competition in Las Vegas, Orlando, New York, LA, Paris, London, Dublin... name a few more. But after spending 5 nights in Charleston I have to agree that it is in the running.

I took a lot of photos, which partially explains why it took so long to complete this post. Just editing the photos and selecting the ones to use took some time. I chose to lead with a photo of a church - [St Matthew's Lutheran Church](#) - because I was struck by the sheer number of churches in Charleston. Churches of all denominations, all in buildings strikingly beautiful and all seemingly historic in some way. St Matthew's is notable for its 300-foot spire and its location on Marion Square, the Central Park of Charleston. Another notable church, on the other side of the square, is "Mother Emmanuel" - the [Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal](#) church which was formerly known for its standing as the oldest A.M.E. church in the southern US but lately has been more famous (or infamous) as the site of the June, 2015, [Charleston church shooting](#) in which 9 people were assassinated during bible study.



St Matthew's and the farmer's market

We took two bus tours of the city - a generic one on Sunday and a "black history" tour on Monday. The black history tour was a bit of a disappointment as it covered many of the same sites as the generic tour, but did offer additional insights into slave life in Charleston before the Civil War. But the most interesting aspect of that tour was the focus on the [Simmons gates](#), the beautiful wrought iron gates created by Phillip Simmons, a black artisan. The town is filthy (not the right word) with Simmons gates, each more beautiful than the last. We also visited Simmons' house and workshop, now operated by his nephew (Simmons died in 2009). The house is shockingly shabby and his workshop is nothing more than a small wooden shed. It is hard to believe that works of such beauty had such a humble birth. When we return to Charleston (and we will), I want to spend a day wandering the city seeking out these gates. Maybe several days. There must be hundreds of these Simmons gates in the city.



Simmons' workshop



Emmanuel A.M.E. From the bus



Simmons' home

Other highlights:

- Marion Square. This is a beautiful urban park, surrounded by beautiful buildings, including the original site of [The Citadel](#). We visited on a perfect day and enjoyed the Saturday farmer's market that was there that day. It is also the site of the iconic statue of John C. Calhoun - known as "Killhoun" by the slaves of the era.
- The [Fort Sumter National Landmark](#) which offers scenic harbor vistas as well as interesting exhibits on Fort Sumter and the Civil War. It is arguably more interesting than the fort itself.
- The market area which was vaguely reminiscent of Faueuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, but more authentic. We had dinner at [Tommy Condon's](#) which is an Irish pub/restaurant. I had, for the first time ever, shrimp and grits. Very tasty.
- The South Battery - the southern tip of the peninsula - which offers both views of Fort Sumter and many historic mansions.



Shrimp and grits

- The Building Arts building, which, ironically, looks like an abandoned (and about to collapse) jail.

Anyway, we had a very fine time in Charleston. We will be back.



Methodist church



Parking lot cemetery



Calhoun statue



Building Arts building



Battery mansion

STS Hop 11: Cecil GA to Bushnell FL

10 Nov 2015

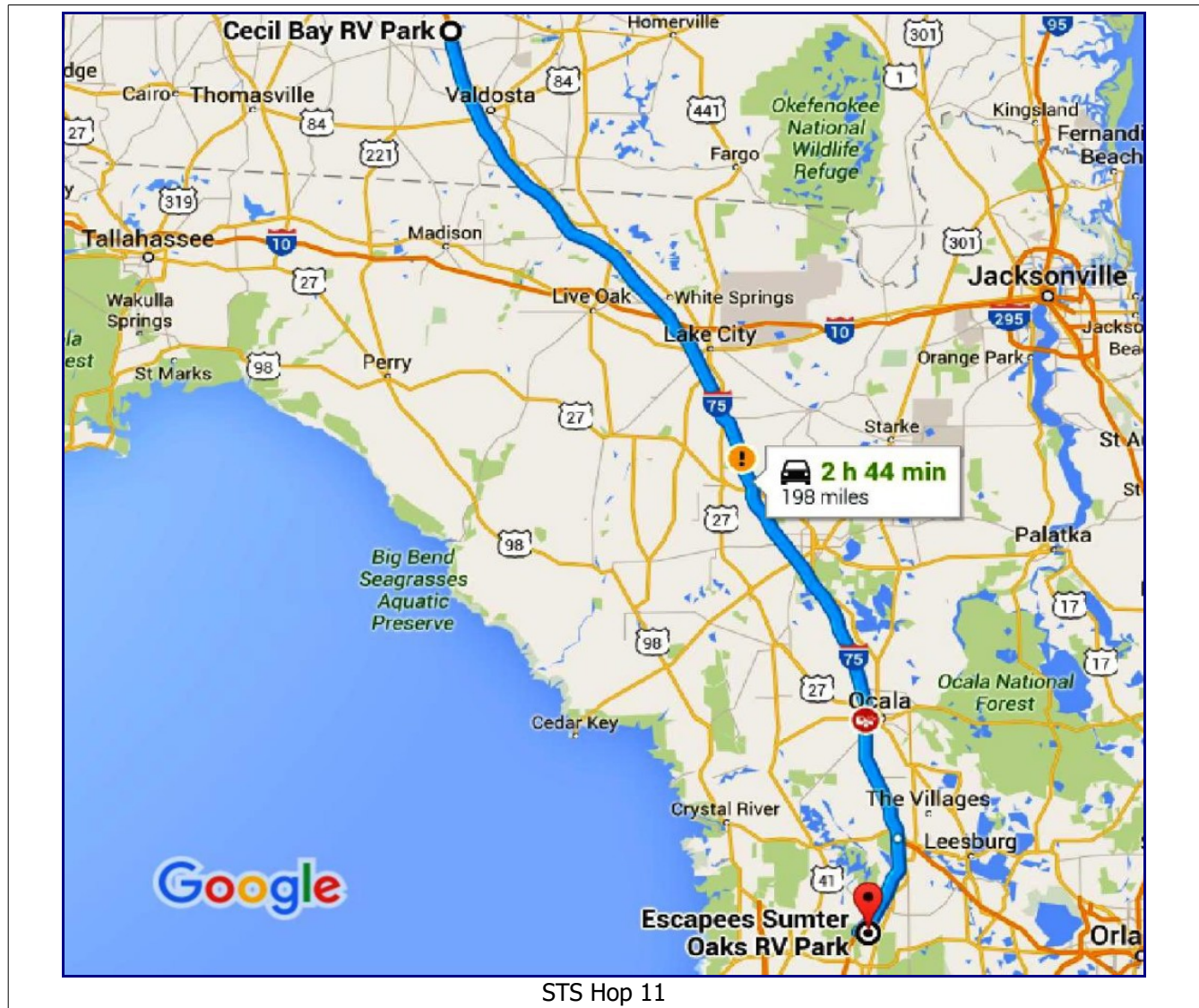
198 miles, almost all on I-75.

It doesn't get much simpler than this: get on I-75 at the exit from [Cecil Bay RV Park](#) and just keep going until exit 309 in Florida, then travel 1.5 miles on county 673 to our destination. It was a flat, pleasant trip in 90-degree sunshine. I-75 has traffic, but not as much as I-95 and is generally in better repair.

We saw our first billboards for businesses in Ft. Myers. We are getting close.

We will be in Bushnell for a week, trying to get our Florida drivers licenses, get our vehicles registered (except,

probably, the Yaris, which is not yet in Florida), register to vote and anything else that goes along with becoming, officially, residents of Florida.



Cecil Bay RV Park

This was just an overnight stop, so we didn't care much about the amenities. Good thing, because there aren't any. It is basically a large plot of land populated entirely with large pull-through sites. It does have cable TV.

The place was maybe 20% occupied (see photo below - we are just to the left of the right-hand tree). So with all of those empty sites you would think that we would get one in great shape. But you would be wrong; they gave us the one where the 50 amp electrical hookup was broken. That was not a real problem as we operate quite well on 30 amps. But why?

One thing Cecil Bay has in abundance is insects. Small, annoying flies that won't leave you alone. And fire ants. LOTS of fire ants.

We were glad it was just an overnight.



Cecil Bay RV Park



Fire ants

Madison and Greensboro SC

12 Nov 2015

We stayed for 3 nights in Madison SC primarily so that we would be able to visit with our good friends Steve and Elaine who came off the road last year to live in a Del Webb community at Lake Oconee SC. The highlights of our stay were (1) playing cards (we LOVE to play cards and so do Steve and Elaine), (2) lunch at the [Madison ChopHouse Grille](#), (3) dinner at the [Bone Island Grillehouse](#) and (4) a tour of the [Del Webb at Lake Oconee](#) "active retirement community."

The weather did not cooperate - it rained all three days. The best weather was when it was simply cloudy and damp. The pictures I took were, consequently, a bit drab and didn't do either town justice. Both



Madison courthouse



Madison Chamber of Commerce

Madison (the larger of the two towns) and Greensboro exhibited an abundance of southern charm. Both had some interesting antique shops. But the meals were the real highlights for both.

For lunch at the Madison ChopHouse I chose the Cajun shrimp po-boy. It was tasty but quite spicy. But I had to do it - I think it was my first po-boy ever. My dinner selection at the Bone Island Grille was jambalaya. Again, very spicy, but good.

The Del Webb tour was an eye-opener. I was impressed by the quality of the construction, the size and décor of the community buildings (including the indoor swimming pool) and the beautifully landscaped grounds. Jett and I are not quite ready to come off the road, but when we do we will have to consider a Del Webb community. Very high quality for a very reasonable price.



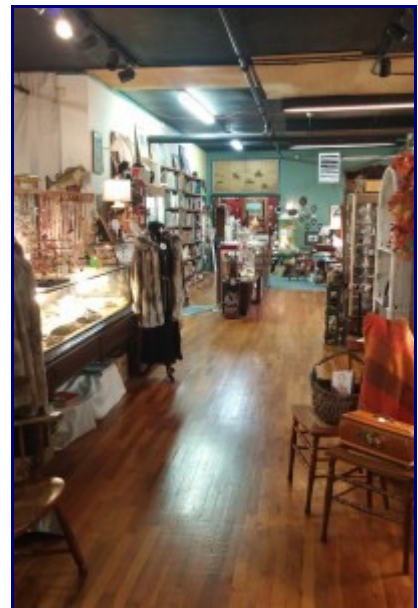
Cajun po-boy



Jambalaya



Walking path



Antique shop



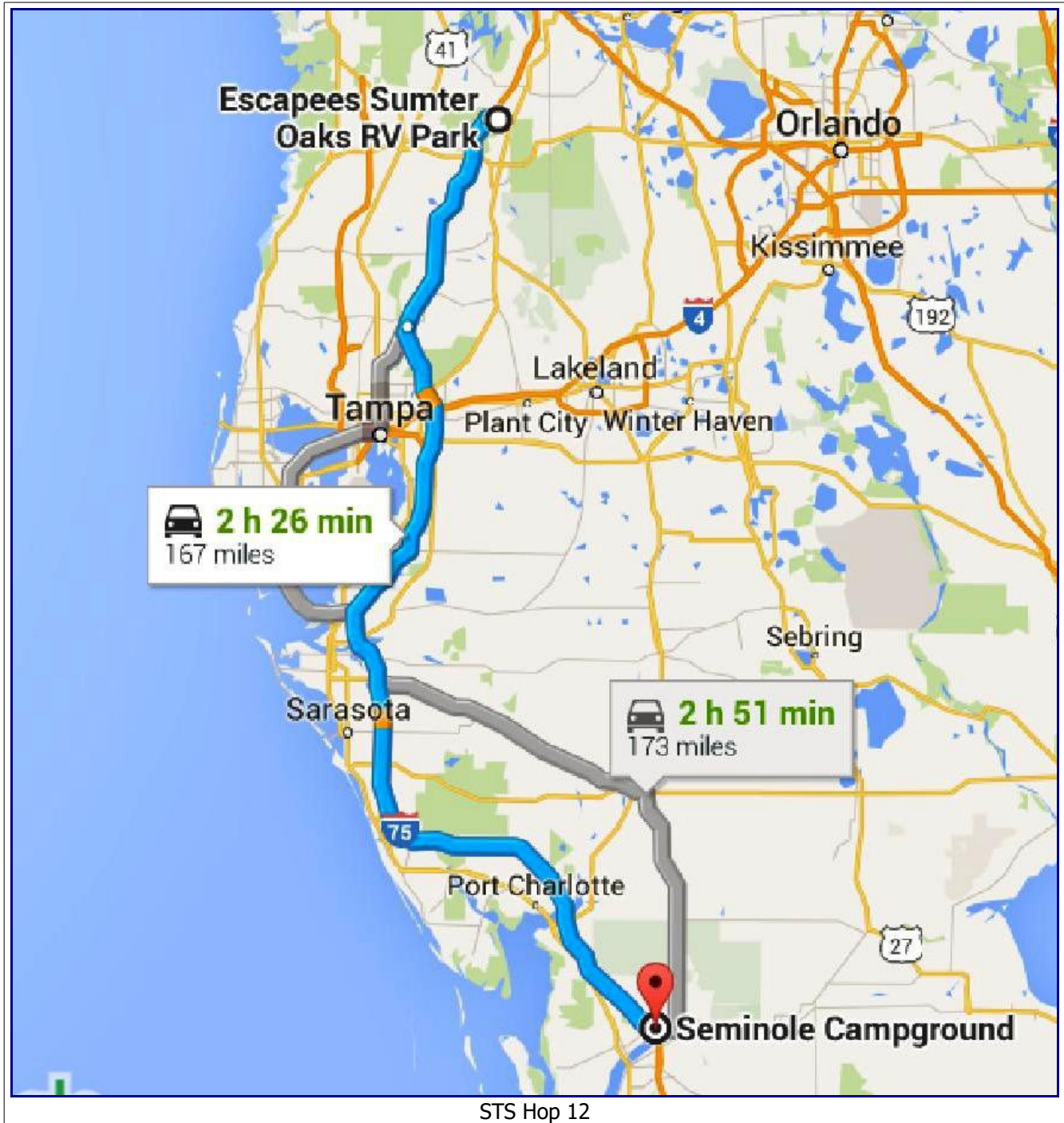
Community (free) dock



Indoor pool

STS Hop 12: Bushnell FL to North Ft Myers FL

15 Nov 2015



167 miles, almost entirely on I-75.

This would have been a simple, uneventful trip in sunny weather had it not been for the idiot young woman who cut us off north of Tampa and who damn near caused a catastrophic accident. I guess she was missing her exit, so, at 70 mph, she swerved in front of us - less than 40 feet, I would say - and then slammed on her brakes, to

avoid the other guy who was going down the off ramp at the same time. Which meant that I also had to slam on my brakes, then swerve into the left lane to avoid creaming her left rear corner. Fortunately, there was no one in that lane (probably because she had just blasted past me there). No accident, but it was as close as we have come to one in all our travels.

I saw her as we blew by - late 20's. Old enough to know better. She just ignored us. She apparently had no idea how close she had come to dying. Being rear-ended by a 10-ton rig would not have gone well for her.

Sumter Oaks RV Park



Site 41 at Sumter Oaks

We stayed at [Sumter Oaks RV Park](#) for a full week. The plan was to use that week to get our Florida driver's licenses, register our vehicles and register to vote as newly-minted Florida residents. However, that plan got short-circuited by Jett leaving her glasses in the Yaris, which will be delivered to us in Ft Myers. She failed her vision test without them (no surprise) and because registering the vehicles required both that they be physically in Florida and that we both have licenses, we had to abort our plans. We will complete the process in Ft Myers after the Yaris arrives next week.

I did, however, get all the vehicles - including the RV - fully insured. The now have dual coverage. As the



Sandhill cranes wandering by

Florida rates are considerably lower than the Massachusetts rates, it will be nice when I can drop the old coverage.

Anyway, I am now a Florida resident and Jett still resides in Massachusetts. I guess we will have to carry on a long-distance relationship for a while.

Sumter Oaks is an "Escapees Rainbow Park" - one of 8 in the US. This means that it is owned and operated by the Escapees RV Club. Which, in turn, means that it is an inexpensive destination for members. Our cost for the entire week: \$151. About \$22/day.



Puzzled dogs



At the groomer's

The park doesn't have a lot of amenities. It has an indoor pool (which was closed), a basic dog park and a small but inexpensive laundry room (conveniently located just a few steps from our site). But what it has in abundance is camaraderie. The Escapees there were wonderful, just as they were in Livingston TX (aka "the mother ship") which we visited way back in 2012. Though we were there just a week we feel like we have a bunch of new friends. We learned to play Hand, Knee and Foot which is a variation on canasta but uses a lot more cards - 6 full decks for 4 players. I couldn't find a link to the rules, which are fairly complex, but we obtained a printed copy for our use. We may experiment with playing this, as a variation on canasta, while we are in Ft Myers.



The swamp

We also got the new rig weighed. We did well. We were well within limits for each axle and just slightly over the

rated weight for the truck. But the weighmaster (yes, that is his official title) said that overall we were fine.

The park has a natural beauty which I found soothing. The park's back side was bordered by a cypress swamp and there were pastures on either side. It also had a family of [sandhill cranes](#) which seemed very comfortable wandering around the park in close proximity to the human residents. They reminded me of the family of turkeys that visited us in Littleton, MA, but were larger and a bit louder. They didn't like our dogs but our dogs seemed to be only puzzled by them. They didn't even bark.

One thing the park lacked: TV reception. Even after adding a second booster, we managed to pull in only 2 not-very-interesting channels. We gave up and went without TV for the entire week. We caught up on Perry Mason (season 2) and started on Mad Men (season 1). I thought we were going to miss our daily TV fix more than we actually did.

[Bushnell](#) is a town of about 2,000 that is pretty far from any major city. Ocala is about 40 miles north and Orlando is just over 50 miles east. It is large enough to have a Walmart, a CVS and not much else. The best meats were found at a gas station (really!) in the adjacent hamlet of Webster (population 800). It did have a sports bar which I visited on Sunday to watch the Patriots improve to 8-0 while all the other patrons cried in their beer over their mediocre Florida teams.

We also found a local dog groomer and took both dogs there to be bathed. Rusty also got a summer cut - he now looks like his bald brother. The groomer was on a farm which also exuded the serenity that permeates the region. The two horses in the front "yard" made the place a bit different from your average PetSmart.

STS wrapup

16 Nov 2015

3,209 total driving miles, 2,011 total towing miles, 39 nights in 12 hops.

This, of the 5 long-distance trips we have taken, had the most stress per mile. Yes, our first trip (GTW) began with a month of ding-a-day mishaps, but evolved into a very pleasant and relaxing 3-month cross-country adventure. This one began with badly timed (and very expensive) truck problems which resurfaced less than 1,000 miles into the trip. More than any other trip, we had to rearrange, reroute and reschedule. It wasn't a lot of fun.

Both Jett and I also had to deal with serious family issues and tenant problems along the way. So when the truck wasn't presenting us with issues, family and tenants were.

And I had to work my way through the maze of Medicare enrollments.

Retirement? Hardly.

The lowlights:

- The "check engine" / "limp mode" truck problems at the start and in Virginia.
- The noisy campsites in Pennsylvania and Virginia.
- The rain in South Carolina and Georgia.
- The total lack of TV reception in Bushnell, FL.
- The near-collision north of Tampa.
- The loss of about \$300 in campsite deposits due to our need to alter our original schedule.
- Failing to get our residency chores completed in Bushnell.

- Family issues.

The highlights:

- Chester Carter, the mechanic who saved the trip by correctly diagnosing and fixing the engine problem.
- Charleston, SC - what a great city!
- Myrtle Beach - camping next to the surf is a treat, even when the weather isn't great.
- Visiting with family in Virginia.
- Visiting Steve and Elaine, our friends in Georgia.
- Meeting a bunch of new Escapees friends in Bushnell.
- Getting the rig weighed.

We are now in North Fort Myers where the plan is to remain until mid-April. However, the site is very cramped (see above) and we will have to look into options, including moving to another campground. So the need to alter our plans continues.



At rest at Seminole Campground

Life in a can

25 Nov 2015

Living in an RV is not, to me, much different than living in a small (but movable) apartment. It has all the

comforts I need, with the possible exception of a laundry room (which we could have, but choose not to). However, when it rains heavily, as it did on Sunday, it is like living in a tin can. The rain on the roof is **deafening**, to the point where we need to double the volume on the TV and must raise our voices to speak to each other. The dogs don't like it much, either.

It is probably the same aural experience that we would have if we were living in a metal shed. But more comfortable.

The residency adventure

28 Nov 2015

I think I mentioned that Jett and I are becoming Florida residents. We have both been residents of MA for a LONG time - 48 years for me and Jett's entire life. It is, like selling the house, another big life transition. We knew it would take some work - we need to establish a "permanent" Florida address, get FL driver licenses and insure all of our vehicles in FL. But we underestimated the task. It has been an adventure.

Getting the address was the easy part. The Escapees club provides mailing addresses in Texas, Florida and South Dakota that may be used to establish residency in those states. They have worked out all the legal issues and have the support of the cities and counties in those locales. And why not? As a "permanent" resident of Bushnell, Florida, we will inflate their population and bring a larger share of federal and state revenues to the city and county. And we won't use any public resources. Seems like a pretty sweet deal for them.

But to establish residency we needed to provide 2 "proofs of address" - utility bills, tax bills, mortgage bills or similar (which, of course, we did not have) - that proves we really "live" at that address. Even though everyone is aware that we don't *really* live there, we still need proof that it is a valid mailing address. Escapees provides a certificate which the county accepts as one proof. And, at the urging of Escapees, I had the Social Security Administration mail me a letter at that address, which we could use as a second proof.

So, with these documents in hand, we found our way to the Sumter County Tax Collector's office on our Monday in Bushnell. In Florida, the county tax collector office doubles as a DMV office. Establishing residency, registering to vote and getting a Florida license is all done together. Very convenient.

As long as you can pass the driver vision test.

I had no problem, but Jett had left her glasses in the Yaris, which was still in Massachusetts. She failed the vision test miserably. And since we couldn't get the vehicles registered without both of us having FL licenses, our big plan to get it all done in Bushnell was thwarted.

I did get all 3 vehicles - the truck, the car and the RV - insured that day. It was done very efficiently and conveniently online with Geico. I did have to call to work out the RV insurance details, but overall that went very smoothly. But because we couldn't get the vehicles registered in Bushnell, we had to finish the STS with dual coverage. That was money that I didn't enjoy spending.

Fast forward to Ft Myers. The Yaris arrived on Tuesday Nov 17 and on Wednesday we went down to the Lee county tax collector office to get Jett's driver's license. But she failed the eye test again (she has had poor eyesight since she had her cataract surgery two years ago - yes, cataract surgery is supposed to improve your eyesight but that was not the case for her). So we had to go to an optometrist on Thursday to get her eyesight certified as safe, then back to the DMV. She got her license.

Whew!

Back to the DMV on Thursday to register the vehicles. And was completely thwarted. I could not get ANY of

the vehicles registered that day, for the following reasons:

- The RV has a lien and in Florida it is the owner's responsibility to get the title (held by the lienholder) to the DMV. I had to complete a form, provided by Florida, to the lienholder, requesting that the title be sent to the Florida DMV. I mailed the form, but the registration of the RV is on hold until Florida gets the title. Could be a couple of weeks.
- The truck could not be registered because we drove the Yaris to the optometrist and DMV. The vehicle being registered must be present so that the VIN can be verified.
- The Yaris could not be registered because it was still listed in the national database as having a lien. I had to call the original lienholder to clear the lien. This was complicated by the puzzling fact that it was also listed as being registered in BOTH Florida and Massachusetts. I am not sure how this happened and am amazed that this didn't cause a problem before, but it had the strange effect of reducing the cost of getting the Florida plates: since it was already registered in Florida I would save the \$85 "registration transfer" fee. I just had to get the lien cleared.

Getting the lien cleared was a nightmare. I called the lienholder, who insisted that the documents I had in hand (which included a very strange "non-negotiable" MA title which no one seemed to know much about) were sufficient to get the vehicle registered in Florida - a position which the DMV had already refuted. Then I called the MA RMV who could at least explain the title (it was a "courtesy" document which was provided because the lienholder had, they said, never responded to their request for the title). Another very painful call to the lienholder finally resulted in them promising to clear the lien in the state database.

I was able to register the truck on Monday this week. Now, on Friday, the lien on the Yaris has been cleared and I think it can be registered. The RV title has not yet arrived.

We will try to get the Yaris registered before Jett leaves (she is going back to MA for 10 days), but the RV registration will have to wait until she returns.

Barring further impediments, we will be full-fledged FL residents before the end of 2015.

It has been an adventure. And not a fun one.

Dizzy dog

12 Dec 2015

Grace just turned 15. She has, until recently, not acted her age. On a recent trip to the dog park she was romping with a 2-year-old German Shepherd. But last Thursday she approached me at 7:40 am, sitting on the sofa with my computer on my lap and gave me a get-me-up-there look. So I lifted her onto the sofa to be with me. She immediately peed and then proceeded to vomit. Thick, disgusting, mucous-y vomit that was the worst I have ever seen. I dragged her off the sofa and out of the RV (I had to carry her down the steps). She continued to be violently ill as I walked her around the park. Worse, she acted like she was drunk. She even toppled over a couple of times.

Needless to say, I was deeply alarmed. I thought perhaps her heart was giving out. She was, without question, the sickest she had ever been. I thought she was dying. I found a nearby vet and took her there, thinking, on the way, that the odds of me returning with her were about 1 in 5; I was probably going to have to put her down.

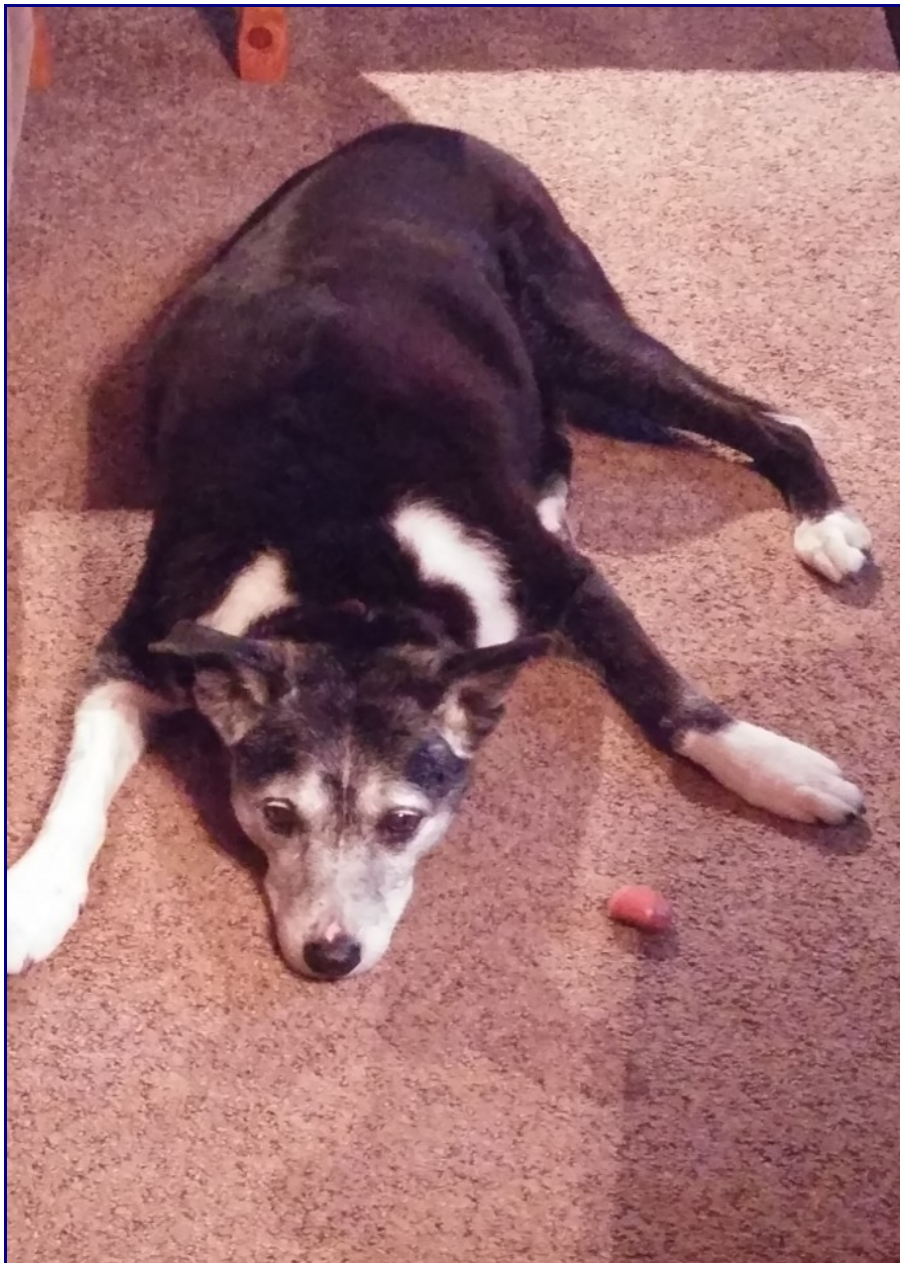
But the vet looked into her eyes and quickly diagnosed her problem as *vertigo*. Yes, a simple bout of dizziness which, she said, was not uncommon in older dogs. She did some blood work to confirm that there was no deeper issue, give us some anti-nausea medicine and sent us home. Needless to say, I was relieved. Grace,

not so much. She was completely miserable. The photo is of Grace, after returning to the RV, lying next to the chunk of hot dog that contained the pill. Of course she was nauseous and didn't want to eat *anything*, including anti-nausea medicine.

I did eventually get her to down one pill in cheese. And the next day her appetite had returned to the point where she would eat chunks of chicken breast, if fed to her by hand, so I was able to get the rest of the pills into her that way. It is now 9 days later and her appetite has fully recovered. But she remains somewhat unsteady on her feet. I still carry her down the steps.

The vet says we need to be patient; it can take over two weeks to fully recover. I am relieved that it wasn't more serious and am glad that she seems to be enjoying life again.

But she is 15 and this was notice that her time is coming.



Grace in misery

Spiny softshell turtle

27 Dec 2015

We have grown accustomed to seeing gopher tortoises on our walks to/from the dog park here. There are at least two that frequently come out to bask in the sun and to dine on grass. But recently we encountered a [spiny softshell turtle](#), a weird duck of a turtle with a pointed nose and a flat shell with upturned edges. Rusty, of course, was fascinated. Grace ignored it.



Spiny softshell turtle



At the Cape Coral Boat Parade



Zachary "The Monkey" at Pohick

