



OurWanderYears 2016

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Cover photo: Sunset on Lake Champlain (Vermont), October 2016.

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Christmas lights, Florida style

2 Jan 2016



Cape Coral boat parade

Those one or two of you who have been reading this blog for over two years, you may remember that Jett and I celebrated our first Christmas in Florida by going on a [boat tour of Christmas lights in Port Charlotte](#).

Viewing lights on land from the water while dressed in shorts and T's was a real treat. This year we reversed the process: we stayed on land (in Cape Coral) and watched the lights (on decorated boats) go by. Again, we were in shorts and T's and again it was a real treat. But this time we were able to include the dogs in the fun.

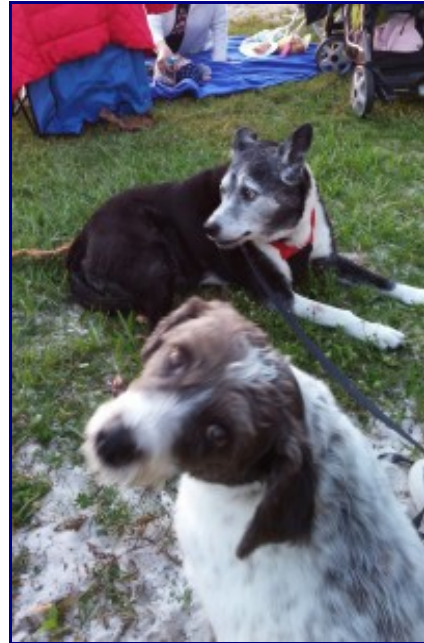
This was this Cape Coral Boat Parade, an annual event in Cape Coral, Florida, held the last weekend before Christmas. The parade starts at the Bimini Basin and winds its way through the major canals of the city. We grabbed a spot on the beach at [Four Freedoms Park](#) at the starting point of the parade. We got there before dusk and got settled in with our hot dogs, funnel cakes (yum!) and root beers. It was a real family event with lots of kids and even a few dogs. Something for everyone. Even a visit from Santa. Music and a beautiful sunset, too. A nice way to spend a warm (80's before sunset) evening before Christmas.



Green finish



Jett and the dogs



The pups at Four Freedoms Park



Sunset on Bimini Basin



The start of the parade



Decorated boat

Hand, knee and foot

4 Jan 2016

One of our favorite pastimes is playing cards and our current obsession is Hand, Knee and Foot. This is a variation on canasta which requires six decks and nimble hands capable of holding 20 cards or more. Like

standard canasta, the hand initially consists of 15 cards and points are scored for canastas (7 of a kind), red threes and melded sets of 3 or more. Also, points are deducted for cards held at the end of the game. The discard pile may be picked up, with certain restrictions. All of this applies to Hand, Knee and Foot as well, but with additional hands (the Knee - a hand of 13 - and a Foot - a hand of 11). The Knee is played when the first canasta is reached and the Foot is played when all cards from the Hand and the Knee have been played. There are 5 required canastas, each with different values:

- 7's - 5,000 points
- 5's - 3,000 points
- wild cards (2's and jokers) - 2,500 points
- red (a pure canasta of any value other than 5 or 7) - 500 points
- black (a canasta of any value other than 5 or 7, with 1 or 2 wild cards) - 300 points

All 5 canastas are required to finish the hand. The values of the canastas (required and bonus) are added at the end of the hand, along with 100 points for each accumulated red 3 and the point count of all played cards (5 points for 4 to 7, 10 points for 8 to K, 20 for ace and 2's and 50 for jokers). As you might guess, the total point count for a hand is quite high - usually over 10,000 points. A game (consisting of 4 hands) usually has a winning point count of over 60,000. It is not unusual to have a difference of over 10,000 points.

Jett has been keeping a cumulative running score since January 1. She is currently ahead by over 80,000 points, due primarily to her uncanny ability to pick up 7's. She has won 22 of the 32 hands we have played so far. I have accumulated the required set of 7 7's in less than half of those games.

As picking up 7's should be a matter of pure luck, I am beginning to doubt the Laws of Probability.

Despite my frustrations, it is still a fun game to play. And a cheap way to keep Jett amused.

Close shave

13 Jan 2016

Last Saturday night Jett and I were playing cards (Hand, Knee and Foot, of course) with neighbors. Showers were expected, but it was a nice evening and so we were playing outdoors, on the picnic table, under the RV awning in case of rain. Just before 7pm we all received weather alerts on our cell phones warning of a possible tornado. But we have been through this drill before and knew that if it was serious then 1) the campground would send someone through with a bullhorn advising us to take cover (in the bath house or laundry - the only rigid structures around) and 2) there would be urgent advisories on TV. I turned on the TV and, yes, the local stations were having special weather coverage but I noted that the warning was to expire in about 15 minutes and no reports of an actual tornado sighting had been received. There was also an observation that the "storm was weakening." And it wasn't very windy and the rain was light. So I wasn't unduly concerned.

We continued to play cards.

The rain did soon become quite heavy, but that is pretty common here. We did finally move into the RV and watched the TV for another 15 minutes before deciding to give up the game. The rain lasted another 30 minutes.

The next morning I awoke to news of an [F2 tornado in Cape Coral](#) the night before. While we were blithely playing cards, a twister was steamrolling nearly 200 homes just 15 miles to the southwest of us. As more information arrived it became apparent that not only was a real tornado on the ground at 7pm the night before, as we played cards, but that its path would have taken it directly over us, had it stayed on the ground.

The last time we had a tornado warning our strategy was to pile the dogs into the truck and take to the roads, figuring that we could outrun any funnel cloud that we sighted. That might be a decent defense in the daytime, but at 7pm, in a storm, I doubt that I could have spotted it coming at me. Heading to the bath house probably would have been the wisest move.

Continuing to play cards in that situation is not going to get me into Mensa.

Genealogy

16 Jan 2016

I love a good mystery. I have been an avid reader of whodunits for most of my life. I cut my teeth on [The Hardy Boys](#). Arguably my best Christmas present ever was a set of 40-plus used Hardy Boys books when I was 10.

All of which goes to explain why I like genealogy. The search for one's roots is a very personal kind of mystery story, as the [Ancestry.com](#) commercials are quick to note. Everyone has a story and that story is, at some point, a mystery. While some branches may be easy to trace (e.g., Jett's paternal lineage can be traced back 17 generations, to medieval England), others - like my paternal grandmother - are surprisingly difficult. I have gotten almost nowhere on figuring out her lineage. I am suspecting that her parents were German immigrants who anglicized their name, but that is just a guess right now.

I am fascinated by the information that is available when one looks for it. For example, there are (nearly) complete passenger lists for all ships that arrived in New England prior to 1700! There is a website ([finagrave.com](#)) that not only helps locate graves of ancestors, but in many cases provides a photo of the headstone. Who has time to wander cemeteries, snapping pictures of all headstones?

As I track down my personal history - and Jett's - I am learning a lot about early American history as well. I was under the impression, for example, that the passengers on the [Mayflower](#) were the first Europeans to set foot in what is now Massachusetts. Not so. In 1602 [Bartholomew Gosnold](#), in his ship *Concord*, landed on (and named) both Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard. The passengers intended to establish a colony and built a camp on Martha's Vineyard, but decided that they lacked sufficient food to last the winter and decided to return to England. But, still, the fact that European settlers were in Massachusetts some 18 years before the Pilgrims was a complete surprise to me.

And I have learned this all in a week, so I expect that many more revelations will follow. It should be an interesting way to spend some time in my retirement.

Kiss my ring

23 Jan 2016

My search for my ancestors continues. I researched my maternal grandfather's Murray lineage back to 17th century Scotland, but got stuck on trying to figure out just which William Murray was my great-great-whatever grandfather. Scotland in the 17th century was filthy with Murrys. You couldn't swing a caber back then without hitting one.

So I reported my results to my siblings and my sister forwarded the information to my Murray cousins. One of them recalled that her father had paid to have some genealogical research done some years ago and that she "thinks she has a book upstairs somewhere."

Long story short: she found the book and it traced her ancestry (and mine) back to a brother of [Robert the](#)

[Bruce](#), King of the Scots, from 1306 to 1329, and son of [Robert de Brus, 6th Lord of Annandale](#). And because he was the 6th Lord of Annandale, it was easy to trace back 5 more generations because they were all famous.

Better yet, the entire Bruce line were cousins of the Stuart line of royalty in England. Which makes me a very distant cousin to Henry I, James I and 4 other English monarchs.

When we next meet you may kiss my ring.

Good thing it ain't Massachusetts

27 Jan 2016

Last winter in Massachusetts we got buried under 100-plus inches of snow. This winter, in Florida, we have gotten over 14 inches of rain - in December alone. If we got this precipitation in Massachusetts we would have over 140 inches of snow. That would be worse. But the rain is bad enough.

I haven't golfed in over 3 weeks, my Thursday softball game got rained out and the stream in the RV park is just about to overflow its banks.

We are going to spend next week on a houseboat. Hopefully we won't get swept out to sea on the raging waters. But at least I won't have to worry about pulling the boat out of the weeds - and getting eaten by leaches - like Humphrey Bogart in [The African Queen](#).



The swollen Potash Creek

Houseboating – Days 1 and 2

1 Feb 2016

We have left our RV for a week to travel the St Johns River in a 54-foot houseboat. We are doing this because (1) we have talked about houseboating for a while and this was an opportunity to try it, (2) we had a timeshare week banked with RCI that was about to expire and we could exchange it for this houseboat week (though at a price), (3) it coincided with my birthday and (4) we are certifiably insane. So I, a lifelong landlubber with almost no boating experience, am now captain of a 54-foot vessel, the *Endevour*, towing a 14-foot "jon boat" with an outboard motor.

I will mention the bad stuff first, then get to the fun part.

1. It is expensive. Even after trading in our vacation week we had to plop down an additional \$1100 to rent the houseboat for a week. That is \$900 for training and whatnot, \$100 for insurance and \$100 for dogs. Actually dog, singular, because we could only bring Rusty; we had to board Grace (another \$500 for a prime home). The jon boat was an additional \$260. After fuel and incidentals this will run us over \$2,000. Not cheap, but we had to see what it was like.



The Endeavour

2. Leaving Grace behind was difficult. The necessity to do so arose from a weight limit of 35 pounds for dogs on board. I can understand why: getting dogs on and off the boat can be difficult once off the pier. It just isn't a real family vacation without our "grand old lady".
3. The nearly 4 hour drive was boring, for the first 3 hours. Then we hit the Saturday traffic at Disney World in Orlando and it became annoying.
4. I left one bag of groceries in the car on Friday night after Jett when shopping for the trip. She discovered the bag, fortunately, before we left. But as it was a bag of meat it was a total loss and the 4 hour trip became much longer because it was filled with Jett's how-could-you-do-that's.

Now the good stuff from Saturday, when we got there, had dinner out and slept on the boat, and Sunday, our first day on the river.

We had a very nice meal at a local restaurant right on the St Johns River, the [Shady Oak](#). I had fried ponga, whatever that is (some kind of fish) and Jett had fried green tomatoes and fried cod bites.

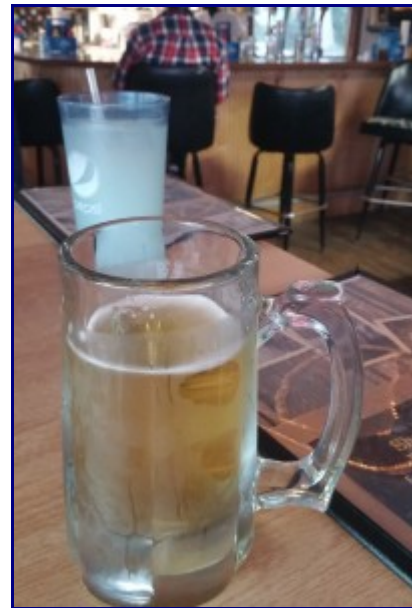
The tomatoes were mediocre but the rest was very good and the draft Rolling Rock was \$1 for a mug. The local "flavor" was... interesting. We were surrounded by elderly bikers.

1. The houseboat is quite comfortable. It has two real bedrooms, a bath, a kitchen and a living room with a futon. It is much like living in our RV, except for the marine head, which is a bit more complicated



The jon boat

2. than our simple RV toilet. But it works and has unlimited capacity. The water and the fuel are limited, of course, but generous enough to not be a concern for a week.
3. It is a rush to be called "Captain". A half-hour into our cruise we had to call a drawbridge operator to request that the bridge be opened. That was a first for me - to have a drawbridge open at my request - and to be called "Captain" on the radio, for all the world to hear, was pretty cool.
4. I think I am a natural when it comes to boats. My first attempt at docking went smooth as silk. The instructor said it was the best first attempt he had seen in weeks. Maybe I missed my calling in the Navy.
5. The wildlife along the river on Sunday was very interesting. Lots and lots of cranes, egrets, hawks and vultures (who did not look at us like we were their next meal). Turtles and some alligators. I am sure we will see manatees soon.
6. There is something pretty cool about pointing the houseboat straight ahead, checking for traffic (very little), the leaving the captain's chair to go get a snack. At 5 mph danger doesn't approach very quickly.
7. We found a great place to put in for the night. Our own private island.



My \$1 Shady Oak mug of beer

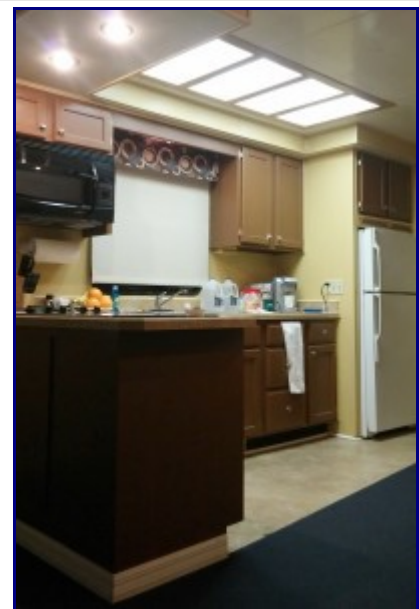
After my training (which took about an hour) Sunday morning, we were off. Only to return 15 minutes later because we had forgotten to hook up the jon boat. So I got a second chance to dock (also successful, though not quite as smooth). Then the drawbridge, followed soon thereafter by some practice tying up to trees on shore. That was a little awkward, but I accomplished it. We stayed tied to an overhanging branch for about 45 minutes while we had lunch.

We had two little adventures along the way. First, one of our onboard CO detectors went off about an hour into the trip, for no apparent reason. I had to call the marina on the ship-to-shore radio to get advice from the engineer. Rebooting it seems to have solved the problem, after I did it several times and then tightened the internal electrical connection.

Second, I just about ran aground once. I was cruising along on the right side of the channel in typical 12-to-17 foot depths when suddenly the clearance dropped to 5 feet, then 4, then 3. The houseboat requires 3 feet of water, so I had a moment of panic. But before I could do anything (it doesn't exactly stop on a dime), the

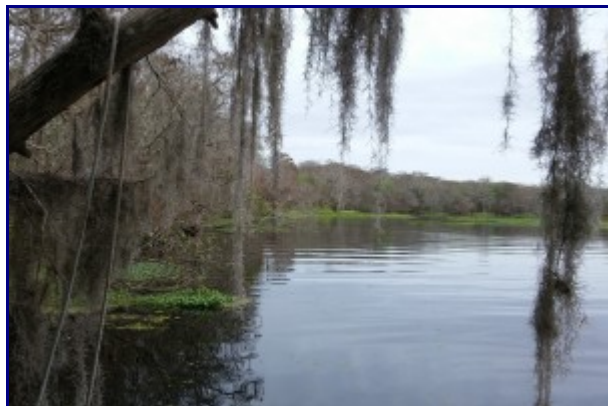
depth jumped back up to 8 feet. I was concerned that perhaps the sand bar (or whatever it was) might have caught the propeller (\$22 per blade), but later inspection showed no damage.

Docking at the little island near Astor was a bit nerve-wracking. We did it very slowly, checking the depth constantly, but had no problem getting the nose touching the little beach. I swung the stern in, tied the boat bow and stern and hopped off to explore, with Rusty's eager assistance. It didn't take long because the island was perhaps 100 feet across and 200 feet wide. But beautiful. I felt like Robinson Crusoe. There was evidence of previous camping on the island - a campfire site and a pole that was clearly used to make a lean-to. This was confirmed when we were visited by the local river police that evening who saw us docked there and just wanted



The galley

to make sure that a squatter that he had run off recently had not returned.



Tied to a branch



Our first island docking position

The generator shut itself down shortly after we arrived. I figured it was due to our starboard-side docking position, where the stern was sitting in weeds, possibly clogging the intake for the generator's cooling water. I was going to back out and come back in for a bow docking, but Jett convinced me that I could just manually reposition the boat. So I untied it, pushed the stern out, then used the bow rope to pull it over to where we wanted it. It worked! Pushing a 54-foot boat around made me feel like Hercules.



Our sundeck, with branches

We had a nice meal (cooked inside because it was very chilly), watched TV and played cards. We shut off the generator and retired to bed at midnight. With the generator off our environment became very dark. And very quiet. Eerie.

But we slept well.

More about our private island tomorrow.

Houseboating – Days 3, 4 and 5

8 Feb 2016



Docked on Lungren Island

I intended to blog every day during our week on the houseboat, but, alas... too much time driving, playing cards and having fun. Plus our wifi connectivity was not stellar. So it is being compressed into 3 posts.

Our plan for Monday was to travel up to the [Silver Glen Spring Run](#) recreation area on the west bank of Lake George, the second largest lake in Florida (170 square miles). But the weather forecast for Tuesday (80 degrees and sunny) was better than for Monday (75 degrees and mostly cloudy), so we decided to just hang out for the day at our private little island - Lungren Island, near Astor, Florida. So Day 3 was all about Lungren Island, Day 4 was about our (disappointing) trip to and from Lake George and Day 5 was about our trip back to the marina.



Rusty on Lungren Island

First, Lungren Island. We loved this place! As previously mentioned, it was tiny - just a few hundred feet wide

and maybe a hundred feet across. But it was beautifully wooded and really felt like it was our private little enclave. Rusty loved it, too. The photo is of Rusty on the island, investigating smells near the mysterious stump with the shoot on top. Jett called it "Wilson" after Tom Hanks' soccer ball in [Cast Away](#). The photo also shows the campfire area left by the earlier squatter. The other side of the island had two rope swings (which we didn't use).



The houseboat at Lungren



Alligator Rock



The upper deck



Non-rock alligator



Scary dead spider

It was a beautiful, serene place, except for the occasional outboard motor noises. I spent some time on the upper deck, grabbing some sun and reading. The photo is from our second docking, on the channel side of the island (more on that in a bit). I also took the jon boat out for a spin early in the morning, then took it out again in the afternoon, with Jett along for the ride. I got some nice photos of the houseboat from the river and saw some interesting birds. I also spotted two white-tailed deer on shore, but wasn't quick enough with the camera to get their picture.

With Jett along we tried to find the deer again, but failed. We did, however, spot an alligator. Or at least we thought we did. Turned out to be a rock which we immediately dubbed "Alligator Rock." But we continued on downstream a bit, then crossed to the other side where we did, indeed, see an alligator. Probably about 8 feet long and pretty chubby. Well fed, I guess.

One thing I didn't mention to Jett: the large (and, fortunately, dead) spider that I found in the jon boat. It was about 3 inches and scary. I don't want to find any live ones.

We grilled bratwurst and burgers for dinner and enjoyed a second very quiet night at Lungren.



Some egrets?



Tuesday morning fog

On Tuesday we woke to dense fog which, fortunately, burned off by 10am. We undocked and traveled north to Lake George and then did our best to find the entrance to the Silver Glen lagoon, which was more difficult than I expected. The lake is so large that we could barely see the shore and had only a general heading to find the (small) entrance. I actually used the GPS on my cell phone to assist in the navigation. We did, eventually, find it, but later than expected. We probably would have had only an hour or so to explore.

Which turned out to be a moot point because I was intimidated by the shallow water (less than 3 feet a quarter of mile from shore) and had visions of grounding dancing in my head. It was obvious that the only way we were going to get into the inlet would be to anchor the houseboat and use the jon boat. But as we had no experience with anchoring, we feared that we would return to find the houseboat grounded somewhere.

So we gave up, turned around and headed home - back to Lungren. We had the same navigation problem finding the river entrance and I had to consult my phone again. The issue with heading east on the lake was that missing the channel and going too far east would put us into a naval target bombing area. As much as we disliked getting grounded, we disliked the idea of getting bombed even more.

But we found the river without being bombed and made our way back to Lungren for a third night. This time, for variety, we tied up on the channel side of the island, below the two rope swings (see the upper deck photo above). This docking area was tighter than the other side and, coupled with a brisker wind and a stronger current, presented more of a challenge. I made it, but only after several tries and several bumps into the roots and branches of the downstream tree.

All in all, it was a difficult day of navigation and a disappointing day in that we never got to our intended destination. I treated myself to a couple of beers and watched the sun set in the west. Then Jett, Rusty and I had a quiet third night at Lungren.



Our second Lungren Island docking

Day 5 was mostly cloudy and very windy. We fought our way - against both the wind and the current, back upstream to the marina. We had some thought of staying on the river overnight, at a recommended mooring location just north of the drawbridge, but four attempts to nose into shore to tie up failed miserably as I was unable to stabilize the boat to get a rope around a tree. After banging into a tree pretty hard, I gave up and headed back to the marina.

I felt better after Charlie, our marina dock hand, banged the houseboat pretty hard into a piling as he tried to

dock it. The wind and the current were pretty tough for him, too.

The good thing about a night in the marina is that we were tied to shore power and didn't have to use the generator. That made the evening quieter and allowed us to stay up late playing cards and watching TV. Just like being in a RV, but with more rocking.



Pre-dusk at Lungren

Houseboating – Days 6 and 7

12 Feb 2016

After a breezy night in the marina we departed Thursday morning to explore the upstream portion of the St Johns river. My original intention was to get to Sanford, but decided against it because (1) there aren't any good places to dock there, (2) we would need to go through a railroad drawbridge and (3) one of the marina staff said "Sanford is where George Zimmerman shot Trevon Martin." Probably not my cup of tea.

So Plan B was to find a place to tie up near [Blue Spring State Park](#) and possibly take the jon boat there to look around. So our target was an island just south of the park, at the Snake Creek Cutoff - an intimidating name, but it didn't deter us.

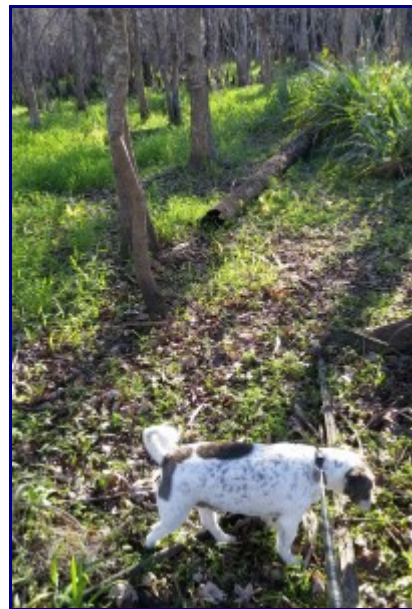
We left about 20 minutes after the departure of our neighbors, a group of octogenarians who were also first-time houseboaters, led by Roy and Millicent, a lovely couple that stopped by for a chat Thursday morning. We were traveling at 1800 rpms, which I regarded as a slow cruise, but soon caught up to them. As we passed them I was tempted to yell out "You're blinker is on!" but held my tongue.



Thursday night docking

They were out of sight by the time we reached a smaller island just north of the park and swung into the inlet there to scope out the docking opportunities (there were none), then had to turn around when the water became too shallow. We re-entered the channel just as Roy, Millicent, et al, were passing. They were amused to see us again.

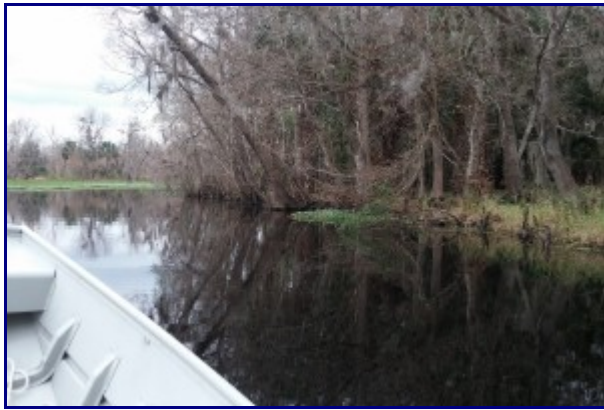
We followed them south to the second island and this time found a good docking opportunity. Not on the island, which was posted No Trespassing, but on the mainland. It wasn't as pretty as Lungren, but was easy to tie up to two conveniently-spaced trees, and provided good, dry ground for walking Rusty. After exploring the site a bit we hunkered down (e.g., moved the jon boat to the side, to protect it from wind and passing tour boats) because the weather was deteriorating. Rain began a couple of hours after we arrived, turned heavy and didn't relent until after midnight. So we had a cozy day on the houseboat, playing cards, reading, watching TV and looking for manatees (didn't see any).



Rusty claiming his second docksite

The tour boats - St Johns River Tours - left from Blue Spring and seemed to be filled with groups that were traveling together. Bus tours of central Florida, probably. In any case, I heard enough of their spiel that I knew there were almost certainly manatees in the area. But well-hidden, apparently. We did see some interesting birds, including what I think was a variety of eagle. No alligators. Which was fine by me.

Every time I took Rusty for a walk I kept an eye out for a lurking alligator. I think Rusty would have looked pretty delectable to a hungry gator.



Exploring the inlet



Our site, as seen from the inlet

Before the rain began I took the jon boat out to investigate the island and the inlet. It was a quiet, serene place, except for the occasional tour boat and some distant channel boating noise. I shut off the motor and drifted for a bit just to feel the serenity.

On Friday we headed south for about 2 hours, to marker 101. There was another recommended docking spot there which we checked out (very nice) but didn't stop. Then back to the marina at a leisurely pace, with the current but against the wind, which again had whipped up. We passed three people in a canoe at the entrance to Lake Beresford who looked like they were struggling to make headway and to avoid getting swamped. It was certainly not a nice day for canoeing.

Jett took the wheel, briefly, on the way back, just to prove to her kids that she had driven a houseboat.

I docked without a problem - I was an expert by then. The staff was surprised to hear that we had not seen any manatees. They said they had seen some swimming by the marina earlier that day. The best news came when they checked out the boat and declared that we had done no harm, so there were no additional charges.

We dined out that night - the last night of our houseboating vacation - at [JC's Lobster Pot](#), a local recommended fish joint. I had the "Fish Trio" - salmon, mahi mahi and "catch of the day" (some kind of whitefish) which was very good. Jett opted for the prime rib which she judged to be good but not great. But the prices were very reasonable and a nice meal out seemed like a good way to end the vacation.

The trip back was boring. I tried to avoid the Orlando traffic but probably made things worse by avoiding the toll road that runs along the western edge of Disney World. We spent over 40 minutes on local streets, snaking our way to I-4. Then, when we got within 10 miles of home, the rains began. Again. So I had to unload in a steady rain while Jett went to pick up Grace.



Jett at the helm

Grace seemed healthy and relatively happy to see us. But once Rusty tells her all about the adventures she missed she will likely never forgive us.

And the answer is... Vermont?

19 Feb 2016

The question is: where will we be next summer? We were trying to find a workamping position (in which we work at the campground) somewhere in New England and right now the most likely place is a campground in northern Vermont, on Lake Champlain. It is not a done deal and is a bit further from Boston than we would have liked, but it is acceptable. And it will put us into a place where neither of us have ever been. That makes it an adventure.

Parade of Light

22 Feb 2016



One of the lit floats

Fort Myers was the winter home of both Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, who were good buddies. To celebrate this claim to fame, Fort Myers puts on an annual "Parade of Light" - because Edison invented the electric light bulb, see? It is a nighttime parade which attracts hundreds of thousands of spectators. I decided that this was the year to witness this popular spectacle.

I was underwhelmed.

Yes, there were a few floats that were nicely lit with colorful LEDs. But mostly it was just your run-of-the-mill parade, but in the dark. Bands went by carrying unreadable banners. Politicians went by, sitting up on the rear

seat of an open convertible as politicians are wont to do, but were totally unrecognizable in the dark. Could have been Charles Manson or Greta Garbo. I couldn't tell what the clowns were doing. All but two of the photos I took were unusable.

Lesson: don't have a parade in the dark.



A few of the 200,000 before darkness fell

Snowbird stress

5 Mar 2016

The trip to Costco yesterday was unusually stressful. First there was a backup on I-75 caused by what appeared to be the end of a police chase: two black cars surrounded by 8 state patrol vehicles and troopers with guns drawn. Then, less than a mile later, another backup caused by a single-car accident. It appeared that a car spun out and landed in the median strip (how does that happen in the absence of ice?). Finally, two ambulances blew by me as I was turning into the Costco parking lot.

Which was completely filled. Cars were cruising, looking for people leaving. I was at Costco before Christmas and this was *much* worse.

I had to return some items so I got into the long returns line. Directly behind a guy who was loudly telling anyone who would listen that he was "feeling the stress" caused by the "northerners". I couldn't disagree, because I just experienced some of what he was talking about, but, being Florida, I was a bit concerned that he would pull out a .45 and start plugging anyone who didn't have a deep tan. And he would probably get away with it under Florida's horrible "stand your ground" law which appears to give anyone with a weapon the right to use it anytime you feel a bit threatened. This guy was apparently feeling a lot of stress, which a jury could construe as being life-threatening. Then it would be open season on snowbirds.

This rather uncomfortable experience gave me cause to reflect on the tension - real and figurative - that snowbirds bring to southwest Florida. The economy here is totally dependent on the snowbirds. But the infrastructure needed to support their 3-month residency - highways, police and fire, to name a few - is huge and is largely unused the other 9 months of the year. Schools aren't affected much, but everything else has to be built to a scale that is larger than would be needed if there were no winter visitors. Even shopping centers and recreational facilities (e.g., casinos) need to hire for the "season", then lay off workers when it is over.

It must be very hard to balance all of this, which makes me glad I don't have to deal with it year-round. But I hope they continue to manage it tolerably well so that guys like the one I ran into at Costco don't start shooting.

A good day

10 Mar 2016

Tuesday was a good day. Beautiful weather, lots of errands accomplished (including washing the Yaris which

was *covered* with pollen), winning at Hand, Knee and Foot. But the highlight was hitting a grand slam home run in softball. If that has ever happened before it was so long ago that I can't recall it. And this was no cheap shot, either - it sailed a good 30 feet over the outfielder's head. Rolled all the way to the 300' sign on the fence. And it was a close game at that point, so it mattered. Ripped their hearts out. Ahhhhhhhh... felt good!

Moving the Yaris

11 Mar 2016

One of the reasons we chose a (towable) fifth wheel RV over a (drivable) motorhome was that we wouldn't need to tow a car to get around once we reached our destination. The plan was to park the RV, unhitch the pickup truck and then use the truck to get anywhere we needed to go locally. However... that plan didn't take into account Jett's fear of driving a diesel dually. You see, while was very comfortable driving her own pickup before we went on the road, it was a tiny Ranger - barely larger than our Mazda 3. Now, over 3 years later, she has still never been behind the wheel of the GMC 3500. Too long, too wide, she says. I keep thinking we need to do some training - like taking her out into an empty parking lot like I did with my sons before they got their licenses - but it hasn't happened yet.

We made it through our first long stay - in San Jose and Temecula, California - by renting cars. We did the same our first summer in Littleton, MA. That met the need, but was expensive. So one of the very first things we did when we arrived in Fort Myers in November, 2013, was to purchase a Toyota Yaris for Jett's use. We planned to sell it in April, 2014, when we headed back to Massachusetts, but Jett liked the car so much that we decided to transport it. We checked into commercial transport and found that prices hovered around \$700. Instead, we hired Jett's brother to fly to Florida and drive it back, for \$600. Yes, it was 1,500 miles of additional wear-and-tear but we trusted her brother more than we trusted the union guys in the car carrier.

We did the same thing, in reverse, to get the car back to Florida this fall. Now we need to get it north again. This time we have opted to drive it ourselves. No, Jett is not going to follow the RV north - that would be too simple. And too much driving for her sore back. So I am going to drive it north, to her brother's place, then fly back a day before we have to begin the long haul north in the RV. That will be *2* 1,500-mile trips for me, back-to-back, but I don't have a sore back (yet) and I actually enjoy driving. Plus I don't have to pay myself.

The Yaris goes in today for an oil change and a "wellness check" to make sure it is ready for the trip, which begins 4 weeks from tomorrow.

Maybe I can get Jett to that empty parking lot and have her drive the truck before I go. She would then have the confidence to use the truck in my absence. And maybe we could sell the Yaris someday.

Hey, a guy can dream, right?

Jett, American Princess

21 Mar 2016

I haven't blogged much lately because I have been busy doing some genealogical research. I have learned a lot more about my forebearers than I ever knew before. I may be related to old Scottish royalty. Pretty cool.

But Jett's family has been even more interesting.

I have gotten almost nowhere on her mother's Irish side. And her paternal grandmother - an English war bride from WW II - is also a blank slate. But the rest of her paternal lineage is fascinating. I have traced most of her paternal great-grandfather's line back to the founding of America and every single immigrant that I could

document arrived before 1700. And 95% arrived before 1650. I would characterize that lineage as "purebred Pilgrim" and the founding fathers of most of New England. I had documented members of her family who were original settlers of the Massachusetts towns of Salem, Watertown, Concord, Lexington and Bridgewater and the Maine town of Kittery. And, yes, Plymouth and Boston, too.

She is descended from not one but at least 5 of the 45 passengers of the *Mayflower* who survived the trip and the horrific first winter. She is a direct descendant of John Alden, arguably one of the most famous of the 45. He was, technically, not a Pilgrim as he made the voyage as a crewman rather than a passenger, but was immortalized in Longfellow's poem, [The Courtship of Miles Standish](#). And, yes, she is also a direct descendant of Priscilla Mullins, the women made famous by the poem and the one who uttered the famous line, "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?"

I told Jett that, with this lineage, she is as close to royalty as we get in America.

I am sure she will remind me of that frequently.

Banana Derby

21 Mar 2016

We spent a few hours at the Lee County Fair recently. We like county fairs. Yes, we gorged on unhealthy food (funnel cakes, sno-cones and a really tasty gyro dripping with dill sauce), checked out the farm animals (I liked the exotic chickens). We watched the one-man band. I even - at Jett's urging - paid 50 cents to see the "headless woman", ostensibly a real human being who was decapitated in an auto accident and was kept alive through a "medical miracle" (which, if true, makes one wonder who paid for that). She looked like a headless refugee from a wax museum. And she was fully clothed. Recommendation to carnival brass: pose her naked and charge a dollar.

But the real highlight was the Banana Derby. You have heard of dog-and-pony shows? Well, this was a dog-and-monkey show. Yes, monkey jockeys riding dogs in a race around a short oval. It really wasn't a fair race as one dog was clearly younger and faster than the other. And the faster dog had the more experienced monkey jockey. But both dogs and both monkeys got treats, so I guess they didn't much care about the blatant unfairness of it all. There wasn't much wagering, either.

The race was preceded by a dog doing some high-wire tricks - walking a high beam and jumping off an elevated platform.

As Jett is a big fan of both monkeys and dogs (ok, so am I), it was a pleasant way to spend 20 minutes. Totally free, too - except for the \$10 that Jett paid to have her photo taken with her favorite monkey (twice).

Good food, good weather and a dog-and-monkey race. Does it get any better?



One-man band



Platform leap



High-wire act



Jett and Gilligan (Jett on right)



The big race

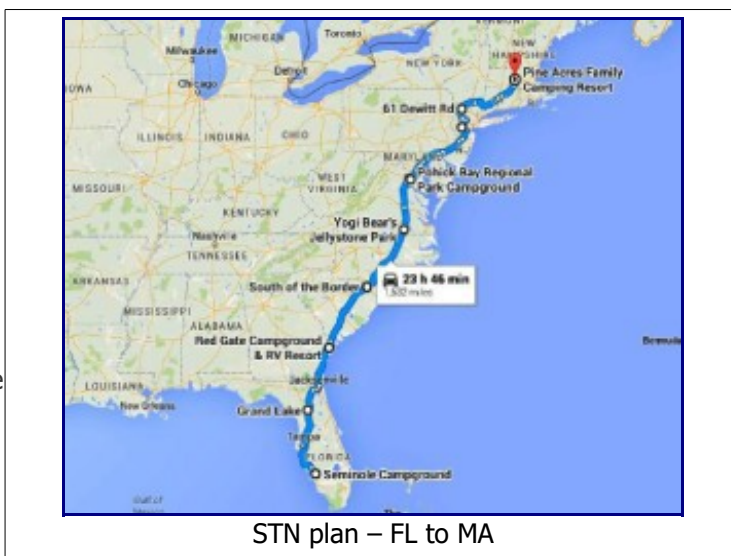
The plan for the second trip north (STN)

2 Apr 2016

Our winter season in Florida is drawing to a close and we are beginning the preparations for hauling the fifth wheel, the dogs and ourselves north for what we hope will be an interesting and productive summer in Vermont. We have already done the "wellness checks" on the vehicles, have tested the hydraulics on the RV and the

umbilical linkage between the truck and the RV and have adjusted tire pressures. I have planned a route, have booked campsites along the way and have checked the route for low bridges. We are pretty much ready to go.

This is going to be a relatively quick trip - 14 days. We need to be in Vermont by April 30 and are planning on an April 28 arrival, just to give us a day to settle in. Total distance traveled: 1,748 miles in 8 hops (it would be shorter if we wanted to skirt NYC, but we have learned to give it a wide berth). Highlights will include a full weekend in Savannah, GA, an overnight at South of the Border (a guilty pleasure), 4 nights with family in VA and 3 nights at a campground in MA that we remember fondly from a tenting trip many years



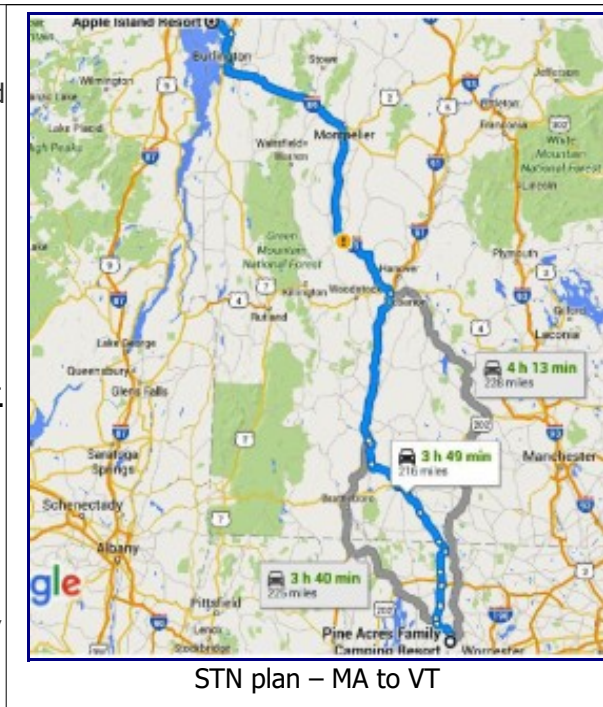
STN plan – FL to MA

ago. The hop from MA to VT will also be interesting as much of it will be on local New England roads (always an adventure) and goes through areas that we have not visited before. And when we get there we can add a 32nd state to our map.

The weather could also be interesting. It will probably be near 90 degrees when we leave FL and there will likely still be snow in the mountains when we reach VT. I hope that there won't be many freezing nights as dealing with frozen water lines is never fun.

As this map shows, we have several choices of routes to VT. We will probably take the one shown in blue, but I need to thoroughly review all the routes for low bridges (which I have done once, but checking twice is necessary) and possible fuel stops, should the tank run dry earlier than expected.

Now that the park is emptying (and softball season is over), I am getting anxious to get on the road. And on to our new careers as "workampers".



STN plan – MA to VT

A season of puzzles

5 Apr 2016

You can't say that I wasn't productive this winter. Softball, golf, dog walking... and jigsaw puzzles. My good buddy Dale and I completed a bunch of them. There were a few 300- and 500-piece puzzles, but most were big, difficult 1000-piecers. The toughest one was the one headlining this post - a jumble of Tootsie Rolls, Tootsie Pops, Dots and Junior Mints. Not only was it difficult but it also made me very hungry.

Another toughie was the one just completed - a painting of what seems to be a Venice canal. This one was tough because it was, when broken into 1,000 pieces, just splotches of color. Dale said he would burn it.



Tootsie Roll toughie



Venice menace

The 300- and 500-piece puzzles:



Winter scene



Village



Dogs



Cottage

Ft Myers dog parks

7 Apr 2016

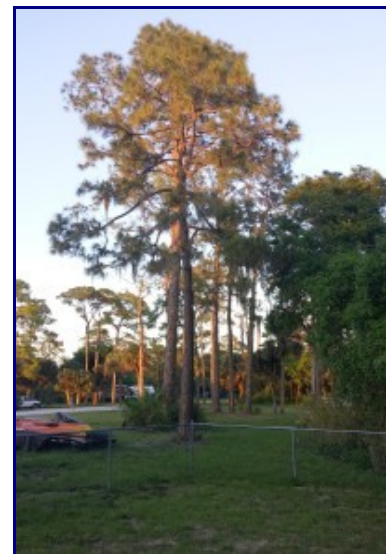
Dogs love parks, especially parks that cater to canines. What is not to love? Lots of smells to sniff, lots of pups to play with, complete off-the-leash freedom. The campground has a very nice dog park, with two enclosures, fresh water and an occasional tortoise to break the monotony if no other dogs are around. It is their favorite destination within the park.

And it is a good destination for me, as well. With the morning sun hitting the trees, it is a great wake-up spot.

For all these reasons - and the fact that it is a short walk from our campsite - we hit this dog park nearly every day.

But there are other dog parks in the Ft Myers area and we checked out two of them this season.

First, we found the [Judd Community Park](#) dog park in North Fort Myers. This is a fairly small dog park which wasn't much better than the Seminole dog park. But it did have a large contingent of other



Morning dog park sun

pooches, which Grace loved and which made Rusty nervous. We didn't stay long and we didn't go back.



Judd Community Park

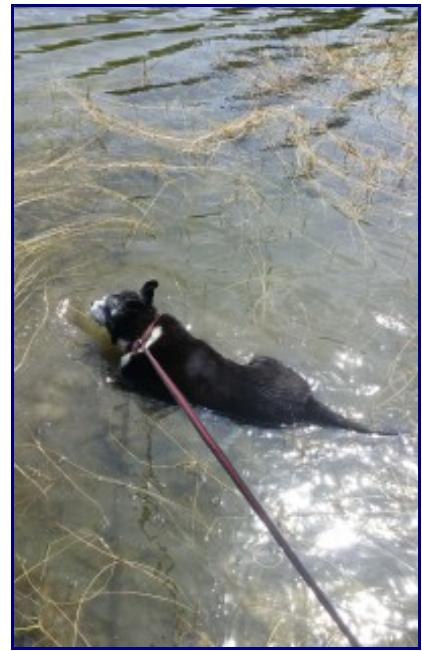


Judd Community Park

Then, just a week ago, we drove 10 miles to the [Barkingham Dog Park](#), in the Buckingham Park. This park was more interesting but was still somewhat less than I expected. I had heard that dogs could swim there, so I thought it might be similar to the incredible dog park at James Island in Charleston. But it turns out that the only swimming was in a pond adjacent to the enclosure which was posted with "Caution - Alligators" signs. Letting the dogs swim there struck me as being unacceptably risky. I did let Grace wade in - on the leash - and, of course, she immediately flopped down in the mud. That dog loves the water.



Barkingham



Grace taking a dip

We haven't returned to Barkingham, either, but we may. It is a very nice dog park.

We will keep our eyes open for more dog parks, but these are the only two public ones that I know of within 10 miles of the RV park.



The pond near the dog park

The best laid schemes...

13 Apr 2016

... o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley (Robert Burns, "To a Mouse").

After carefully working out all of the details of the STN (second trip north), as previously reported, Jett was notified today that her brother has decided to forgo further chemotherapy and is now in hospice with a projected lifespan of no more than two weeks. Rather than taking a leisurely trip north we are going to strap on the afterburners and hastily head to Massachusetts tomorrow morning. The trip will still be 7 hops, but they will all be one-night stops, with the exception of the Maryland (formerly Virginia) stop which will be two nights, to give Jett an opportunity to get a few much-needed hugs from her sons and grandson.

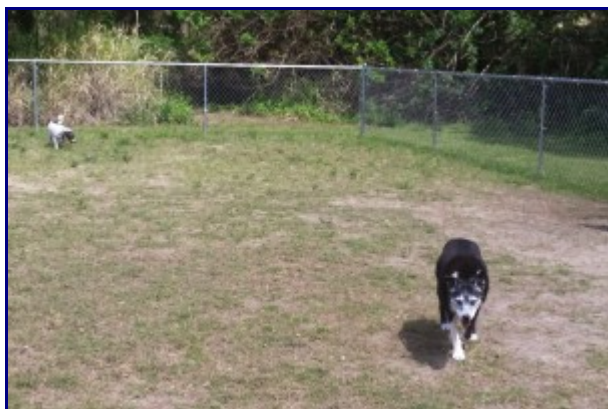
The three days we squeeze out of the trip north will be added onto our MA stay, giving us a full week there. Obviously we will be visiting with her brother immediately upon arrival. And hopefully a few more times after that.

STN Hop 1: North Ft Myers FL to Citra FL

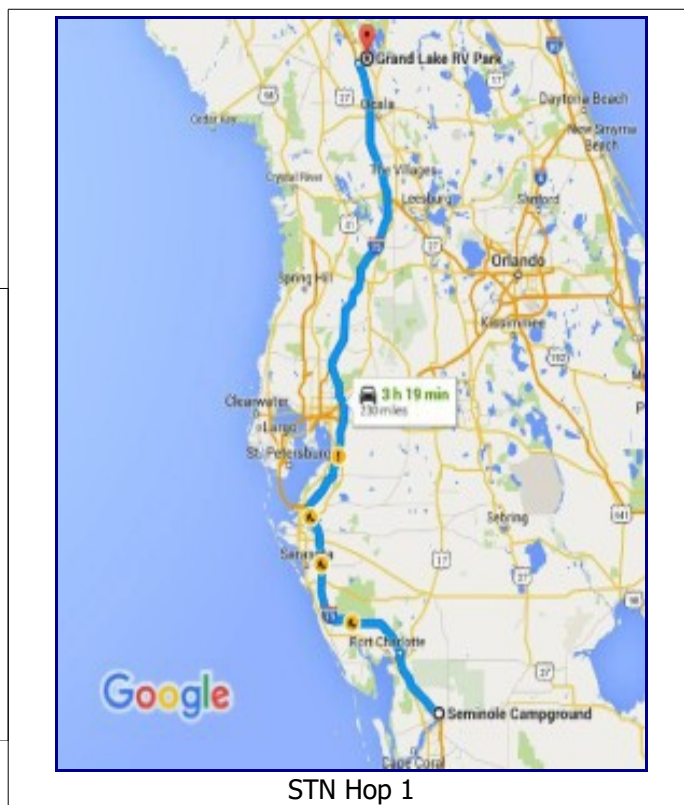
15 Apr 2016

30 miles, mostly on I-75.

I gave the dogs one last walk to the dog park, then, after waiting for our neighbor to pull out first, we were on our way. It was 11am - about an hour later than we planned - and we paid for our tardiness in Citra by getting caught in a downpour while setting up.



Last dog park walk



STN Hop 1

About 210 of the 230 miles were on I-75 and about half of those were construction zone. The scenery consisted of orange barrels. Lanes were dropped or narrowed over long stretches. If it had been the weekend - or even Friday, I think - it would have been very unpleasant. But midday Thursday wasn't too bad. Even Tampa, which is seemingly *always* backed up, flowed pretty well.

We stopped once. We didn't really need a break after just 2 hours, but we had some difficulty in entering our destination into the GPS. I guess the "NW 45th Ave St" (sic) made as much sense to the GPS as it did to us. Entering the name of the campground (Grand Lake) made the GPS happy and got us underway again.

The hop, with GPS stop, took just a few minutes under 4 hours.

Our home for the evening, as previously mentioned, was the [Grand Lake Golf and RV Resort](#) in Citra, FL. This is a very large (estimate: 500 sites) RV park with many park models and long-term residents. But no trashy long-term residents. All the RV units were newer and in good repair. But many sites had landscape improvements and quite a few had permanent steps and/or wooden decks. I think sites could be owned as the reception desk was labeled "Sales Office".

The weather was terrible - a downpour while setting up and brisk winds that prevented us from deploying the awning. We also had a tree in close proximity that brushed against the RV, which affected the quality of our sleep. But despite these negatives, I thought the

place was very nice. Having a golf course on site was a plus, but there was also a very nice rec hall, a laundry with new machines, a very large dog park and a restaurant, right on the shores of Orange Lake with a lakeside patio (which would have been great had the weather been better), that served surprisingly good food. Their fried green tomatoes were tangy and crisp - just the way we like them. I had a shrimp basket that was very tasty and filling. I didn't really need dessert but had to try the "peanut pie." It was like a slice of peanut butter cheesecake. A bit disappointing in that it didn't have chunks of peanuts, but good enough to finish.

The park also has cable TV - 44 channels. Most of them were either news or sports, so the number of entertainment choices wasn't a big improvement over our 8 over-the-air channels at Seminole. But it was a relief to not have to deal with a weak signal.



Ready to leave Seminole



After the downpour



Grand Lake restaurant and tree



Grand Lake patio



Grand Lake street

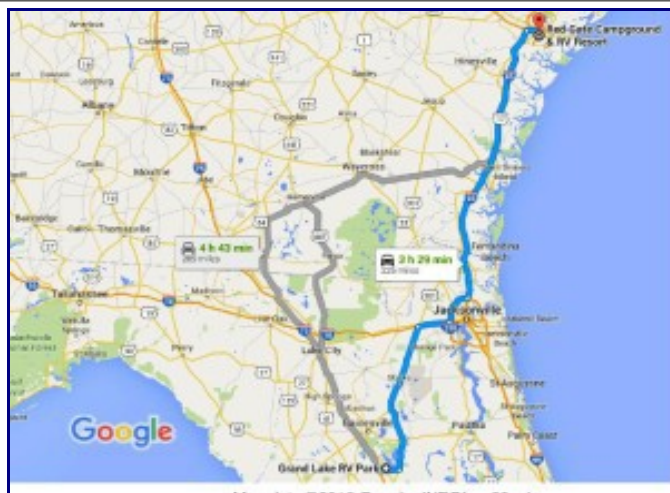
STN Hop 2: Citra FL to Savannah GA

16 Apr 2016

224 miles on US 301, I-10, I-295 (around Jacksonville) and I-95. Cumulative miles: 475.

The weather was less than ideal - intermittent showers the entire 4-hour trip - and much of the trip was on I-95, which we have traveled several times already. So the interesting part of the trip was the 67 miles on US 301. This is a decent 4-lane road with very few lights or stops. It passes through Starke, home to Florida's very active death row (though the prison itself was not in sight) and traffic was heavy there. But it was Florida, so it was flat and green. Pretty boring.

Our destination for the evening was [Red Gate Farms](#), an "event venue" and, incidentally, an RV park. It is... strange. The RV "park" is pretty much just an open field with water and electric



STN Hop 2

connections scattered about. There are probably fewer than 40 sites in all. Our water-and-electric site was "clubhouse right" - i.e., the site to the right of the clubhouse. Some of the facilities - like a decrepit stage - were awful. But the clubhouse was nice and the grounds, with a scenic lake and a stunningly awesome cypress, were very nice. And it was very close to downtown Savannah which, if we had adhered to our original plan to spend three nights here, would have been very convenient. I also appreciated having a gas station very close by which had diesel for \$1.99 per gallon (regular was \$2.03).

I walked the dogs down to the lake and saw a sign warning of snakes and alligators. But a more immediate danger was the gaggle of geese on the shore. They did not like the dogs and appeared to be ready to defend their turf. We decided to let them be. But we coulda took 'em.

On to South of the Border today for a true kitsch experience.



Spectacular cypress



Scenic-but-risky lake



Our rig (in the background)



The full hookup row

STN Hop 3: Savannah GA to Hamer SC (South of the Border)

18 Apr 2016

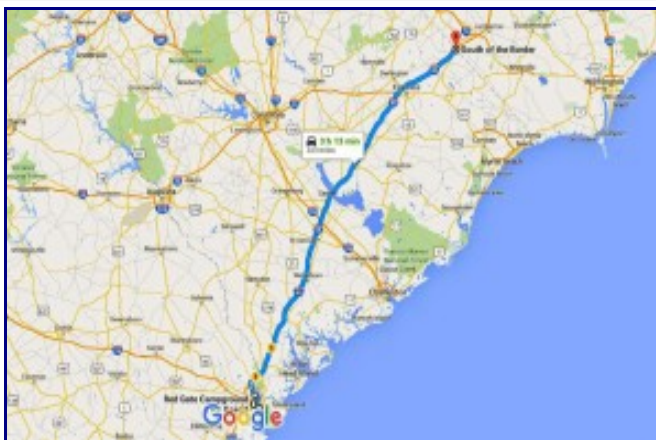
225 miles, on I-516, GA 21 and I-95, with 10 extra miles due to my screwup. Cumulative distance: 714 miles.

This was supposed to be easy. But I misread the map and took a wrong turn onto I-516 in Savannah and ended up on the local streets. Some 10 miles and almost 30 minutes later I was back on track, heading north on I-95. The screwup did nothing to help Jett's sensitive stomach as she HATES hauling the RV through busy local roads (and I can't say I am much of a fan of that, either), but she eventually calmed down. We took one short rest area break about 2 hours into the trip. Other than the early screwup, it was an uneventful trip in bright sunshine and comfortable temperatures (about 70 all the way).

But we cut it close on the tank range: the "low fuel" warning came on just a quarter of a mile short of our

destination.

Which was South of the Border. For those of you who have traveled the I-95 corridor - or those of you who, like me, traveled to Florida before I-95 existed - you will know the place of which I speak. Nowadays, even if you don't stop there, you can't be unaware of its presence as the billboards begin about 120 miles away and increase in frequency and size as you approach. Like Wall Drug in South Dakota, you are drawn to it, just out of curiosity. What in the blazes could justify such hype?



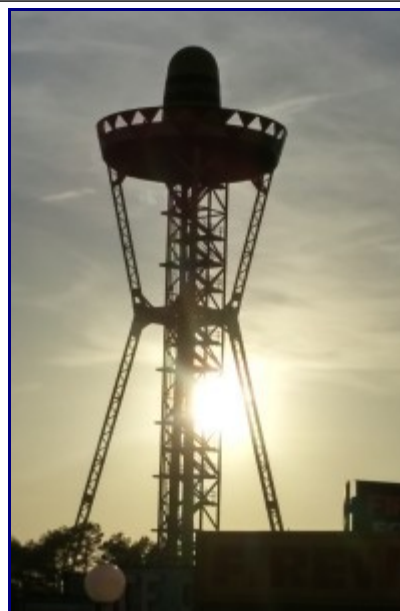
STN Hop 3

Well, hype isn't needed for places that are truly interesting. I don't think there is a single billboard for the Grand Canyon. South of the Border needs hype. It is a "tourist trap" of the first order. In its heyday - which is now so far in the past that you can't see it with a telescope - was a glitzy extravaganza of pure kitsch. It was a go-to place for trinkets and souvenir junk of all kinds. Fireworks. Climb the Sombrero Tower. Eat and get gas. One-stop shopping for those who just needed to stop.

But Jett's first comment when she saw the huge, sprawling complex from the I-95 exit: "It looks deserted." And indeed it did. The kiddie carnival area had about 3 people there - on a nice Saturday afternoon. The shopping area had a handful of cars. There seemed to be no one at the restaurant. Overall... sad and dying. A fading monument to pre-Interstate travel.

But there is an RV park at South of the Border, which

is a popular overnight RV stop for snowbirds. Which is why we stopped there. It isn't a great RV park, but it is inexpensive (about \$33) and decent. We enjoyed our one night - and the \$1.86/gal diesel price at the SOB truck stop.



Sombrero Tower



The SOB sign and beach shop



Our rig at SOB

STN Hop 4: Hamer SC to Emporia VA

18 Apr 2016

202 miles, almost entirely on I-95. Cumulative distance: 932 miles.

The trip itself is hardly worth noting - 200 solid miles of interstate travel. Uneventful. Boring. Efficient. We didn't stop until we arrived at our destination: Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park at Emporia, VA.

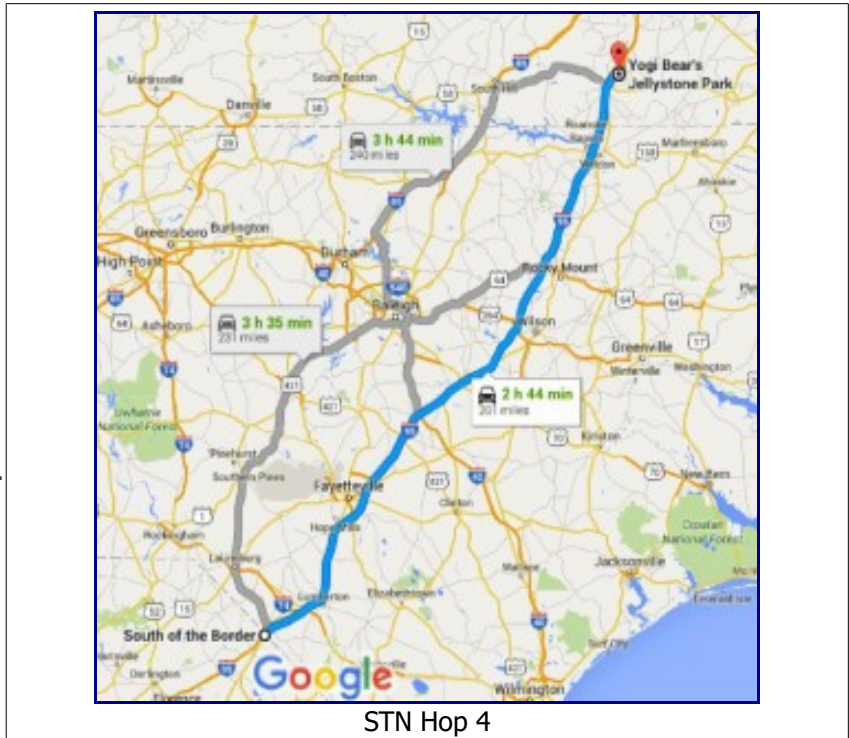
I had avoided Jellystone Parks in the past because... well, because it is called "Jellystone Park." I felt that my maturity demanded something less juvenile. But I also avoided Carnival Cruise Lines for years because I had heard they were "party ships," only to discover that I loved them. Maybe I am just a party guy. Maybe I would love Jellystone Park.

Nope. I didn't hate it, but I didn't love it, either. This particular one seemed a bit worn around the (fur) collar. Some sites were being used to store old and possibly derelict trailers. In all, perhaps 10 of the 50 or so sites were occupied.

Most of the "attractions" - such as the pool and the bouncy house - were closed. The playground was open, but it wasn't much of a playground. If I had been traveling with a young 'un I wouldn't have seen any reason to pick Jellystone Park over any other (presumably better named) RV park.

And then there were the trains. Loud enough to wake me out of a sound sleep. I was reminded of the early morning train scenes from *My Cousin Vinny*. If you know the movie, you know what I am talking about. If you haven't seen the movie, shame on you. Rent it!

Cable TV was an extra \$2. But worth it. Turn up the TV to 110 decibels and you won't hear the trains.



STN Hop 4



Jellystone derelicts and us

STN Hop 5: Emporia VA to College Park MD

22 Apr 2016

190 miles on I-95 and I-495 (around Washington). Cumulative distance: 1,134 miles.

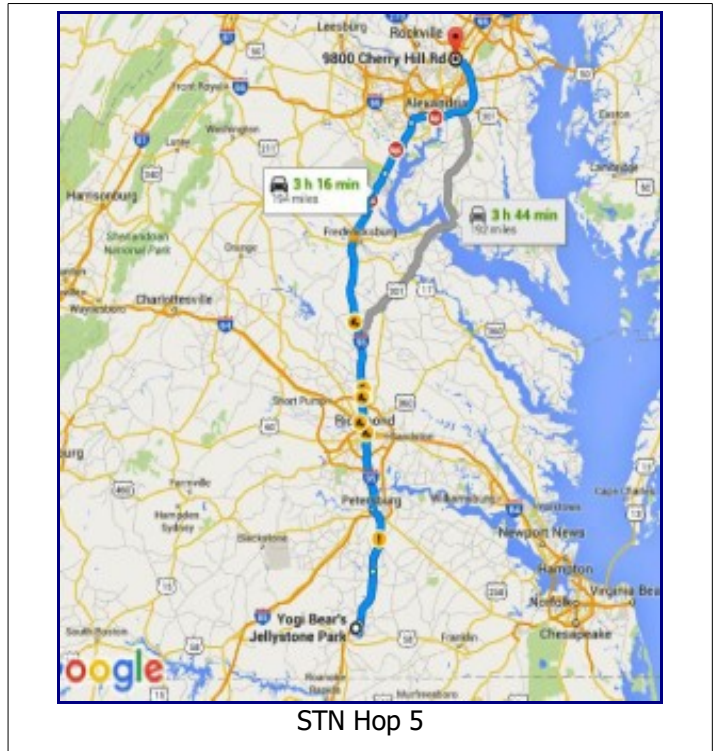
If you want to take your RV rig out for a leisurely drive, I-95 near Washington - and I-495 (the "Beltway")

around Washington - is NOT the place to do it. These roads are always crowded and the drivers are always crazy. Just getting to any destination in the DC area is, in my book, a major accomplishment.

Our destination this time was [Cherry Hill Park](#) in College Park, MD. This was a major deviation from our original plan which had us staying 4 nights at Pohick Bay Regional Park, the park nearest Jett's sons' home in Alexandria and one of our favorite parks in the US. But there were two problems this time: (1) the park was unexpectedly heavily booked (a situation which we still find hard to believe as we have never seen the park more than 20% occupied in April), so we could get only a water-and-electric site and (2) we preferred to travel farther north, to avoid the need to refill the truck's tank on Hop 6. Plus I had heard good things about Cherry Hill Park, so we decided to give it a try.

We are glad we did. I don't know which park was #10 on our Ten Best Campgrounds list, but it just dropped off. Cherry Hill Park is reminiscent of

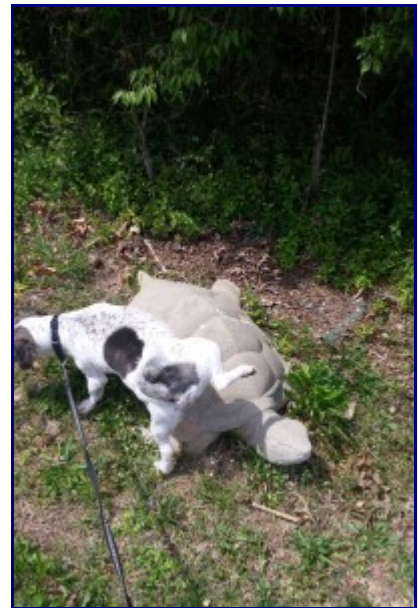
Normandy Farms, in Foxboro, MA, in that it is spectacular. With a price to match. But for two nights we were very happy to pay the \$65 rate. Jett did complain that I didn't fork over the extra \$10 that would have gotten us a "premium" pull-through which offers more private patio space - with wrought iron furniture - than the standard site with just a lowly picnic table. But I just didn't see the need for lawn furniture. We didn't even use the stinkin' picnic table.



The inimitable Zachary



Air supply



Rusty using the turtle

This was the only 2-night stay on our revised itinerary to MA. It was a welcome break after four straight one-night stands. Jett's boys helped us out further by coming to visit us rather than having us come down to them - a saving of nearly 2 additional travel hours in the truck. And they brought Zachary, our seriously cute 5-year-old grandson, so we got some quality grandparent time.

He enjoyed his time with us as well. And why not? Not only are we fun grandparents but we were staying at an RV park that is a veritable playhouse for youngsters. The playground is large, with some interesting (unique?) pieces of equipment. There are two swimming pools - a heated one and an unheated one with a waterfall. A splash pool, a beautiful mini-golf course and - another unique (or so we thought) attraction - a goldminer's panning stream. No, you don't actually pan for gold but you can find gemstones and fossils in bags of sand sold at the café. Oh - the café has an arcade and ice cream, too. And a tractor-drawn cart that serves as a free shuttle around the park. And... just about anything your little upscale camping heart could desire.

To top it all off, Cherry Hill has the absolute best laundry room that we have seen at any park, anywhere. Jett said, after seeing the laundry, "I don't want to leave." Funny what grabs her attention.



Playground



Mini-golf



Splash pool



Campground shuttle

The park also has free air - a place to inflate your tires - if needed. Not a big deal I suppose, but something that I have never seen at any other park. As for the dogs, there is no "dog park" but there are some very large, grassy areas designated for "dog run". These were more than adequate for the dogs' purposes. They also had a few cement turtles scattered around the park. I am not sure of their intended purpose, but Rusty saw them as fireplug substitutes.

We did encounter one... um... interesting problem during our stay at Cherry Hill Park: we had water dripping from a spigot located behind the left rear wheel. I had seen this once before, for just one day,



Ready to go

about 6 months previously. But this drip was continuous, for two days, unless we turned the water supply off. This didn't mean we were without water; it just meant we had to use the water from the fresh water tank. Not a real problem; just a bit annoying. But the presence of the drip indicated some kind of problem. The question, of course, was did it indicate a *serious* problem.

I subsequently learned that this spigot was the "fresh water overflow," so the problem was that the fresh water tank was filling to overflowing. But I didn't have the fresh water inflow valve on, so no water should be flowing in at all. I guess it is some kind of valve problem but not a particularly serious one. We will have to add it to the list of warranty items to be looked at. Which is, in itself, a problem. Our 1-year manufacturer's warranty expires in a month, then our Camping World extended warranty kicks in. I can just see Camping World saying "You should have had this fixed under the manufacturer's warranty." Warranty wars. Oh, fun.

Anyway, despite the minor issues, we really enjoyed our two days at Cherry Hill Park. Highly recommended.



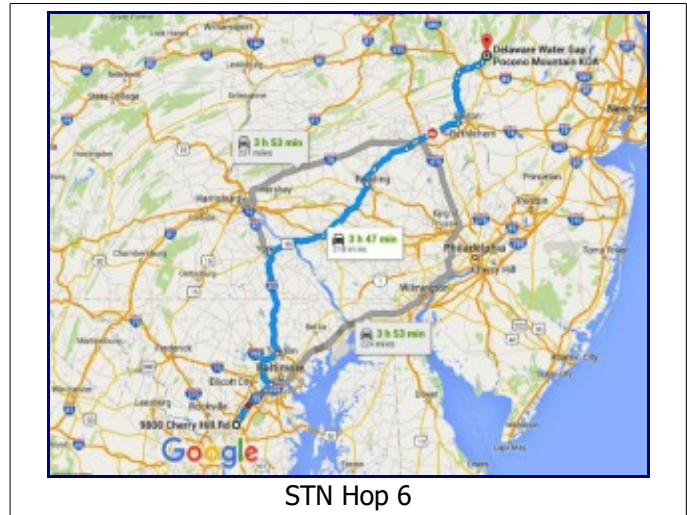
Jett by the waterfall pool

STN Hop 6: College Park MD to East Stroudsburg PA

29 Apr 2016

225 miles on I-95, I-695 (around Baltimore), I-83, US 30, US 222, PA 33 and US 209. Cumulative distance: 1,364 miles.

This was, in some respects, the most difficult hop on the STN. It started with I-95 between DC and Baltimore, then a stretch on the I-695 beltway around Baltimore - both of which were quite busy despite being midday. That was followed by 30 minutes on I-83, then 25 miles on US 30 through "Pennsylvania Dutch" county, about 40 miles on US 222, about 20 miles each on US 22 and PA 33, then short stretches on I-80 and US 209 and, finally, two very tight, curvy miles on a local road. Lots of turns, a fair amount of traffic. And, as we approached our I-80 exit, warnings about commercial traffic being prohibited on US 209 "north of Bushkill". We were staying south of Bushkill but intended to take US 209 north. Would this be a problem? Something to worry about.



STN Hop 6

We also had competition between Google and the GPS for the best route from I-80 to the campground. Google wanted us to take exit 310 which was, arguably, a bit shorter, while the GPS opted for exit 309. The map directions seemed complicated (7 turns) so we trusted the GPS (which isn't always a good idea). In this case we made the right choice as we found out later that the route from exit 310 was blocked by construction and we would have been routed back to 309 anyway. As we were pretty close to our range limit, this would have stressed us out even more.

Our home for the evening was the [Delaware Water Gap/Pocono KOA](#). This was our first KOA stop since KOA confiscated our deposit when we had to alter our plans on the way to Florida, which ticked me off. But KOA campgrounds are generally pretty nice and this one was very conveniently located, so I swallowed my pride and booked it.

I am glad I did. Even though it was very early in the season and many of the facilities were not open, this clearly would be a very interesting and active campground in the summer. It has some wonderful recreational facilities, nice vistas and friendly, helpful staff (who reassured me that the US 209 restrictions would not be a problem for me). Close to the Delaware Water Gap recreational area, this would be a good place for outdoor-oriented families. This would also be a good spot for birdwatchers as the place was populated by woodpeckers and other fairly exotic species, including bluebirds. I don't recall ever seeing a bluebird in the wild before.

Our premium campsite (which was a free upgrade due to construction near the office) was on a hill which was a hard pull, but we got there. Our neighbor was a couple with another 2015 Bighorn 3875FB, but one which had been customized a bit (e.g., an outdoor TV and a select-a-number mattress). He was having an issue with his leveling system, so we spent some time talking about the problems we have each had. But we both agreed that, despite the problems, it is a great model for full-timers.

One of the facilities at the KOA was a "mining" operation, similar to the one we saw at Cherry Hill, but even more elaborate. I guess this feature was not as unique as I thought. However, the KOA did have a facility which is, in my travels, unique: a Ga-Ga arena. I learned that Ga-Ga is a variant of dodgeball, played in a small walled arena. It sounds interesting; I would like to see it played sometime and, perhaps, join in.

Our overflowing water tank problem continued. I have taken to shutting the water off at night and using only the (unintentionally full) fresh water tank. This has the downside of having the water pump activate every time we turn the water on - an annoyance - but has the advantage of shedding some of that water weight before we get on the road again. We will have to get this problem fixed at some point, but it can wait for VT.

We also continued to have a coolant leak on the truck. This is a bit more urgent than the fresh water RV problem, but has not yet resulted in overheating. I fill the radiator every morning and monitor the engine temperature as we travel. This might have to be looked at in MA.

There is always something that needs to be fixed on our rig. Just like having a house.



Our hilltop premium site



Overlooking the KOA campground



Mining facility



Ga-Ga arena

STN Hop 7: East Stroudsburg PA to Oakham MA

3 May 2016

229 miles on US 209, I-84, MA 49 and MA 31. Cumulative distance: 2,046 miles.

The cumulative distance includes all the driving we did during our week in Massachusetts. Busy week. More on this later.

The trip from PA to MA was mostly on I-84. The only good thing about I-84 is that it isn't I-95, which is even worse. But it is bumpy and busy. Not fun.

The 25 miles on US 209 is mostly through federal forest bordering the Delaware River and it is scenic. Plus, with commercial traffic excluded, we didn't have to compete for space with 18-wheelers,



STN Hop 7

which made it even more pleasant. The 20 miles at the other end, on MA 49 and MA 31, were not quite as scenic, but were pleasant enough. But the 180 miles in the middle, mostly on I-84, were thoroughly unpleasant and we were delayed for 30 minutes due to construction in Hartford. But we did, despite the ugliness of I-84, make it to Massachusetts unscathed and with our nerves mostly unfrayed.

If you recall, we shortened our stays in both GA and DC to get more time in MA. The beneficiary of this change was the [Pine Acres Family Camping Resort](#) in Oakham, MA. We spent an entire week there. We had stayed there once, probably 14 years ago, in a tent on July 4th weekend. We recall the experience vividly because Grace, who was then just a pup, got so freaked out by the fireworks that she clawed her way through the wall of the tent.

We were obviously in a different area this time, being in an RV, but we barely recognized the place. A lot of money has been poured into the facility in the intervening years and it is beautiful. Another new entry



Our site

on our Top 10 Campgrounds list. Outstanding vistas, very attractive cabins, great landscaping, a very nice mini-golf course and spacious dog park. It is, I think, the only campground we have seen with a "Dog Beach" - a beach on Lake Dean that is reserved for dogs. It was too chilly to use it, but we appreciated the gesture.

Because it was early in the season, many of the facilities, including the General Store, were not yet open. But because it was school vacation week when we arrived, we were surrounded by families with children. But after Sunday they all went home and we were virtually alone in this very large campground.

Overall, we were very impressed with Pine Acres. It is not convenient to Boston, being at least 90 minutes away - and more than 2 hours when there is traffic, which is most of the time - but it is less than 30 minutes from Jett's brother Ray. We will definitely consider staying here again.

"The wheels are falling off this family"

6 May 2016

Our revised STN itinerary included a full week in Massachusetts to deal with a number of family issues. The main "attraction" was Jett's brother, George, who was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer less than 6 months ago and appeared to be close to death when we left Florida. He has undergone chemo and radiation therapy and he has pulled back from the brink, but no one is suggesting that he can be cured. It is, as they say, just a matter of time. His expected longevity is now measured in months rather than years.

There is also the issue of his "quality of life". He has lost nearly half his weight and has experienced periods when he is disoriented. Fortunately, when we visited him on April 22 he was very lucid and in good spirits. We had a great visit. Jett visited him again, on her own, on April 24 and we both saw him a third time on April 27. He continued to be (relatively) healthy and happy during those visits. The best news is that he has very little pain or discomfort. We are cautiously optimistic that he will have a good summer.

But besides his illness, Jett's family has experienced, in the 15 months, the deaths of two of her brothers-in-law: Christine's husband John, in February 2015, and, just a few weeks ago, Sybil's husband Jess. When we got together at her brother Ray's place on April 24 for a family dinner, Ray said "it feels like the wheels are falling off this family." No truer words were ever spoken because sister Sybil, who arrived complaining of numbness in her right hand - which she passed off as sleeping badly - ended the evening in the ER, diagnosed with a stroke. She was, we feel, lucky in that the stroke did not do major damage and she has since recovered full use of her hand.

But, after surgery to repair a 90% blockage in her carotid artery, she remains in a rehab hospital, mostly to deal with confusion caused by medication and to strengthen her hand.

It has been a tough time for Jett and her siblings. We are keeping in close contact with both George and Sybil and Jett is ready to make the 3 or 4 hour trek to Boston at a moment's notice if her assistance is required. That's what you do when the wheels are falling off your family.

STN Hop 8: Oakham MA to South Hero VT

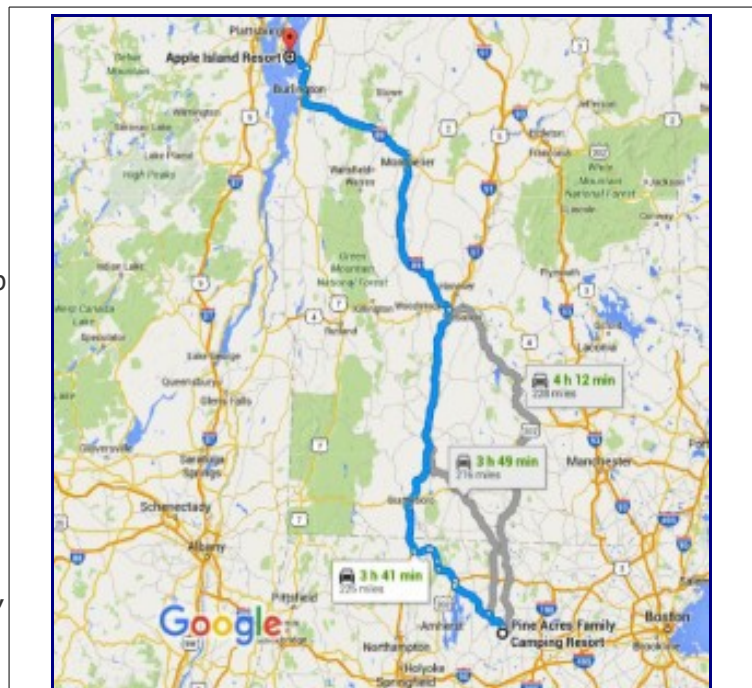
3 May 2016

230 miles on MA 122, MA 2, I-91, I-89 and US 2. Cumulative distance: 2,276 miles.

This hop was the most interesting of the 8 STN hops. Nearly all of the miles were on roads we have never traveled before. And, being mostly in Vermont, they were very scenic.

We stopped twice along the way, not so much because I needed a driving break but because Jett did. She was driving the Yaris, following the rig. This is the first time that we have done a hop in 2 vehicles. It went pretty well, partly because the route was scenic, partly because the traffic was light (it was Thursday midday), partly because the weather was gorgeous (if a bit cool) and partly because we made those two stops.

We made it to [Apple Island Resort](#) without incident. Because the resort was not yet open and the gate was locked we had to call someone to let us in. We got into our site relatively quickly, got set up and put our feet up for a few minute. During this time I left the laptop on the sofa and got a great photo of Rusty checking it out.



STN Hop 8

Apple Island will be our home for nearly six months, if things go according to plan. The first month will be tough as we are not used to the cold. The temperature dropped to 29 degrees the first night and the water in the park was shut off, so we had to crank up the heat and run off of our stored water. Not difficult, but a bit of a shock as we were basking in high-80s heat just 3 weeks ago.

I will give a full accounting of Apple Island after we get more familiar with it. It is a big place and we need to explore a bit.

This marks the end of a successful Second Trip North. Final stats:



First stop, I-91

- Cumulative tow miles: 1,755
- Cumulative truck miles: 2,276
- Cumulative campground cost: \$690.89

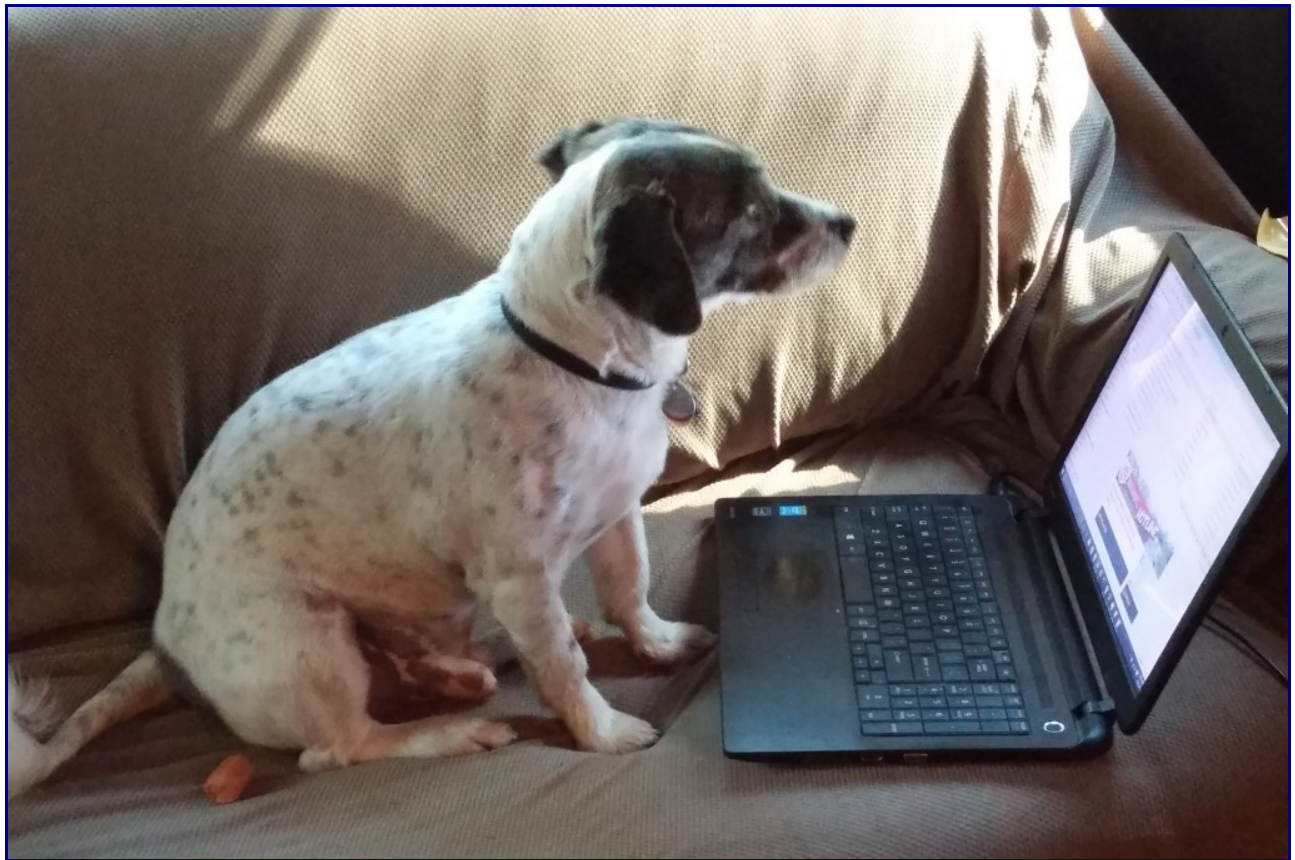
The cost does not include tolls (just \$10 for the rig) and fuel, but we got just about 9 miles/gallon and diesel ran about \$2.10/gallon, so figure it out. The cost also does not include the cost of transporting the Yaris. Tolls for the Yaris were about \$30, fuel averaged about \$2.00/gallon and we got about 35 miles/gallon. There was also one night of lodging at about \$68 and a one-way airfare at about \$200. The total cost of getting north was over \$1,500.

This was probably the "smoothest" trip we have ever taken. Other than the minor problems with the truck radiator fluid and the RV fresh water overflow, the rig performed well. No accidents, no illnesses, no major delays. Just the way it should be.



Second stop, I-91

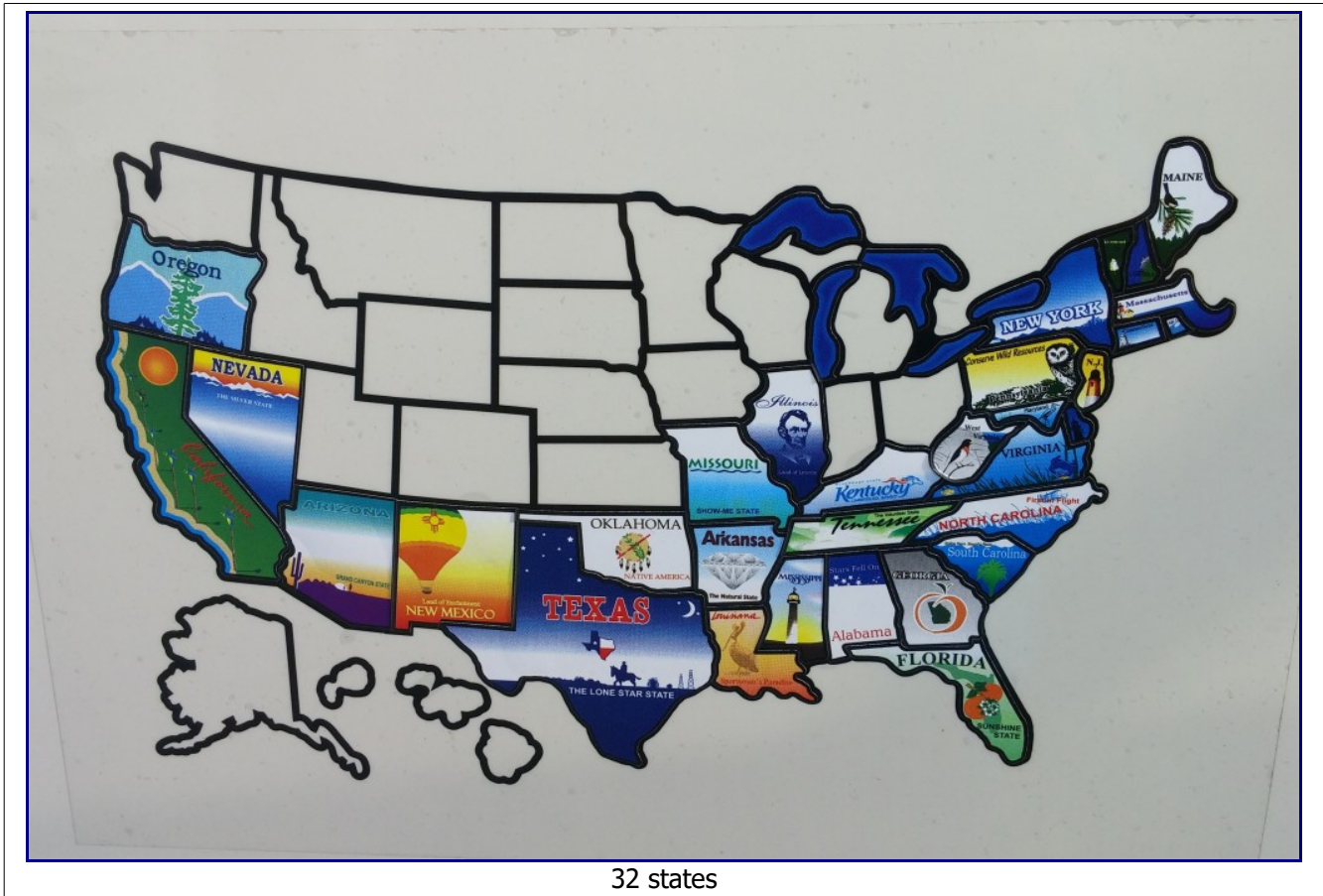
Now we get to remember what it is like to work full-time. I hope we enjoy it.



My Master's Skype

32 down, 16 to go

13 May 2016



When we set off on our RV journeys, way back in September 2012, one of our goals was "48 states in 48 months." We got off to a good start with the Great Trip West, but got bogged down last winter with our need to stay in Massachusetts and get our home ready to sell. As a result we haven't yet had an opportunity to make that second big trip west. But with our arrival in Vermont, we have reached the two-thirds point: 32 states. We now have visited every state east and south of Ohio. Hopefully we will bag the Great Lakes states next summer and, perhaps, in the fall of 2017, get some of those elusive plains and western states.

Workamping

23 May 2016

"Workamping" is not in the dictionary, but it probably will be soon. It is a gerund that describes the work situation of a full-time RVer who is employed by the campground in which he/she is residing. The word describes what Jett and I are doing this summer at [Apple Island Resort](#) in South Hero, VT. Jett is working in the resort office and I, believe it or not, am working at the marina. I don't know that there is much to say about the office work, but I will have plenty to say about the marina work. This is a totally new experience for me.

The weather, not surprisingly, has been very cold and mostly gloomy. It is, after all, early spring in northern Vermont. It is nothing extreme and nothing we haven't experienced before, but it is a bit of a shock after leaving

sunny, balmy Ft Myers just one month ago. We are using a lot of propane trying to keep warm. The water was shut off the night we arrived, to keep the pipes from freezing.

We are working nearly full-time. Because we are the low men on the totem pole, we get to work weekends. Our days off are Wednesday and Thursday. This is not a real burden for us as, being retired (on paper anyway), the days all look pretty much the same. Besides, we expect to be making frequent trips to Boston (nearly 4 hours away) and would rather travel on weekdays than weekends.

The jobs don't pay a lot, but in addition to the pay we also get the campsite at a dramatically reduced rate. That boosts our effective pay rate up to a level that we don't scoff at. Besides, doing something new is, at some level, an adventure. But a six-month commitment is a bit risky. We can only hope that we enjoy the work and, at the end of the summer, feel that our experience has been rewarding.

Time will tell.



Our site at Apple Island

Putting in the docks

4 Jun 2016



The marina office

As previously mentioned, I am helping manage a marina this summer. That means, among other things, that I am learning how to tie nautical knots. It also means that I participated in the spring activity known as "putting in the docks." As a seasonal marina on Lake Champlain, the Apple Island Marina must remove its floating docks every fall and reassemble them in the water every spring. Dock space / slip rental is a key income source at the marina, so it is necessary that they be in place by opening day - May 15.

Putting in the docks is a 4-man job: one to drive the front-end loader that lifts the dock segments



Launching the work boat

and places them in the water, one to stand on the dock segments as they are assembled, one to stand in the water to wrangle the segments so that they can be bolted together and one to drive the work boat to tow the segments into place so that they can be anchored in place.

I was the in-water wrangler. I was dressed in hip-waders. They insulated me pretty well, but the 58-degree water was still chilly. I wish I had a picture of me in the waders, but I don't. No one was thinking of taking photos during the 3 days it took to assemble the docks. It was intense, physical labor. I slept well each night.

The process was to assemble 4 to 6 dock segments, then tow them into place, bolt them to the previously-installed dock segments and then attach the anchors. I would stand in the water while the segments were connected, then hop aboard and ride the segment to their anchored location.

This work was preceded by two days of "pulling up the anchors". Each anchor consisted of a large block of concrete resting on the bottom of the lake, somewhere between 5 and 30 feet below the surface. Attached to each block was a long chain. The chains were left on the bottom over the winter and had to be pulled to the surface each spring. When the docks were removed in the fall, all of the anchor chains were connected by a small line that ended at a location on shore. The "pulling up the anchors" task involved taking the end of the line, getting aboard the work boat and carefully following the line to each sunken chain. We would pull the chain to the surface, attach a buoy, cut the line we had followed and then follow the line to the next chain.



The gas/launch dock

This was dirty, cold, wet work that chafed the hands. I found some rubber-gripped gloves that helped, but it was still unpleasant. I was a mess at night - damp and stained with rust and kelp.

All of the work was made more difficult by the failure of the "new" work boat. A used but improved work boat had been purchased, but it failed its initial trials. It ran fine for about 10 minutes, but died when full power was applied. The vendor took it back and returned it two days later, supposedly fixed. But it failed again, this time a considerable distance from shore. We had to call the Coast Guard. We eventually got the engine started again and made it back to port under our own power, but were met by the local fire department when we arrived. The Coast Guard had notified them that we might need a water rescue.

Embarrassing.

But we got the job done. We did the launch/gas docks first, then the rental docks.

I almost feel like a sailor now.

Almost.



Docks half done

RV water torture

10 Jun 2016

An update on the water overflow problem. To synopsize... we started experiencing a steady drip from a spigot at the rear of the RV undercarriage way back in mid-April. We determined that the problem was, in essence, due to the fresh water tank overflowing when we were attached to city water. In that configuration no water should flow into the fresh water tank. We managed the problem by using the fresh water tank (and the rather noisy water pump) until the tank was empty, then switched to using the city water until the tank became full again.

That worked, but was a pain in the neck. It necessitated me switching the inflow valve several times a day - sometimes late at night in my pajamas. Plus we had to deal with the unpleasant noise and vibration of the water pump (think jackhammer next door). It was noisier inside the RV than outside, but Jett still didn't want the pump to go on late at night, for fear of bothering our neighbors. So we often brushed our teeth at night using bottled water.

Inconvenient, to say the least.

Enter Peter, an RV repair guy. He correctly diagnosed the problem as a faulty inflow valve (we thought it might have been a faulty water pump, so the diagnosis was good news). He got a replacement cartridge for the valve,

installed it and... no effect. The tank continued to overflow. So he got a brand new valve assembly and installed it. No effect. Or possibly worse. He was puzzled and so was I. To demonstrate the issue, he ran some tests with me watching and demonstrated that water was still leaking. He fiddled with the knob a few times and found a position in which the water did not leak. He left it in that position and said he would call the manufacturer to discuss the problem. The water did not leak for an entire day, so Peter suggested that I turn the knob a few times to find a position in which it leaked again and, perhaps, find a position in which it reliably did not leak at all.

So I fiddled. And fiddled. And was unable to make the leak reappear. I wish I could feel good about that, but I have an uncomfortable feeling that I still don't understand the problem. And that it will show up again.

Peter and I continue to scratch our heads and look for root causes. So far the most likely one is: demon possession.

I don't think this is the end of the problem. But in the meantime I will enjoy the "fix".

January

14 Jun 2016



January lakescape

The weather today will be lovely - sunny with a high in the low 70's. However, that does not fully compensate for the last 4 days which were miserable - highs in the mid-50's, strong winds and a cold rain. Apparently this is not all that unusual for northern Vermont. When we complained about the weather to a local resident he just smiled and said, "Welcome to January." A January/June combination. Lovely.

Jett, American Princess - update

15 Jun 2016

A while back I blogged about Jett's amazing colonial lineage ([Jett, American Princess](#)). I have since completed a second round of research on her ancestors - all of which derive from her paternal great-grandfather (her paternal grandfather's father), Elbridge Scribner Stone. Here are some salient statistics:

- She has, through this great-grandfather, 268 known immigrant ancestors.
- Of those 268, 266 (99.3%) arrived in America before 1700 and 246 (91.8%) arrived before 1650.
- Of those 268, 243 (90.7%) landed in Massachusetts.
- Of the 102 passengers aboard the *Mayflower*, 10 are direct ancestors.
- Of the 53 *Mayflower* passengers who survived the first winter, 7 are direct ancestors:
 - [Constance Hopkins](#)
 - [Francis Cooke](#)
 - [John Alden](#)
 - [Priscilla Mullins Alden](#)
 - [Richard Warren](#)
 - [Susanna White](#)
 - [Resolved White](#), Susanna's son

As most early colonial families were quite large - 10 children was not uncommon - she also has a slew of distant cousins. That group reportedly includes John Adams, Humphrey Bogart, Marilyn Monroe and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

All of this is pretty amazing, really. I doubt if you will find a purer line of colonial ancestors anywhere. The Cabots and Lodges have nothing on Elbridge Scribner Stone. The last two generations have diluted that purity a bit. Jett's mother was Irish from 19th century immigrants and her paternal grandmother was a World War II bride from England. So the "colonial" aspect is diminished some for her, but she has continued the theme of English/Irish purity.

Cheap truck repairs... or so I thought

16 Jun 2016

When it comes to our GMC 3500 it seems that there is no such thing as a cheap repair. As I mentioned previously, I had to add radiator fluid several times during the STN. I fixed the problem temporarily by adding Stop Leak to the radiator. I also needed to get the front end aligned - something which should have been done 2 years ago when I had my fender bender, but didn't because the shop could not handle the large truck. So I scheduled a day for service at the local GMC dealer, fully expecting the total cost to be under \$500 - a couple of hundred to find and fix the minor radiator leak and about \$150 to do the alignment.

If only.

The service rep came to me, in the waiting room, sipping on my coffee, oblivious to the rock that was about to fall on my head. First, he informed me that they were unable to do the alignment because my "camber rods"

were frozen and needed to be replaced at a cost of about \$800. Then, because that wasn't bad enough, he told me that the coolant leak was caused by a bad head gasket. Cost to fix that one? Only \$5100. So, instead of a \$500 repair bill I was looking at about \$6000.

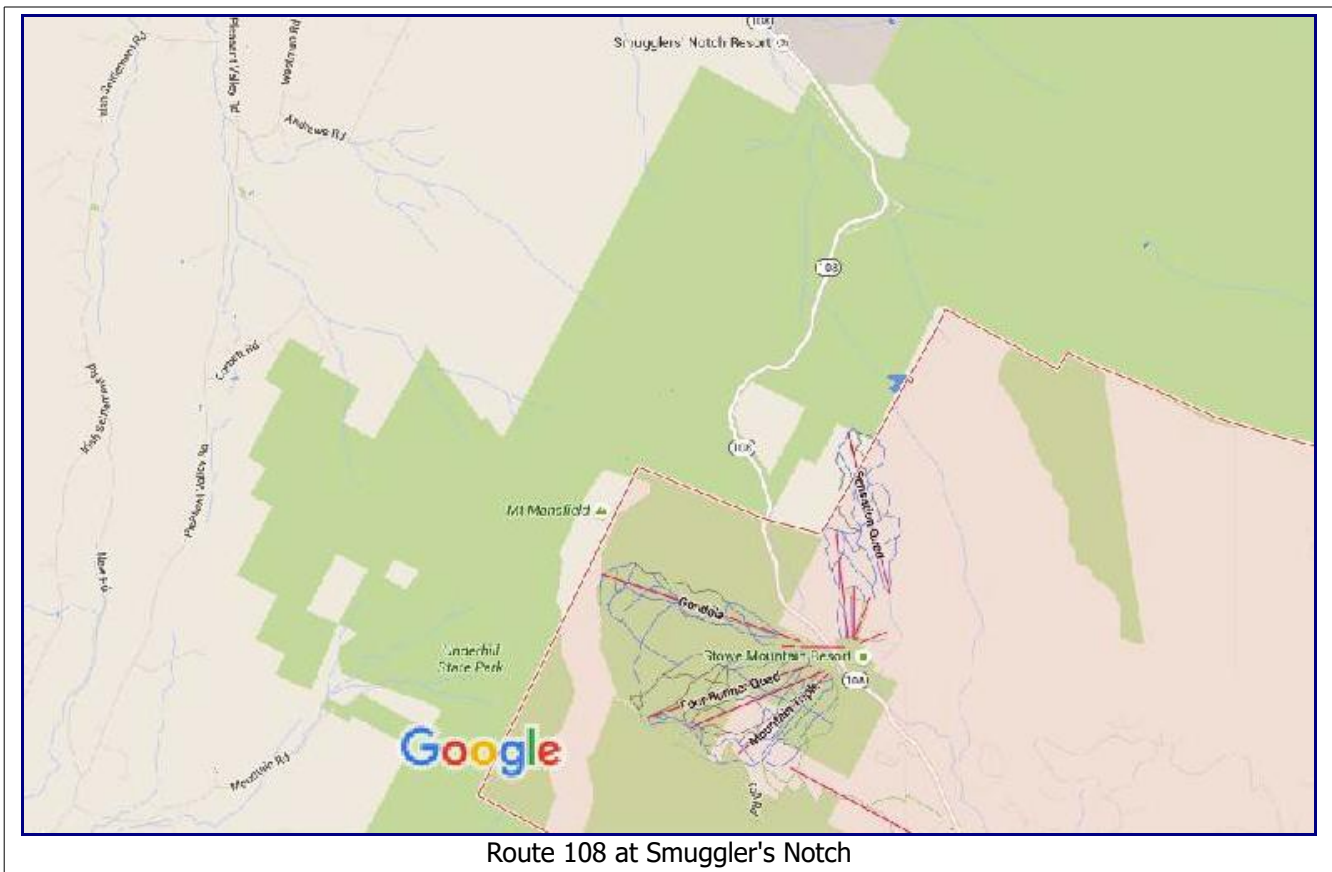
Ouch.

I thanked him and told him I needed to get a second opinion. I then drove the truck home.

It ran beautifully. How can a truck that needs that much work run so well?

Vermont Route 108

30 Jun 2016



Route 108 at Smuggler's Notch

Two weeks ago, on one of my off days, I explored the Green Mountains just east of Burlington. Specifically, I was curious about [Vermont Route 108](#) which has the reputation of being one of the most intimidating roads east of the Rockies. I have to say that it didn't disappoint... at Smuggler's Notch - the pass through the mountains near Mt Mansfield - the road narrows to a single lane and traverses a chasm, with an S-curve, that prevents seeing oncoming traffic. The only comfort is that no one in their right mind would be traveling more than 5 mph through this curve, so the risk of a high-speed head-on collision is nil. But, still, I did this with my monster truck and would have appreciated an extra set of eyes so that I could simultaneously watch for sides scraping and oncoming traffic.

I made it, but I am not about to do it again.

This route passes by both Smuggler's Notch (north of the notch) and Stowe (south of the notch) resorts, two of

the largest and best ski areas in the east. Should I ever go skiing at one of these places (unlikely as they are a long way from Ft Myers), I will know how to get there.

Paradise Point

12 Jul 2016



Paradise Point

One of the best things about the [Apple Island Resort](#) is Paradise Point, an elevated promontory overlooking Lake Champlain. It is nearly inaccessible by car, but is a great destination for a short hike. It has a few Adirondack chairs in case you feel the urge to sit and enjoy the view. And you will.

Sisters-in-law

25 Jul 2016



Christine as pontoon captain

Jett's sisters, Sybil and Christine, came to visit us at Apple Island Resort. These are the 3 surviving sisters from the original 6. A lot of wine was downed, good food was consumed, cards were played and lots of friendly banter was exchanged. A good time was had by all, I think.

There were three notable outings: a pontoon boat ride, dinner at [The Blue Paddle Bistro](#) and a trip to downtown Burlington featuring a downpour and lunch at [Leunig's Bistro](#). The pontoon boat ride was *gratis*, due to my position at the marina. It featured a few minutes with Christine at the helm, looking very comfortable, but was cut short by the arrival of a thunderstorm.

The Blue Paddle Bistro is just about 2 miles from the resort. It is one of only two restaurants nearby. Jett and I had passed it many times and had vowed to try it out "sometime" but sometime didn't come until Sybil and Christine arrived. The place is understated but is decorated with some very imaginative and colorful original artwork, including a woodcut portrait of the owner's dogs.



Waiting at the Blue Paddle

The food was... what is the word? *Spectacular*. I regretted not taking photos of the various dishes, but I distinctly remember the flavors. Jett had one of the most succulent and tender ribeye steaks ever. I had

salmon on a bed of ginger and fried cranberry risotto, Christine had the coffee-crusting roast pork tenderloin - the best pork dish I have ever tasted - and Sybil had the filet mignon (Mmmm!). I tried to avoid dessert, but they offered both cr me brulee and pecan pie, so I couldn't resist. I went with the pecan pie while Christine and Sybil split a cr me brulee. The pecan pie was unbelievable. Simply the best ever.

This superb dinner was followed, the next day, with lunch at Leunig's Bistro in downtown Burlington. The food was very good, though not spectacular, but the craft brews were very tasty and the ambiance was very authentically Parisian. We had contemplated dining at a sidewalk

table, but opted for inside. Good decision as a downpour erupted mid-lunch, driving everyone inside. We had a window table and were amused by all the people running and getting soaked. I also noted a trash barrel with a cleverly-altered sign with perfectly captured the Burlington spirit.

All-in-all, a very fine visit from two very fine sisters-in-law. Thanks, Sybil and Christine, for brightening our temporary Vermont homestead.



Woodcut of owner's dogs



Trash can with a message

Starr Farm dog park

2 Aug 2016

One of the (many) shortcomings of the Apple Island Resort is the lack of a dog park. While there are plenty of places to walk the dogs, there is no place where they can run (or in Grace's case, walk) freely. So I recently took them to the [Starr Farm Dog Park](#) in Burlington. This is a very large dog park - maybe an acre of fenced-in land - with water for the dogs and places for owners to sit. About a half dozen other dogs were there when we arrived and neither of our dogs socialized much. Rusty doesn't deal well with larger dogs and he was the smallest dog there, so just as well that he kept to himself. Grace is more social but showed no interest on this day. They contented themselves with sniffing their way around the boundary fence and enjoying the ability to roam freely.



Roaming

Grace, who is nearly 16 now, is becoming more feeble. She went down into a large hole that had been dug by some other dogs and was unable to turn around or back out. I had to grab her collar and assist her back up to level ground. Sad.

But it is a very nice dog park and we will get back there again someday.



Entrance

56th Escapade

8 Aug 2016

When Jett and I first heard that the 2016 Escapade - the national convention for the [Escapees RV Club](#) of full-time RVers - was to be held in 2016 in Vermont, we immediately resolved to be there. One of the reasons we accepted our summer jobs in South Hero, VT, was that we would be just 15 miles from the Escapade venue in Essex Junction, VT. We even made getting the week off a condition of our employment.

So the Escapade, held July 23-29, is now history. We are glad we went, though Jett participated only minimally due to poor health (ongoing digestive



A general session

issues - more on that in a subsequent post). It was a large event - over 1,200 people living in over 700 RVs (and we probably had the shortest trip of all as many traveled thousands of miles to get there). It was amazing to be surrounded by so many other people "living the dream" as they say. I attended many of the very informative seminars and learned a lot. As a side benefit, we got the RV in motion after several months of just sitting, which is always a good idea.



One row of RVs



Our site for the Escapade

The first amazing thing we observed was how efficiently the "parking team" got everyone situated in a water/electric site. Though there was a constant stream of arrivals on both Saturday and Sunday, there was never a line of RVs waiting to get parked. We were parked within 5 minutes of arriving. It is almost like they have done this before. Or maybe they have done this 55 times before (this was the 56th Escapade).

The seminars varied widely in topics. I attended one - surprisingly entertaining - on toilet odors and how to control them. I also sat in on two very interesting and informative genealogy seminars, one on how to do local research and another on how to photograph gravestones (which is harder than you would think). Other seminars included volunteering in federal parks and refuges and workamping in general. The general sessions were also interesting with the best one featuring Kay Peterson, co-founder (with her husband, now deceased) in 1978 of the Escapees organization. The success of her effort was demonstrated in the announcement that the most recent membership number was over 130,000. Jett, in one of her distressingly rare moments out of bed, sat with Kay and had a nice chat. Wonderful ladies both.

Social events included a concert, an amateur talent show, a potluck supper, a fundraising chili cookoff (very successful - over \$6,000 raised for charity), a pet parade and, on Friday morning, a "hitchup breakfast" to give everyone something to eat before they left. Jett volunteered for the potluck supper (with me filling in because she felt so lousy) and I volunteered for the hitchup breakfast (a breeze, except for getting there at 6:30am). We met some wonderful folks, all of whom planned to attend the 57th Escapade in April 2017 in Tuscon, AZ. We didn't commit but would very much like to be there. Escapades are fun.



Jett with Kay



The toilet odor talk



Chili cookoff



Pet parade



Pet parade

Jett's digestive issues

9 Aug 2016

Jett will probably kill me for posting this, but it is an important topic that significantly affects our life on the road, so I think it should be covered.

Jett has, for many years, suffered from occasional bouts of [pancreatitis](#). I am sure that she would want me to immediately point out that hers is **NOT** caused by alcoholism (in fact she almost never drinks alcoholic beverages of any kind); rather, she is one of the unlucky people who have [pancreas divisum](#), a congenital abnormality of the pancreas.

Due to this physiological variation, she has suffered occasional episodes of severe abdominal distress for over 10 years. Several of these episodes have landed her in the ER. She has learned to live with the condition, meaning that she is very careful with her diet (e.g., light on fatty foods) and is able to recognize the early signs and just stop eating when they appear. The good news, if any is to be found, is that she will never be overweight because she can't eat much and the condition isn't fatal. But each episode is very unpleasant.

When she experienced some digestive issues in mid-July, few days before the start of the [56th Escapade](#), the first thought was "Oh, no, not another pancreatitis attack!" But the symptoms were not quite the same - less severe, which was good, but more persistent, which was bad. The pain finally drove us to an "urgent care" facility the day before the start of the Escapade where tests were done which led to a shocking initial diagnosis of "hepatitis." She was then transported to the University of Vermont Medical Center for additional tests. There the diagnosis was revised: she did not have hepatitis but did have "elevated liver enzymes." Some palliative care

got her home in time to get to the Escapade, but she spent the week in discomfort. The UVM doctor recommended that she come back for more tests if she didn't improve. She didn't improve, so the day after we returned from the Escapade we were back in the ER. A CAT scan and an ultrasound produced a diagnosis of "blocked bile duct" on Friday night, followed by a very uncomfortable weekend before she could consult with her regular doctor. He advised her to submit to an [endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography](#) (ERCP) procedure at UVM and, on Thursday last week, she did. The doctors were able to confirm the blockage and were also able to install a temporary stent to allow the bile to flow again. They said they saw no sign of cancer, which had been a concern as cancer could have been the cause of the blockage.

I wish I could report that Jett immediately improved and the whole painful mess is behind us, but that would be an overstatement. She was in extreme discomfort through the weekend, due mostly to the trauma the procedure wreaked on her very sensitive esophagus. The throat pain subsided on Monday, to be replaced by abdominal pain. Today (Tuesday) her doctor had her go back to the hospital for more blood tests which showed that she did **not** have pancreatitis, as feared. Rather the suspected cause of the severe pain was the trauma to the pancreas due to the ERCP. In any case, the conclusion was that there was not much that could be done. She just has to be very careful with her diet and keep hydrated. By evening she was considerably better.

It has been a rough stretch for her, but we remain optimistic that this, too, shall pass.

Apple Island fauna

13 Aug 2016



Two fawns

The [Apple Island Resort](#) is not exactly in the middle of nowhere; it is on US Route 2 - a heavily-traveled road -

on the shores of Lake Champlain, just a few miles from Burlington, Vermont's largest city. Yet I have been surprised several times by the sudden and unexpected appearance of wildlife of various sorts. First, two fawns (the second is just barely visible above the white post) surprised me on the third hole of the golf course. They just came out of the adjoining woods, walking straight onto the fairway and headed straight for my ball. They were maybe 50 feet away from me. They were unafraid and, for a moment, walked directly at me. I was somewhat fearful that a doe or buck would charge out of the woods and try to butt me, to protect the young-uns. But the fawns turned and romped back into the woods and I continued my round, unmolested.

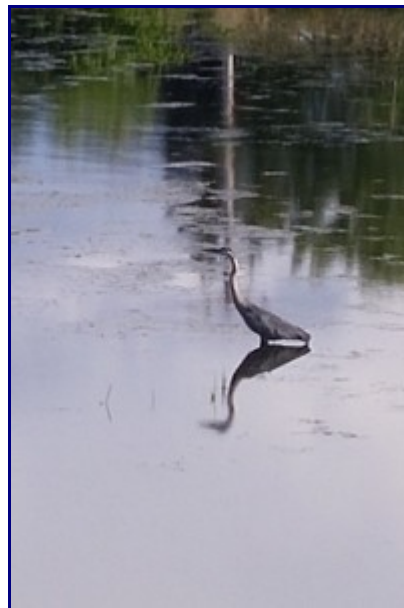
Then there was the fox that crossed our path as I walked the dogs down one of the resort roads one morning. It just ran by us, probably no more than 25 feet away. I was totally surprised, having never seen a fox in the wild(?) before. It happened so quickly that I couldn't get a photo. And it apparently surprised the dogs as well as they just watched it run by, mute. Rusty barks at and chases anything that moves, so having him remain silent and motionless as he watched the fox was a huge surprise.

The marina also has some wildlife. There is the crane that lives in the area and uses the marina basin to fish. I haven't identified the type of crane, but it is smaller than a sandhill.

A large-mouth bass for several months was living under the launch dock. I would see it every morning as I was working on the boats. I regarded it as my pet and admonished people to not fish for it (fishing off the docks is prohibited anyway, so I was well within my rights to yell at them). But someone must have gotten it as I have not seen it for a month.

Then there is the muskrat that startled me one morning by popping his head up out of the water near the dock as I was walking by. Again, his appearance was so brief that I didn't get a photo, but it is another animal that I have never before seen in the wild.

Finally, there are the dogs. We allow dogs to be taken aboard the pontoon boats. They are not exactly wild animals, yet one of them was responsible for the only animal-inflicted injury that I have received this summer: a bite on the calf. The owner assured me that his dogs were friendly, but I know dogs and one seemed to be acting aggressively, so I kept my distance. But as I was carrying the paddles (he and his companion were renting the canoe) to the shore, I got a bit too close and the damn dog lunged and nipped me. Not a bad bite, but bad enough to break the skin. Fortunately it did not get infected and is now nearly healed.



Crane at the marina



Dog bite

Didn't he know that I am a dog person?

Staining the docks

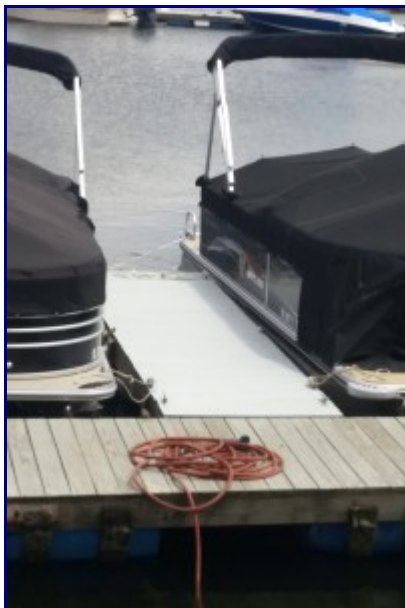
17 Aug 2016

One of the tasks of a marina guy is to maintain the docks. This includes replacing worn board (I have replaced

about 25 this year) and staining the docks. Replacing the boards is a matter of using a crowbar to rip up the old one, then screwing down a new one. Not hard, except on the knees. Staining is simpler - just use a roller to apply the stain. The only hard part is to do it while keeping the docks operational, which means doing only half the width of the dock at a time and carefully planning how to get to the boats and the gas pump at all times without stepping on wet stain. I started with a "test patch" - one of the small finger docks - then moved on to the rest after the marina manager approved.



Before (almost)



Test patch



After

Because it can only be done in the "down time" when there is no other activity, staining the launch dock took almost two months, start to finish, with almost 7 gallons used.

As Jett would say, "A good job done."

I included the bottom photo just because it shows how beautiful the marina can be on a perfect day.



A perfect marina day

Night lightning

21 Aug 2016

My dogs hate thunderstorms, so lightning of any kind is usually not welcome in our home. But recently we experienced a spectacular nighttime lightning storm that was almost totally thunder-free. It eventually turned into a real thunderstorm with rain, wind, thunder and lightning, but for about 20 minutes it was simply a spectacular light show that rivaled the best fireworks extravaganzas.

I decided to see if I could capture any of these vivid bursts of light and, in doing so, found a use for the "burst" mode on my cell phone's camera. When I press and hold the snap button it produces a series of still shots. In the past this has annoyed me as my natural ham-handedness with the camera has produced multiple shots when I really wanted just one. But with the lightning show all I had to do was point at the sky, hold the button down and then discard the 90% of the shots that were uninteresting. With this technique you are pretty much guaranteed to capture some flashes.



Night lightning



Another flash

Headstone hunting

23 Aug 2016

As you may know, I have been spending a large portion of my free time researching Jett's ancestors. One branch of her family lived - and died - in Vermont. According to my records, six of them were buried in the [Pine Grove Cemetery](#) in North Springfield, VT. Despite it being the permanent resting place for most of Springfield's earliest settlers, it is an active cemetery - with its own FaceBook page! This is your opportunity to be friends with a cemetery.

So I took a (very long) day trip to North Springfield recently to see if I could locate the headstones of Jett's ancestors. It was also my first genealogical graveyard trip and an



Pine Grove Cemetery

opportunity to test some of the headstone photography tips that I got at the Escapade. I loaded the car with some paper towels and "Awesome" cleaner (to clean dirty markers) and took, in addition to my cell phone, my trusty Mexican-bought digital camera, mostly to see which was better at capturing headstones.

Burlington to Springfield is about two and a half hours. I had no trouble finding the cemetery or gaining access, but I was somewhat daunted when I got there. It is a large cemetery with thousands of headstones. I was thinking it might take me several hours to find the headstones I was looking for, if, indeed, they existed at all. But I quickly figured out that the pre-20th-century headstones were all in the northwest quarter of the cemetery, which cut my estimated search time by 75%.

I was looking for two families: the Cooks and the Winchesters. As it turns out, I would have found both very quickly if I had started my search at the top of the hill rather than the bottom. But I didn't, so I spent about 30 minutes discovering that Springfield was loaded with Woodwards, Bisbees, Howes and Lelands, but not many Cooks or Winchesters. But I found them, eventually.

The people I was looking for:

- Salmon Winchester, died 1887. I believe his name is pronounced like a 2-syllable "Solomon" rather than like the fish. He was a soldier in the Civil War. One of the things I learned from this trip - from cleaning his headstone - was that he was a member of "Co. A 3rd Reg. Vt. Vol." A little research revealed that the 3rd Vermont Infantry (which Salmon's company was incorporated into) was a highly regarded and decorated force in the Union Army. It suffered the highest casualty rate of any union unit in the war. I would like to research Salmon a bit further to find out what his personal experiences were.
- 

Salmon Winchester inscription
- David Winchester, Jr., died 1858. Salmon's father. He was a prominent man in Springfield and, for a time, a proprietor of the town's only hotel. In addition to providing lodging, it provided libation and eventually became a target of the temperance movement.
 - Abigail Clarke Winchester, died 1871. David's wife and Salmon's mother. Not much is known about her other than she was the wife of a prominent citizen of Springfield. She was born in Raynham, MA, and I have to wonder how a homebody like David Winchester, Jr., managed to find a court a woman from southeastern Massachusetts. Her headstone was in the worst shape of the six, broken in half.
- 

Abigail Clarke's broken headstone
- Susan "Bessie" Cook Winchester, died 1917. She is the link between the Cooks and the Winchesters. Born in North Springfield, lived in North Springfield her entire life, died in North Springfield. She was the granddaughter of Thomas Cook, one of the earliest settlers of Springfield, who came to Vermont from Rhode Island in 1795. But he died in New York and is not in the Pine Grove Cemetery. One of her brothers, Selden Cook, was a very prominent businessman in Springfield, operating a department store there for many years.
 - Oliver Cook, died 1863. Son of Thomas Cook, father of Susan Cook Winchester and Selden Cook.

- Polly Bruce Cook, died 1842. Wife of Oliver Cook. Her parents were reportedly Quakers and some of the earliest settlers of an adjoining town, but I have not been able to corroborate that.

The Vermont connection was broken when Abigail Winchester Stone, the daughter of Susan and Oliver Cook, married and moved to Massachusetts.

I found all 6 headstones and took pictures of them all with both cameras (conclusion: picture quality was pretty similar with both cameras). I then drove down to Springfield and spent about 90 minutes doing some research in the public library there, with the assistance of a very helpful librarian. I didn't learn a lot that I didn't already know about Jett's relatives, but learned a lot about the town. For example, it wasn't settled until the violence of the French and Indian War died down and an outpost was built there. And that the first roads were Indian trails. And that the original site of the town - along the Connecticut River - was abandoned because the land was grabbed up by speculators (the cost of over-speculation, I guess).



Winchester-owned Springfield House

All-in-all, it was a very interesting and productive day. I hope to get an opportunity to do similar cemetery research when I get back to Massachusetts.

I am beginning to wish that some of our ancestors died in Florida. It would be a nice way to spend some time this winter. But, no, they were a bunch of northerners.

RV water torture, the continuing saga

6 Sep 2016

Our fresh water overflow problem is back. After mysteriously disappearing two months ago, it reappeared after I (belatedly) replaced the anode rod in our hot water heater a couple of days ago. To perform that little task, I had to turn off the water supply for about 20 minutes. A few hours after turning the water on again, the overflow reappeared. Drip, drip, drip. Torture.

Now please understand that the hot water heater cannot be blamed. Yes, water could flow from the fresh water tank to the hot water heater if the water pump was activated, which it was not. Turning off the water was a simple act of closing the valve at the utility post. I did not do ANYTHING with the water controls in the RV. So I cannot think of any reason why this simple task would cause the problem to resurface.

Several attempts to "fix" the problem (i.e., make it disappear again) - by turning the 4-way water flow valve that was replaced earlier this summer - have had no effect.

Frustrating.



Anode rod

For those of you who have no idea what an anode rod looks like, see the photo. This is a zinc rod which has the effect of protecting the innards of the hot water heater from corrosion by sacrificing itself to corrosion. A chemical engineer could probably explain it further.

Bored at the marina

13 Sep 2016

The marina was very busy this summer, except for those few days when the weather was bad. But even on those days I had maintenance chores to keep me busy: power-washing the pontoon boats, replacing worn boards on the docks, etc. Now, post-Labor Day, business has fallen off the cliff. On Sunday the wind was blowing so no one wanted to be on the lake. No rentals, no gas sales. And no maintenance chores. The resort is planning to replace the docks next year, so no more dock maintenance is needed. The pontoon boats are all clean and the minor maintenance tasks have all been completed. What to do, what to do?

Sudoku. For about an hour.

Reading. But the book I am on now hasn't piqued my interest yet. Another hour.

That leaves about 8 hours to fill. Fortunately the marina office has a fine internet connection. Also, fortunately, it was the first week of the NFL season, the Red Sox were fighting for first place in Toronto and my four fantasy baseball teams could all be monitored as the real games were being played. Thanks to the internet, I was able to follow the play-by-play progress of all of these in real time. It brightened an otherwise very dull day.

There were some very exciting, nail-biter NFL games, the Red Sox won a back-and-forth affair on a Big Papi homer and my fantasy teams all did very well (one has a 27-game lead in a 12-team league!).

Thanks, internet, for entertaining me at "work".

The ever-changing view from the marina

13 Sep 2016

Even on a dreary day the view from the marina office is pleasant. On a sunny day - or a stormy day with sunny breaks - the view can be absolutely breathtaking. I particularly like the marina when the sun gets low in the sky and long shadows mix with bright boat profiles.



Stormy day



Serenity



Stormy day



Before dusk



Simple beauty



The marina at its best

Champlain Valley Fair

30 Sep 2016

Jett and I like street fairs. We like county fairs. We like state fairs. So of course we went to the Champlain Valley Fair when it was in town in August. The "Champlain Valley" encompasses several counties in northern Vermont, but not the entire state, so it is somewhere between a county fair and a state fair. It is large and the venue was the Champlain Valley Expo, where the Escapade was held in July. So we got to see the same facilities used in a different way.

We also, of course, stuffed our faces with the usual assortment of fair foods. Funnel cake, french fries, scones, bratwurst. To our credit, I think, we passed on the deep-fried oreos and bacon.



Gas-powered washer

One weird thing on display: an old, gas-powered washing machine. Never saw one of those before.

We also came within an inch of buying into satellite TV. Dish had a nice fair special and we got to the point of handing over our credit card before we discovered - and the salesman discovered - that the RV service did not support DVR. Well, Jett has to have a DVR. So we will keep looking.

But despite that disappointment it was a fun, sunny day at the fair.



Double-decker carousel



Sand sculpture

Burlington, with friends

4 Oct 2016

Thank God for family and friends. We might have never seen Burlington this summer had we not had guests. I have already reported on the [visit by Jett's sisters](#). More recently we spent a very pleasant afternoon with my college roommate, Roger, and his lovely wife Nancy. It was a day when Jett was feeling well enough to walk a bit, so we met Roger, Nancy and their dog Zelda in downtown Burlington and spent some time exploring. We found the waterfront - both the elevated park above the lake and the park and commercial area at the shore - and had a very nice early dinner at a sidewalk restaurant.

We started with a stroll up the Church St pedestrian mall, which is, I think, the heart of Burlington. It is a great place to people-watch, have lunch and shop. Being Vermont, it has a Ben & Jerry's ice cream shop which, appropriately, is located on Cherry St (with a sign that suggests that it is actually "Cherry Garcia St.).

There is also a rather unique water fountain nearby. Looks like a prop from *Rollerball*.

The First Unitarian Church anchors the northern end of Church St. Beautiful structure.

After Church St we wandered down to Battery



Nancy, Jett, Roger and Zelda on Church St



Water fountain



Ben & Jerry corner



First Unitarian



Battery Park

Park, which overlooks Lake Champlain, then strolled down to the Waterfront Park. I fortified myself with a maple-flavored "creemie" (soft-serve ice cream), then we fought our way back uphill to Church St. We finished with a late lunch/early dinner at [Ri Rá Irish Pub](#).

Thanks, Roger and Nancy, for giving us a reason to see this beautiful city.

Sierra surgery

13 Oct 2016

Way back in June I was informed that my 2005 GMC Sierra pickup truck would need a new head gasket. For those of you who aren't familiar with internal combustion engines, the head gasket is a large, complex gasket that fits between the engine block and the "head" - the piece that caps the cylinders. Its purpose is to ensure a tight seal on the cylinders, keeping oil and coolant from getting into the cylinders and preventing high-pressure combustion gases from escaping into the cooling system. It is a very important piece of a very complex puzzle.

And it is a bitch to replace. The engine must be pulled out of the vehicle, then completely disassembled, cleaned and reassembled with the new gasket installed. The original estimate was \$3,000 but I expected it would be substantially more, probably \$4,000 after adding in parts and state tax. Well, I was low. The final cost was \$5,574.05. There was "extra labor", glow plugs (i.e., spark plugs for diesels), thermostats and two injector return hoses.

This truck is important to our lifestyle. Our fifth wheel goes nowhere without it. As we needed to vacate our current location by Oct 22, it was vitally important that we have a functioning truck by that date. I briefly considered trading it in on a newer used truck,

but could find no suitable replacement. Buying a new one would mean an additional \$60,000 of debt, which was not palatable. And the truck has only 127,000 miles, which is nothing for a diesel engine.



The engine-less Sierra

So it was with a great deal of trepidation that I handed over the keys for what would be nearly a two-week job. My trepidation was not diminished when, a week into the job, I stopped by the Keeler Bay Service and Sales to check on the progress and found the truck sitting outside with the engine in about a thousand pieces, filling the back seat and much of the bed of the truck. Nor was I soothed when I inquired as to status and they said that the repairs were being delayed because the wrong gasket had been delivered to them. Nail-biting time.

Well, the repairs were completed and the truck was returned to me a week ago. I took it for a 100-mile test drive yesterday and it seems ok. I wasn't towing anything, so I still am not completely sanguine about the situation. But I have built some confidence that they didn't make it worse.

That sounds like faint praise, but the fact is that I was very worried that they might do exactly that. I drove the truck all summer - not far, but frequently - and we did use it to tow the RV to the Escapade in July. It was operating flawlessly, which made the decision to invest over \$4,000 all the more difficult. But Mitch, the owner of the Keeler Bay shop, told me that they found oil in the coolant when they took the engine apart, which was a symptom of impending doom. He assured me that the engine would have been destroyed if I had further delayed the repairs.

So now, \$5,500 later, I have a truck that operates as well as it did before. But will (hopefully) last for years.

Plattsburgh NY

15 Oct 2016



On the ferry

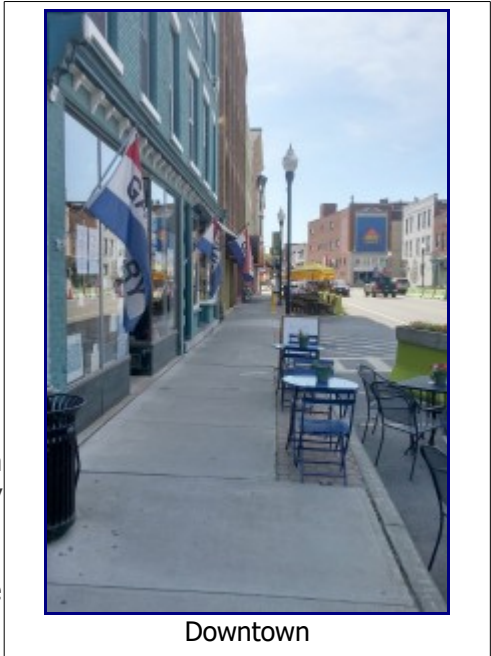
By most measures - including "as the crow flies" - we are closer to Plattsburgh, NY, than we are to Burlington,

VT. When we Googled the nearest Walmart we found that it was in Plattsburgh. But we never went to Plattsburgh, despite its proximity. Until two weeks ago.

Why? Because it is a ferry ride away. A \$21 round-trip ferry ride. It is a nice ferry and it runs frequently, but I was not about to pay \$21 to get some discounted Walmart goods.

But I remained curious and, so, when Jett was away and the Sierra was in the shop, I decided to make the ferry trek to Plattsburgh in my rented Toyota.

It was an interesting ferry ride, but it wasn't exactly a pot of gold at the other end. Plattsburgh seems to be a fairly sleepy old mill town (there is still a Georgia-Pacific mill there). It looks like they have done a credible job of going upscale downtown - sidewalk restaurants and only a few empty storefronts - but it has none of the energy that Burlington exudes. I stayed for less than an hour, so it wasn't an in-depth exploration. But I felt that I had seen all I wanted to see. I feel no urge to return.



Downtown



Riverfront park



Ferry terminal



Riverfront obelisk

Montreal, Quebec

16 Oct 2016

Montreal is in an entirely different country, yet it is less than 2 hours from our place on Lake Champlain. We could drive to Montreal in half the time it takes to drive to Boston. And, on a Thursday a couple of weeks ago, we did. We left at 8:30am and returned at 4:30pm. We took our passports but didn't take the dogs - we didn't want to risk having them detained at the border. But it wasn't a particularly long day for them. I am sure they would have enjoyed meeting some French-speaking dogs, but staying at home was best for all concerned.

The highlight of our trip was lunch at [Lester's Deli](#), an iconic Montreal deli famous for its "smoked meat" sandwiches. I, of course, had to try one. The smoked meat is brisket and the result is a smoky version of a corned beef sandwich. Pretty good. I also ordered a side of poutine, a Montreal staple. It is a pile of French fries, soaked in gravy and covered with melted cheese. It sounds disgusting, right? But I was assured that if I tried it I would love it. So I tried it. It is disgusting.



Smoked meat sandwich



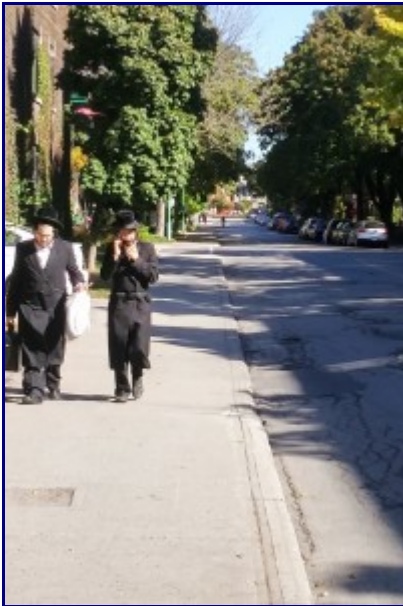
Interior of Lester's Deli



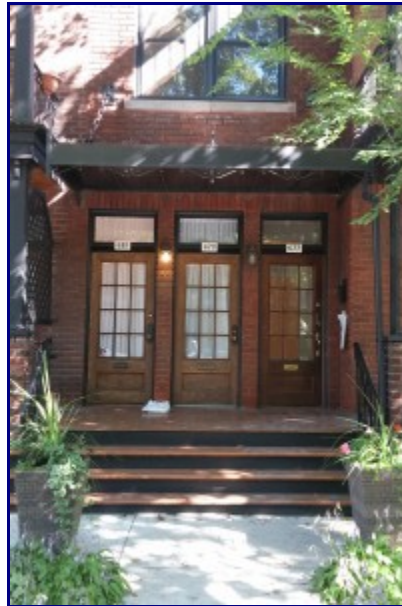
Poutine

We also wandered the area around Lester's and were surprised to find that it had a heavy Hassidic Jewish population. There was some interesting architecture as well. I don't recall ever seeing triple-deckers with three front doors. I would like to tour one of these buildings sometime and see how the stairs are arranged. We also saw many buildings where the main entrance was on the second floor, with some **very** long staircases to the front door. I had to wonder how dangerous those stairs would be in the winter.

We drove around some other neighborhoods but found the traffic and the parking conditions to be daunting, so we only got out of the car on top of Mont Royal. There is a terrific panoramic view of the city from that promontory, but the photo didn't turn out. Don't know why. I guess you will either have to take my word for it or go see it for yourself.



Near Lester's



Triple doors to triple decker



Downtown traffic

Winding down the marina season

17 Oct 2016

The marina closes October 15, but business has been very slow since Labor Day. Once the kids are back in school the lake is used mostly by fishermen - and now duck hunters. But very few pontoon rentals. So a day at the marina consists of minor chores and hours of reading, doing Sudoku and surfing the 'net.

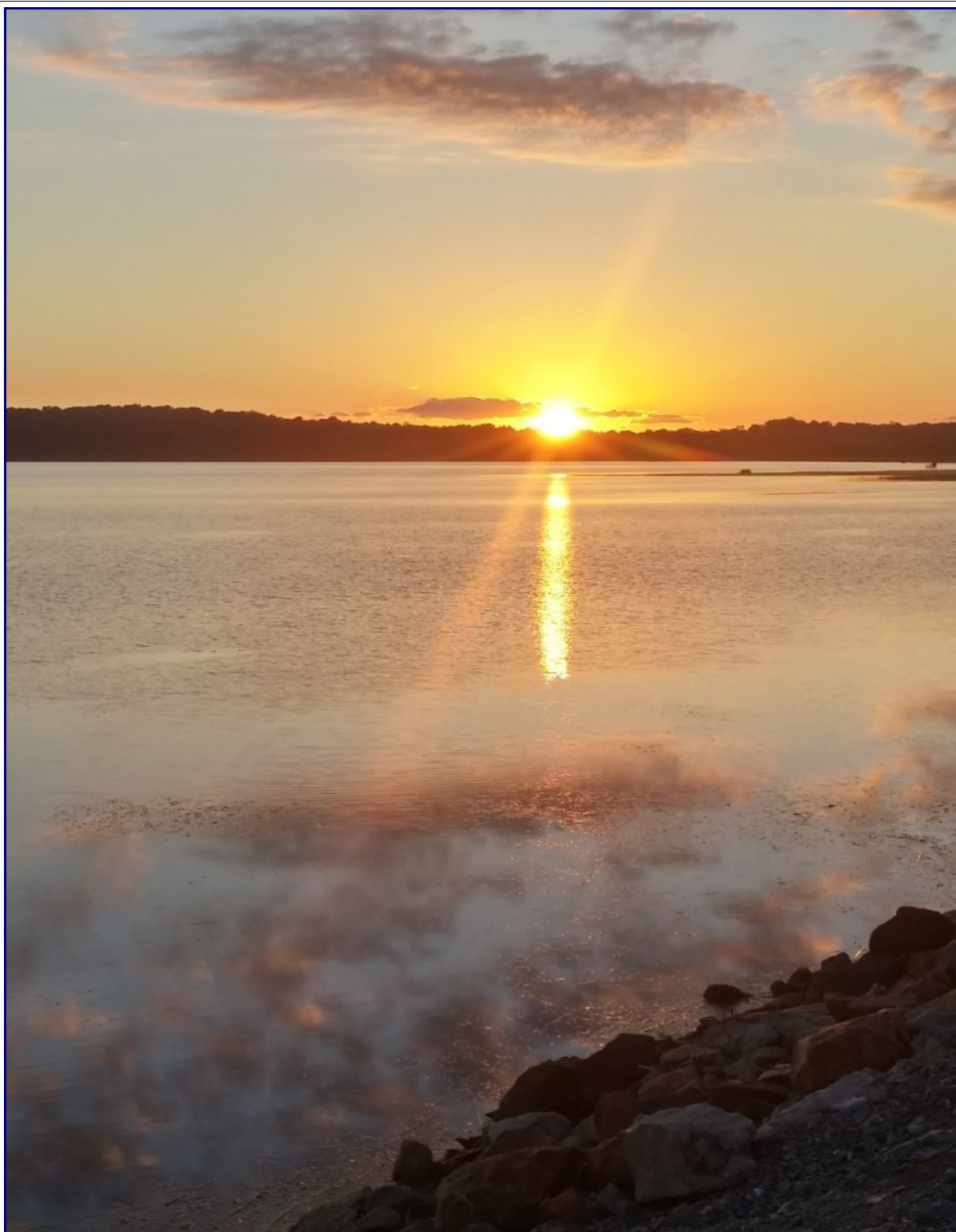
But there are still moments when the lake is beautiful. When the wind dies down and the sun is low in the sky or a storm passes by and a rainbow appears... the beauty is nearly breathtaking. At those times the job is not boring at all.



The lonely gas dock



Fall sun



Early fall sunset on Lake Champlain

Fall foliage

18 Oct 2016



Vermont at its finest



Ballooning



Two balloons



Color everywhere

You are not allowed to spend October in Vermont without taking pictures; if you try to leave without any they stop you at the border. So I had to take a few. Fortunately, the day when I took the repaired truck out for an 80-mile test drive was a perfect day and the fall color was nearly peak.

It was such a beautiful day that several balloonists decided to go for an aerial stroll.



Red

Third trip south (TTS)

19 Oct 2016

Today Jett and I leave South Hero, VT, and start our trek south, to Ft Myers Beach, FL. It will be a journey of just over 2,000 miles and will take 26 days. we will spend 6 nights in MA, catching up with family and friends, and 5 nights in the DC area, also catching up with family. That part of the trip - MA to DC - will be a simple reversal of our trip north. Nothing new there. But after that we will hit a few new places:

- Natural Bridge, VA. It is just one night, but I have always been interested in this stop. Probably just the name - "natural bridge" - but it sounds interesting.
- Asheville, NC. Seeing the Biltmore estate and the western NC region is on my bucket list. We have the time to take a pretty significant detour to make this happen. 3 nights.
- Charleston, SC. We are looking forward to having 3 more days to explore one of our favorite cities. And we will be staying in one of our favorite RV parks, with the huge dog park. The dogs are looking forward to this stop, too.
- Jacksonville, FL. Jacksonville may not be at the top of the list of Florida destinations, but I think there is

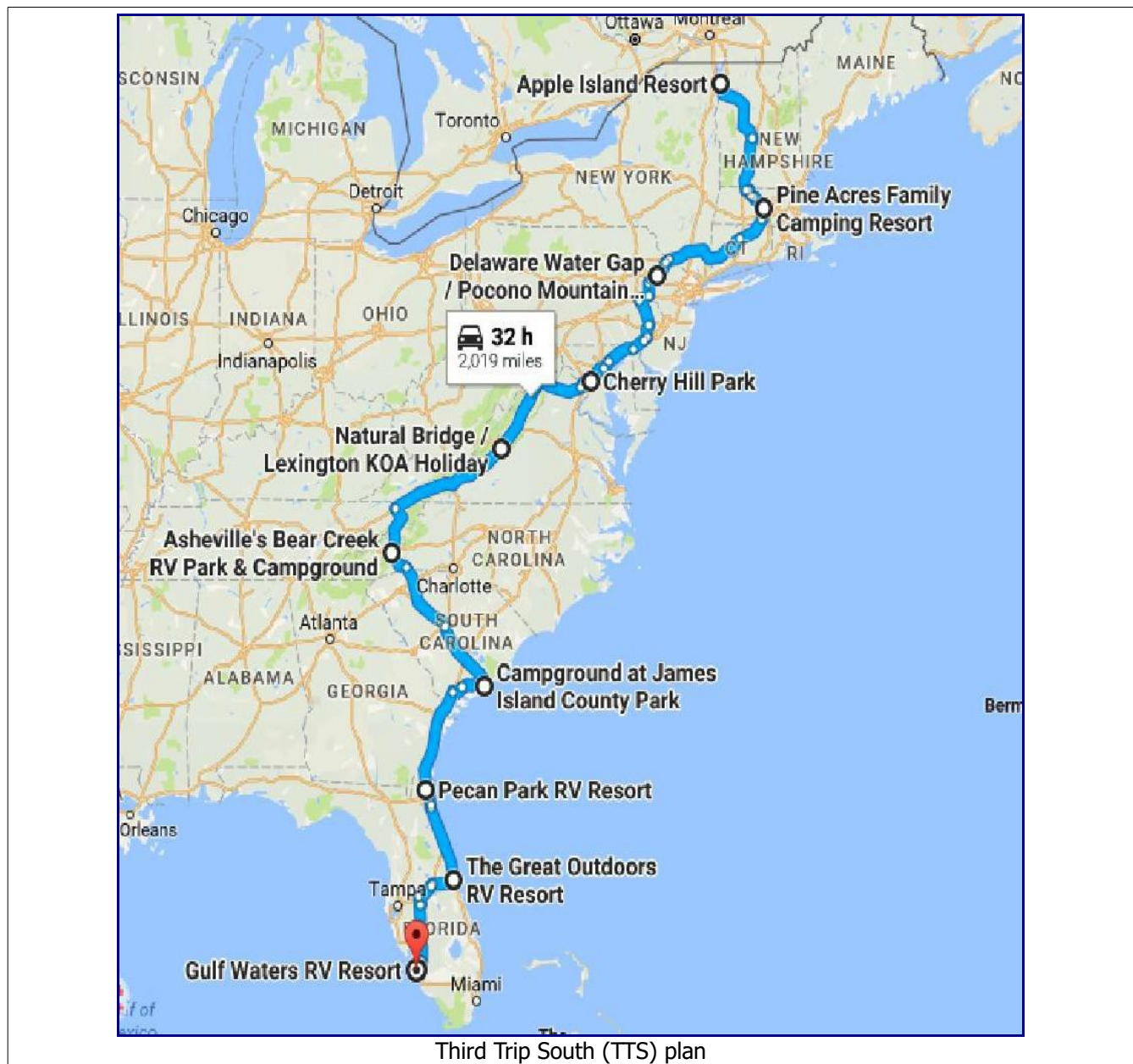
enough there to keep us interested for 3 nights.

- Titusville, FL. This is near Cape Canaveral, which I have never visited. And it is an area of the east coast of Florida that I have never explored. 3 nights.

Then on to our new Florida home for the winter - [Gulf Waters RV Resort](#). We loved the Seminole Campground, but decided to try a new, more upscale, park this year. It is expensive, but, hopefully, will be worth the price.

Of course, this will all be done using our repaired truck. The first hop down to MA will be nerve-wracking. I will be listening intently for any unusual engine sounds and hoping against hope that the engine doesn't blow up. It should be fine, but I won't be comfortable until we complete that first hop unscathed.

Wish us luck.



TTS Hop 1: South Hero VT to Oakham MA

20 Oct 2016

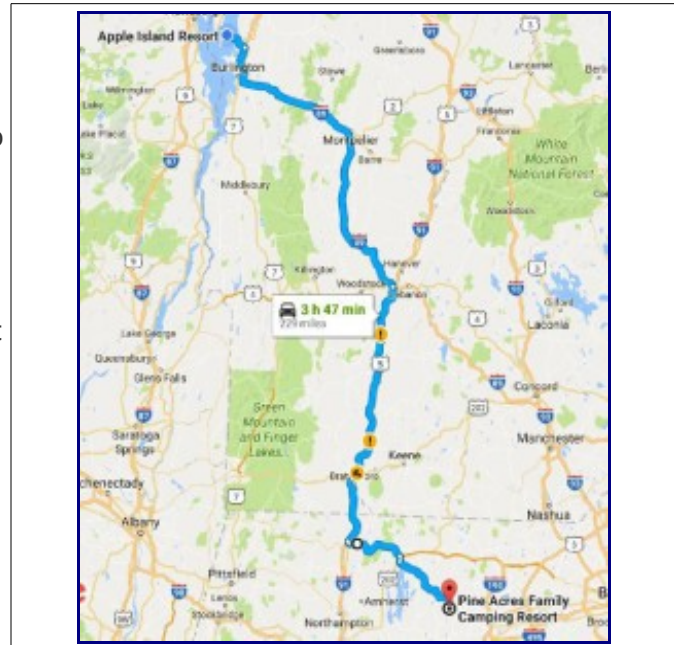
229 miles via I-89, I-91, MA 2 and MA 122.

This first hop of the TTS was a mirror image of the last hop of the STN, so there was no new scenery. We stopped twice: a lunch stop in Hartford, VT, and an emergency roadside stop just north of the MA border to reattach a strip of molding that came loose on the RV. There was a moment of excitement on I-91 where I was traveling along in the right lane with large trucks in front of me and to the left of me. Suddenly the truck in the left lane put on his turn signal and started edging over into my lane. I braked, to let him in, then saw that the truck in front of me was braking hard. I had to swerve into the breakdown lane to avoid both. The reason for all of this drama: a police accident investigation, protected only by a few traffic cones deployed a hundred yards from the accident site. This was a very dangerous situation (an SUV had already plowed through one of the cones) and I blame the troopers for not securing the site better. They should have posted a cruiser before the start of the lane reduction, to warn traffic to slow down.

But I made it through unscathed.

The best thing about the hop was the fall foliage. It was absolutely spectacular from start to finish and it was enhanced by the bright sun with just a few clouds for dramatic effect. I don't have any photos taken during the trip because it is generally unwise to snap photographs while driving a 10-ton rig. But I do have one that I took this morning at the [Pine Acres Family Resort Campground](#), just to give a small sample of what we were treated to for 229 miles.

I should also mention that the truck performed admirably. No problem at all. Whew!



TTS Hop 1



Hartford VT rest area



Lunch stop



The end of Hop 1



Color at Pine Acres

Our first workamping gig

23 Oct 2016

"Workamping" was coined to describe those full-time RVers who earn a living while traveling by working at the campground at which they are staying. It is kind of like the Old West where itinerant laborers would work around the ranch for room and board. I don't know how many people do it, but there are several websites devoted to ads for campgrounds seeking workers (e.g., WorkampingJobs.com). These are generally low-pay jobs that are worthwhile only because the campsite is provided either free or at a huge discount.

Our summer at the [Apple Island Resort](#) in South Hero VT was our first workamping gig. In our case the campsite was not free, but was so inexpensive that it seemed like it was free. And electricity and cable TV

were included. We also had free laundry. So our summer living expenses were very low. That part of the experience was entirely satisfactory.

I had a job at the marina. I had almost no experience in boating so I learned a lot. I even got my VT Boating Safety Certificate, which is basically a boating license which will make it easier for me to rent a boat anywhere in the US. Not that I intend to rent a lot of boats, but it is one of those good-to-have cards to carry around in my wallet, like my scuba certificate.

Jett had a job in the office. She was trained in one particular type of campground management software. That experience will be helpful in any campground office. She also got to brush up on her (already extensive) customer service skills.

So the positives from this first experience were:

- reduced living expenses
- additional income
- acquisition of new skills
- beefing up our resumes

But it wasn't all positive. Jett's health problems this summer really cut into whatever fun we might have had. She also intensely disliked her supervisor, to the point where she quit her job just a month into it. Her health problems would have prevented her from working much anyway, but that was moot as she had already quit by the time she got sick. She was all in favor of me quitting my job as well and just leaving VT, but I felt a commitment to finish the work assignment that I had signed up for. Besides, we had no place to go. I am sure we could have found someplace, but leaving would have left a taste of failure in my mouth.

So we stayed. We endured. We survived. And we were damn happy to leave.

Besides Jett's dislike of her boss, there were many other things that we disliked about this summer, only some of which were work-related. The work-related dislikes:

- We disliked the campground. I will go into this in detail in a separate campground review. Suffice it to say for now that it is not a place that I would recommend to anyone. When our friends Roger and Nancy came to visit (see [Burlington with friends](#)) we directed them away from Apple Island and instead



Me, in my uniform, at the marina

recommended that they stay at a nice state park just down the road.

- We disliked the corporation that owns the campground. It is a family corporation which, I believe, is 51% owned by one man. He is a classic "trust baby" with more money than sense. He is autocratic with a "my way or the highway" attitude which makes my hackles rise. As I told my boss at the start of the summer, the owner is a classic example of a guy who says all the right things and does all the wrong things. Example: there is a policy that each workamper can have 5 and only 5 uniforms. Because they refused to get the uniforms to us before the start of the season and because we felt uncomfortable ordering sizes without trying on the uniforms, we ordered only two uniforms initially and they did not appear until almost two weeks into the season. We had to start the season with borrowed used uniforms! And then, due to a bookkeeping error, when we ordered the additional uniforms Jett's order was refused. Rather than risking sending her one additional pair of pants, the entire order was refused and she had to resubmit it. She finally got her new uniforms about a month into the season - just in time for her to quit. There were other policies that we found distasteful and just a whole bunch of how-stupid-can-they-be things that we observed. But the owner was not open to suggestions. My way or the highway. We preferred the highway.
- We didn't feel very close to the other workampers. While we did make friends, we didn't make many close friends. Jett and I mostly hung out by ourselves, which was fine. But closer friendships would have improved the experience.

There were also some significant negatives that were not work-related:

- We were too far from Boston. We made several trips to Boston as a couple and Jett made a few more on her own. It was a grueling 4+ hour trip. Too far.
- South Hero was not close to anything other than Lake Champlain. Every trip to get food or take out pizza was a 20-mile round trip. We would like to be closer to shops and services.

If I had to grade the overall experience it would be in the C- or D+ range. Jett would give it an F, for sure. The lessons we learned, should we apply for another workamping position (and we will):

- Try to vet the place before applying. We need to research both the campground and the area to make sure that we will enjoy spending time there. Apply to campgrounds that we have stayed at and have enjoyed, if possible.
- If working in New England, make sure we are within 2 hours of Boston.
- Try to find a 3-month assignment. Six months is just too long if it turns out you don't like the job.

Duck hunting

24 Oct 2016

I have never lived near a duck hunting venue, so I was a bit startled earlier this month when I woke to sounds of gunshots nearby. Apparently Lake Champlain is a good place to bag some ducks on their way south. Ducks: take note.

I was also amused and amazed at the effort that duck hunters expend to fool the fowl. Some construct elaborate blinds near the shore. Others just camouflage their fishing boats. Some add so much greenery that their boats look like floating islands. Add a few flowers and they would be ready for the Rose Parade.

I suppose that I should have grabbed the opportunity to experience duck hunting at its finest. I didn't. But I will add it to my bucket list.

At the bottom.



Floating duck blind

TTS Hop 2: Oakham MA to East Stroudsburg PA

26 Oct 2016

232 miles via MA 122, MA 31, MA 49, US 20, I-84 and US 209. Cumulative tow miles: 458.

We are getting out of New England just in time: the temperature in Oakham dropped to 32 the night before we left and also dropped to 32 in East Stroudsburg, PA, the night we arrived. Frost on the pumpkin, indeed.

The day was partly cloudy, so it wasn't as bright and beautiful as the day we left VT, but it was striking how much the colors had faded in just 6 days. The reds and yellows have mostly given way to shades of brown. It was still colorful, but not vibrant.

The route was almost identical (in reverse) to the route we took last spring to get to Oakham. But the GPS took us in a somewhat surprising (and 3 miles longer) route

getting out of Oakham. It wasn't a bad route, but the extra miles were a concern. The planned route of 229



A frosty truck

miles took us pretty close to our cruising range.

The bulk of this route is on I-84, which is on our short list of the Worst Roads in America. It is always busy, is always dotted with construction and, despite the constant construction, is always a bumpy, knock-the-cans-off-the-shelf ride. We were stuck in about a 5-mile backup near Newburgh, NY, and had several other traffic slowdowns. We made two stops: a lunch stop and an "emergency" refueling stop which consisted of us stopping at a rest area and me pouring the 4 gallons from my reserve gas can into the tank. We always carry a few gallons of extra fuel, but this is



Frosty morning at the KOA

the first time that I have used it. I was concerned because we were approaching "E" when we still had 50 miles to go. I knew that the last 30 miles were on US 209, which is very narrow with no shoulders - not the place where I would want to run out of gas. It turns out that we would have made it as I filled the 30-gallon tank with 27.8 gallons of diesel fuel, but using the reserve was the prudent thing to do.

The 6 days in MA were... eventful. Besides taking the dogs in for checkups (both doing fine, including Grace, who is feeble at 15), a dental cleaning and an aborted attempt to get an interview for workamping jobs next summer in Foxboro, MA, we had to deal with a flood. Yes, a flood. Worcester, MA, was the recipient of 5 inches of rain in about a 2-hour period Friday night. Our rental property - a 3-family in Worcester - is prone to flooding. The basement has flooded 3 times in 7 years, the worst being 3 feet of water about 3 years ago. This one topped them all: 4 feet of water in the basement. The furnace and all 3 water heaters were submerged. The water even got high enough to trip the outlet that the sump pump was connected to, which made matters worse. So Saturday, Sunday, Monday and even Tuesday morning involved work to recover from the flood. Jett's brother Ray did the work on Saturday, which involved renting a pump and pumping out the water. Sunday was mostly a matter of drying out the water heaters and the furnace (we did get one water heater restarted Sunday night). Monday was when we tried to restart the rest but succeeded only in getting one more water heater restarted. We called in a furnace repair guy on Monday who diagnosed the problem and promised to return Tuesday morning. On Tuesday the furnace guy identified another problem and recommended that the entire furnace - at least all of the internal components - be replaced, which I agreed to. A plumber was schedule to arrive to look at the balky water heater, which may also have to be replaced.

Estimated flood damage: about \$3,000. It may or may not be mostly covered by insurance. I need to chat with my agent.

The ironic thing about the flood is that Worcester - like most of New England - is in a severe "Stage 3" drought. The reservoirs are nearly empty. The 5 inches of rain probably exceeds the total for the entire summer. They need the rain, but does it have to end up in my basement?

[Pine Acres Family Camping Resort](#) continues to impress us. The sites are large, wooded and consistently attractive. The lake is wonderful and both the dog park and the dog beach are first-rate. We dropped off our workamper applications; we would not mind spending a few months here next summer. We have seen the campground only in off-season when most of the amenities are shuttered and few campers are there. I can

imagine that the place really hops in peak season. I hope we can experience that

Taking out the docks

27 Oct 2016

The final task in my marina mini-career was taking out the docks. The floating docks had to be removed from the lake and stacked on shore, to keep them from being crushed by the winter ice. This is normally a simple task, taking maybe a day and a half. This year it took a bit longer, due to the near-historic low water on Lake Champlain: the level when we started removing the docks was about a foot below the 100-year median and less than 6" above the all-time low water of 1941. About a quarter of the dock segments were sitting on the mud and had to be dragged and/or lifted out of the non-existent water.

The launch dock came out first. I had started that process a week earlier by detaching the four segments that were still floating and tying them to the gas dock. I then removed the pins that connected the other 8 segments and just left them sitting in the mud. When the front-end loader arrived, it was used to drag all 8 of those segments to shore where they could then be lifted and stacked. The 4 floating segments were then floated to near the shore where they were also lifted and stacked.

The main docks - the ones that are rented to seasonal customers - were removed next. All but 6 segments could be removed by dragging them free and floating them again. I rode on those docks to shore, like Huck Finn on the raft. The final 6 segments took some heroic - and dangerous - work with the front-end loader, driven by the resort's facilities manager. It took over 4 hours to remove those 6 segments.



Most of the center dock removed

The last dock to be removed was the gas dock. That was pretty trivial as those segments were all still floating (they were in the region dredged last year for the new state boat ramp that was next door).

The final task was to remove the 24 mooring balls. The general process was to string a "leech line" from shore to each of the buoys, tying the line to the anchor chain, removing the buoy and then dropping the chain to the bottom. This took longer than usual because 4 of the moorings were so shallow that the work boat could not get to them. we had to get a rowboat out of storage and use it to get to the final 4 balls. Even then we got stuck a couple of times because the water was less than a foot deep.



Lifting a dock segment



Riding the docks



Removing a stuck segment



Docks gone

My final act at the marina was to take a photo of the dock-less lake. You can see the extensive mud flats. It looks kind of forlorn. Note the anchor block in the foreground - it was under more than 3 feet of water in May.

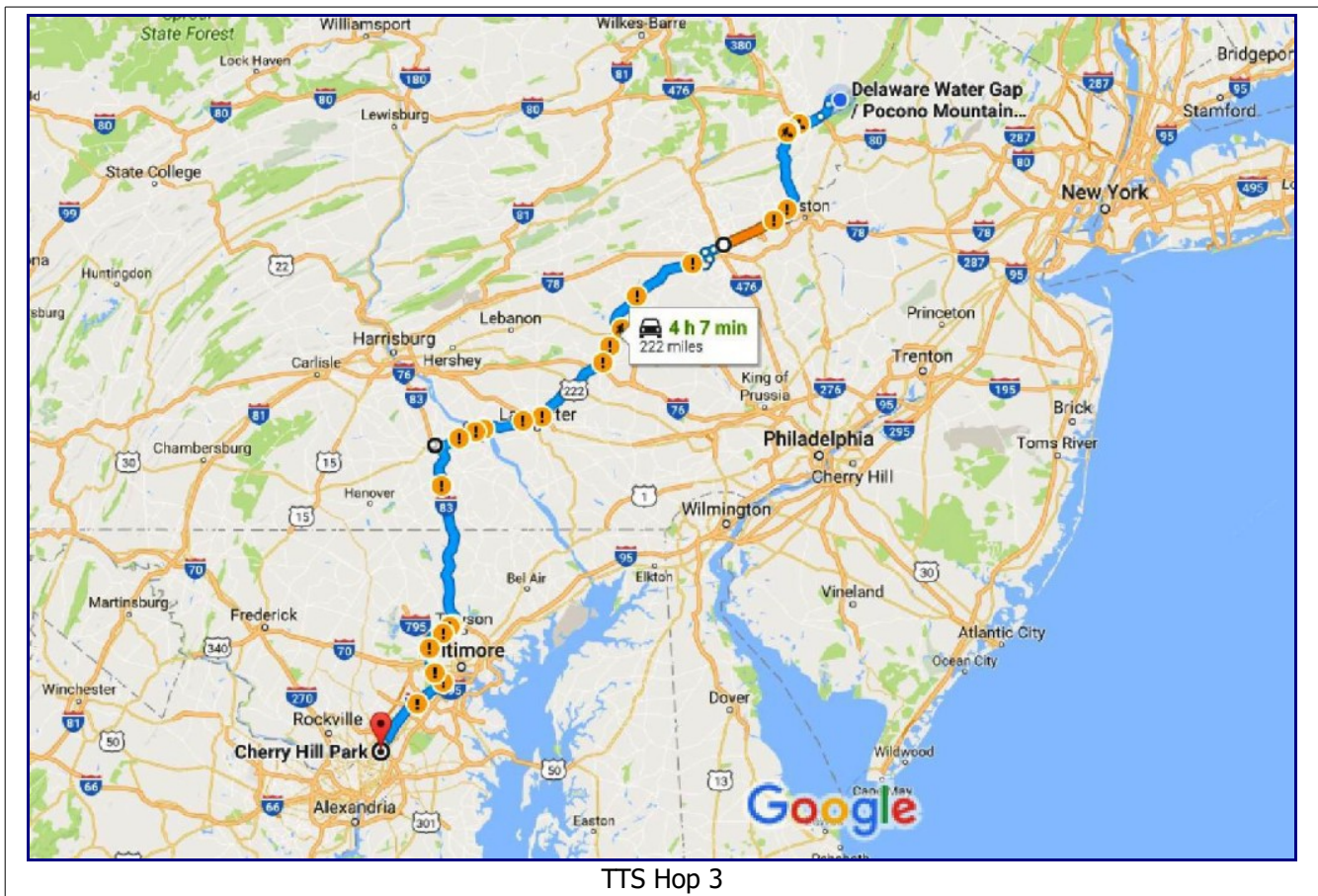
A long winter lies ahead.

Hopefully one with LOTS of snow.

TTS Hop 3: East Stroudsburg PA to College Park MD

27 Oct 2016

222 miles via US 209, PA 33, US 22, US 222, US 30, I-83, I-695 (around Baltimore), I-95 and MD 212.
Cumulative tow miles: 680.



This was almost a reverse of the hop last spring, with a few minor differences. The biggest difference is that we decided to travel US 30 to its connection with I-83 rather than taking the shortcut. We regretted the decision as it not only added about 5 miles to the trip but also got us stuck in about a mile-and-a-half of very heavy traffic. We will take the shortcut next time.

This hop, though the best of the options (the other routes all involve tolls and city traffic), is not fun. It lacks any rest stops (I ate lunch while driving). We did, finally, make a rest stop about 25 miles short of our destination, to relieve Jett's bladder. But other than the lack of places to take a break, it was an uneventful trip over roads that

are generally in pretty good shape. But there were a few rough patches - enough to knock the broiler oven off its shelf in the closet.

I don't have anything more to say about the [Delaware Water Gap / Pocono Mountain KOA](#). It is a very nice campground that is in the perfect location for us for an overnight stop between Boston and DC. I am sure there are many recreational activities (and bears) in the area, so it might be a good choice for someone who would like to stay and explore a bit.

Our destination for 5 nights is the [Cherry Hill Park](#) campground. We stayed here on our way north last spring and it now is firmly established in our "best ever" campground list. We love this place! It is expensive (over \$70 per night for a premium site), but it has many amenities and is close to everything. Jett's sons and grandson will be visiting, so we will have a chance to catch up with family. Should be a fun five days.

If Jett stays healthy. She has sniffles this morning.

Apple Island "Resort"

30 Oct 2016



The featureless plain

Jett and I spent nearly 6 months this spring/summer/fall at the [Apple Island Resort](#) in South Hero, VT, about 20 miles north of Burlington, VT. I previously reported on our [first workamping gig](#) and won't comment further on working there. This is just a review of the campground itself.

I have a problem with the "Resort" part of the name. When I think "resort" I think [Normandy Farms](#), [Gulf](#)

[Waters RV Resort](#), [Pine Acres Family Camping Resort](#) or even the [Seminole Campground](#) (which doesn't even claim "resort" status). These parks all have extensive amenities - all have a pool, game room, laundromat, playground and community center and some have pickle ball courts, tennis courts, golf (or Frisbee golf) course, card room, softball field, outdoor amphitheater, dog park and beaches - lots of activities and very attractive campsites/RV pads. Yes, Apple Island has a very nice community center with a room that could be used for cards (though I never saw anyone playing), pool and a 9-hole golf course, but not much else. It does have the marina, which is nice, but no beach, no tennis courts, no pickle ball courts, no softball field, no outdoor amphitheater, no dog park. The laundromat is, kindly put, minimal and unpleasant to use with no windows and no ventilation. The playground is pathetic - up a hill and consisting of little more than a slide and some plastic structures to climb on. The activities are also minimal. There are cookouts, Bingo and BBQs, but always at a price, and very few other activities. No FOB, no reading club, no genealogy, few community socials/pot lucks. There seems to be no sense of community.



Pitiful laundromat



Pitiful playground

And the campsites... let me tell you about the campsites. The "lower field" consists of a featureless (no trees, no bushes - see the photo at the top) plain where the RVs park on grass or thin strips of loose gravel. The whole area was designed with motorhomes in mind, with the unit facing forward (because the sites are aligned with the best view forward), so the utilities are on the left for the motorhomes, but are on the right (which is wrong) for all other RVs which would like to face backward because the best view for them is out the back of the unit. These sites have no sewer connections - they are water/electric only - because the park apparently built the sites without thinking about upgrading



RVs amid the park models

their ancient sewage processing plant. If you want a full-hookup site you must take one of the sites "up the hill" which vary greatly in quality but tend to be uneven and very cramped. Almost none of those sites have any view whatsoever; instead they are nestled amongst the park model trailers of the permanent and seasonal residents.

This mixing of transient RVs and permanent residents pleases no one. I think I am being charitable when I say that I think the park is "in transition." They have a full-time sales manager whose job is to convert the transient

sites into seasonal or permanent sites, so they clearly want more permanent/seasonal residents at the cost of reduced transient capacity. It would seem that the goal is to have all sites "up the hill" be permanent/seasonal sites and transient RVs all relegated to the "lower field." Until this transition is complete - and it could take years - this awkward intermingling of transients and permanent/seasonal residents will continue.

I should also mention the tent sites. There are a grand total of 6 of them, all in a row in a strip of grass carved out of the woods above the field. Tenters are allowed to drive to the site to set up, but then must move their vehicle to the bottom of the hill. The restrooms and showers are also at the bottom of the hill, which is both a strenuous walk and, in the dark, quite difficult. For the privilege of using this inconvenient swatch of grass (with a fire ring and picnic table) the tenter pays \$45. A much nicer site at the state park 2 miles away costs \$21.

My first impression of the "resort" back in April was not very favorable. I kept thinking that I would learn to love it. I didn't.



Community Center



Library/card room

TTS Hop 4: College Park MD to Natural Bridge VA

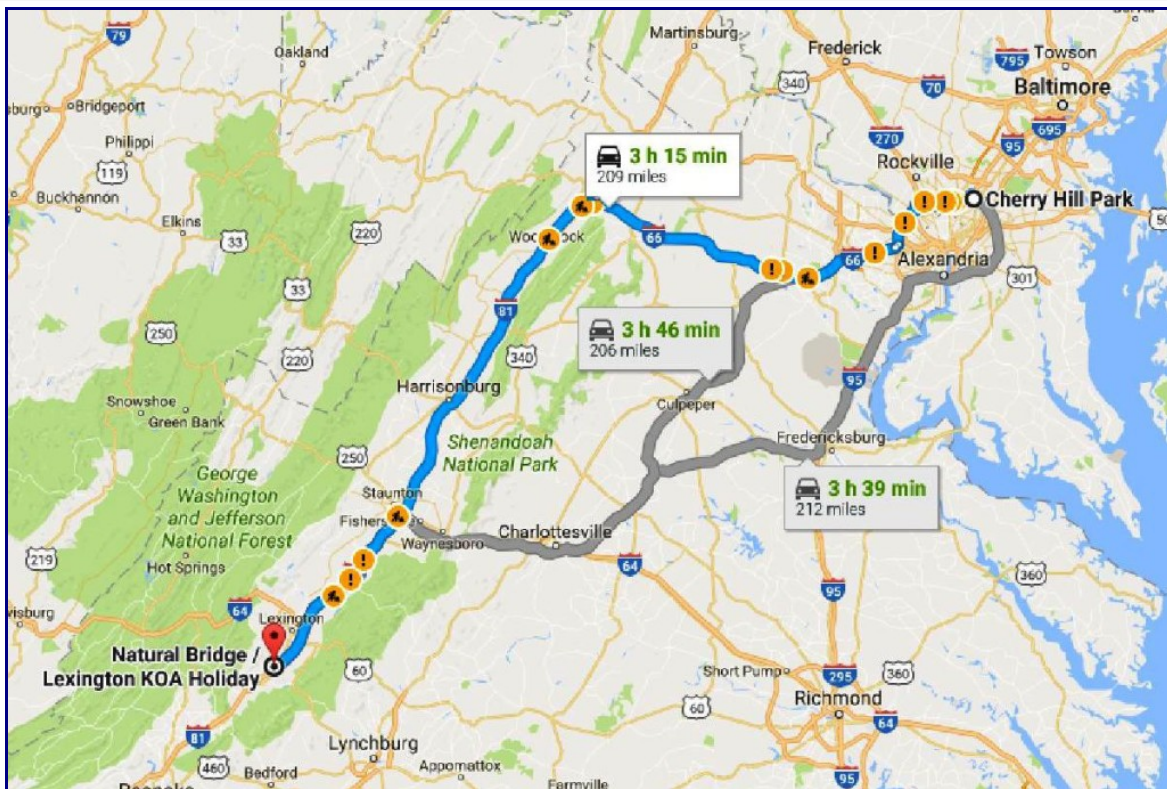
2 Nov 2016

212 miles via I-495 (around DC), I-66 and I-81. Cumulative tow miles: 892.

I consider this a "low stress" hop because it was almost entirely on interstate highways. I was worried that the first 50 miles - on the I-495 DC Beltway and out I-66 - would have a lot of stop-and-go traffic, but there was almost none of that. Pretty smooth, traffic-wise, though I-81 is always heavy. There are also a lot of hills on I-81, so the gas mileage was pretty lousy - under 8 mpg. But diesel fuel is cheap enough (I filled up at the destination for \$2.30/gal) that I didn't really care.

All in all, a pretty easy hop. But not particularly interesting. I was surprised that the foliage was past prime this far south.

The I-81 south trip reminded me of our first month on the road, way back in 2012. I-81 was the road where we had to leave the RV in the breakdown lane to go into town in search of tires as we had two blowouts in the same day. Good times.



TTS Hop 4



Luxury cabin



Cabin bedroom

[Cherry Hill Park](#) was, once again, awesome. This time we took a "luxury cabin" for two nights so that Jett's son and grandson could stay with us and avoid multiple 100-mile round trips. We were very impressed. Large, clean, nice furniture, lots of dishes, nice bedding, very comfortable bath. This is probably the nicest cabin we have ever seen. Another plus for Cherry Hill.

We laundered our clothes at their awesome laundry. We later discovered that the park has a second laundry which was even closer to our site.

We used our two days with Jett's son and grandson to play minigolf, dine out, visit IKEA (a first for me) and have smores around the campfire. A good time was had by all, but was marred by Jett's severe cold. She couldn't even hug them goodbye, for fear of making them sick.



Cabin kitchen



Messing around at mini-golf

TTS Hop 5: Natural Bridge VA to Asheville NC

3 Nov 2016



TTS Hop 5

279 miles via I-81 and I-26. Cumulative tow miles: 1,171.

This was another "easy" hop in terms of navigation: down I-81, then down I-26 to Asheville. But it was a long trip, with a refueling stop, and a couple of problems arose. First, some rubber molding on the RV came loose several times, requiring uncomfortable emergency stops on I-81. After the third failure I had to dig out some Gorilla Tape to keep it in place. Second, I changed the refueling stop and made a mental note of its location: Exit 63 on I-81. But Mile 63 came and went and there was no Exit 63. So we kept our eyes open and picked a Petro Truck Stop at Exit 26. We got fuel and lunch at the Iron Skillet (a first - they make a pretty good grilled chicken sandwich) and got back on the road. Later, in Tennessee, we passed Exit 63. My memory had the right exit but the wrong state.

I had never traveled I-26 before and was surprised at how rugged the mountains were and at the steepness of the grades. For the first time since the Grand Canyon I kept my eyes on the engine temperature (it topped out at about 200 degrees - about 10 degrees below "hot"). I also had to watch the tach. Because I was in "towing mode" where the engine helped brake. On some of the downslopes the RPMs exceeded 3500, well above the 3000 RPM start of the "red zone." In short, I-26 was very hard on the truck. But the repaired engine performed well and we arrived without incident.

Our one-night stay in Natural Bridge was at the KOA there. Like most KOAs, it was an older park, in decent but not great shape, with fairly tight sites. This one also had some pretty dramatic hills and dips, which made getting into the site interesting. And, for the second time on the TTS, I had to use multiple wood blocks to level the rig.

Jett still wasn't feeling well, so we did takeout from a Wendy's in Lexington, VA, about 10 miles north. I didn't mind the extra driving as it gave me a chance to look around the area a bit. Lexington is a very pretty small town with some very narrow streets. The narrowness was an issue because I was there around 5pm on Halloween and there were oodles of youngsters trick-or-treating. I tried very hard to avoid running them over and mostly succeeded.

The extra 20 miles - after refueling - was the reason that I had to change the refueling stop. No big deal, but getting the state wrong added a bit of drama to the trip.



KOA office



Pool



Hilly terrain



Our site

The Biltmore Estate

4 Nov 2016

My bucket list is not very long, but [The Biltmore Estate](#) has been on it for a number of years. On Wednesday I checked it off my list.

I was expecting Biltmore to be similar to [The Breakers](#) in Newport, RI. And why wouldn't they be? The Breakers was built by Cornelius Vanderbilt II, grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt and Biltmore was the creation of George



Biltmore

Vanderbilt, another of Cornelius' grandsons. Both were completed in 1895. Both were designed by Richard Morris Hunt. But while the buildings are similar in scale and amenities, Biltmore has more of a French feel. And the grounds... well, there is just no comparison there. While The Breakers commands a spectacular view of Narragansett Bay, it is on just a few acres of land. The Biltmore Estate is nestled in the midst of over 8,000 acres of forest and gardens. It is immense, about 1/3 the size of Disney World. There may be larger private estates elsewhere in the world, but not many.



Overlooking the 8,000 acres

The first evidence of the size of the estate comes shortly after entering: you encounter a sign that says "Biltmore Estate 2 miles". A 2-mile long driveway! I would hate to shovel that in a snowstorm.

Because we were in our dually, we were directed to a lot that was relatively close to the mansion. But we still had to walk about a quarter mile to the entrance (we got a shuttle ride back). We got the self-guided audio tour and were glad we did. The audio tour contains much more information than the brochure. We spent nearly 2 hours inside, then had a (very expensive) snack in the courtyard. Jett did some gift shopping while I did a quick tour of the gardens and conservatory. All of this under a bright sun on a warm day.

This was a bucket list item that did not disappoint.



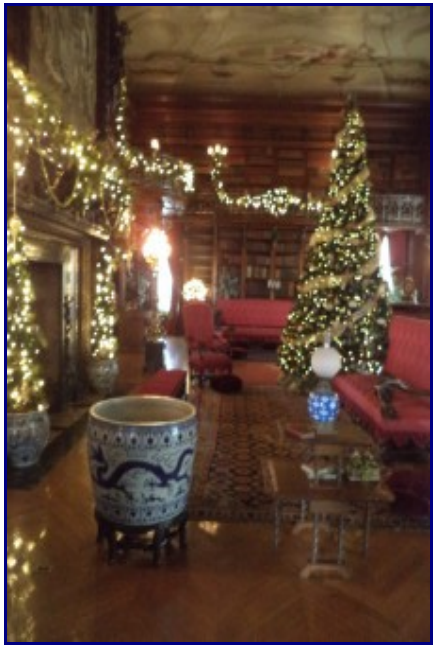
Dining hall



Breakfast room



Kitchen



Library



Gardens



Conservatory



Guest room



Orchids



Who knows?

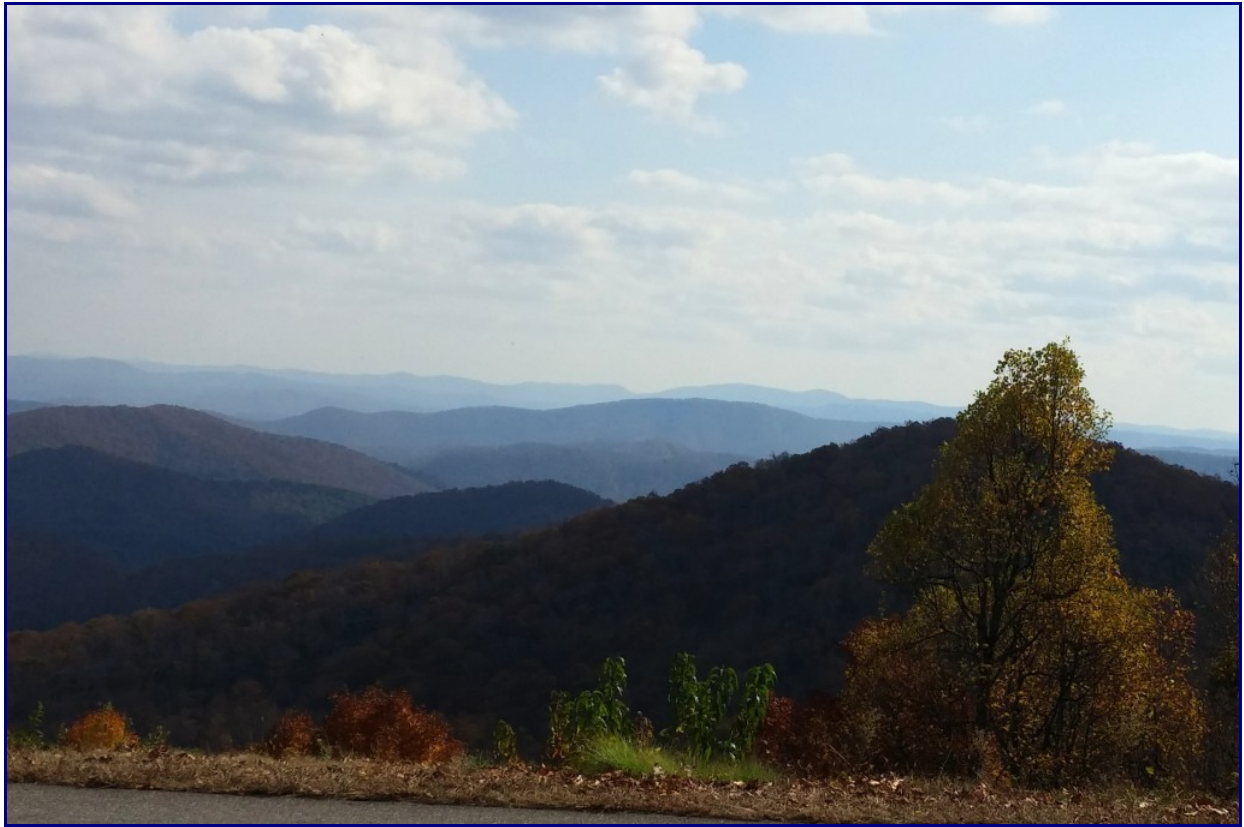
Blue Ridge Parkway – Pigsah section

5 Nov 2016

On our free day in Asheville, I was looking for some way to explore the area further and discovered that the very southernmost section of the [Blue Ridge Parkway](#) - the "Pigsah" section - ran very close to Asheville. And, in fact, very close to our campsite. That was all the encouragement I needed to take a road trip.

It was a clear day, but a bit hazy. Not a picture-perfect day, but not a bad day to capture the shades of blue and gray and the late fall colors. The drive itself was surprisingly challenging, rising from the 2,000-foot elevation of Asheville to over 4,000 feet in less than 10 miles. The parkway has many overlooks where travelers can stop to admire the view and take pictures and I used most of them.

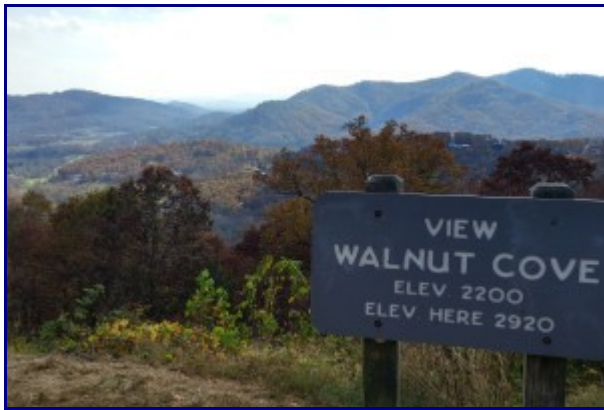
Some of my photos are shown below.



View from the parkway



Blue Ridge, with some fall colors



Walnut Cove overlook



Bad Fork Valley overlook



Stony Bald overlook



Big Ridge overlook

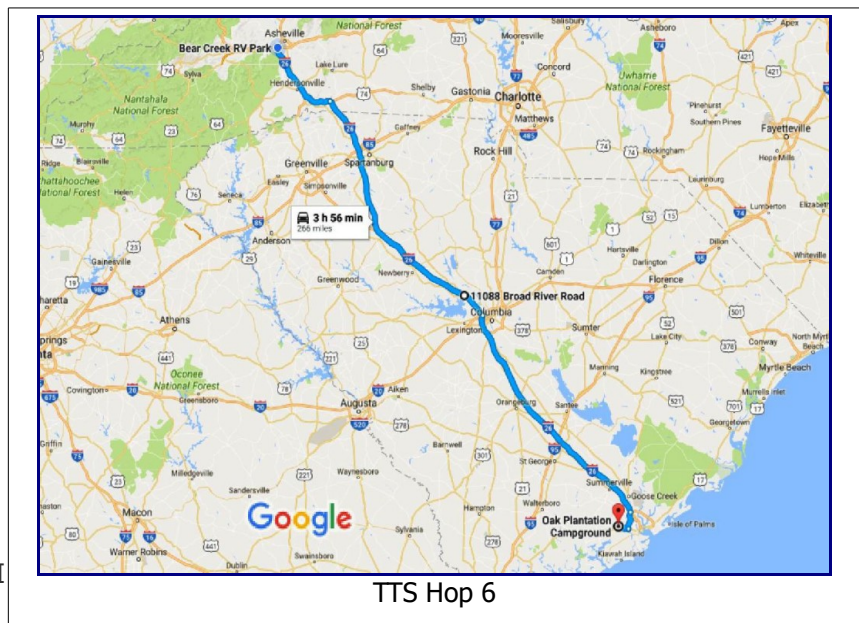
TTS Hop 6: Asheville NC to Charleston SC

6 Nov 2016

266 miles via I-26, I-526 (around Charleston) and US-17. Cumulative tow miles: 1,437.

This was a pretty straight shot down I-26 to Charleston, with a lunch/refueling stop at the midpoint. The NC portion of I-26 was hilly, but not as hilly as the approach to Asheville from the north. And once it crossed into SC it turned into gentle hills and then, as we hit the lowlands, into a very flat final 50 miles. Pretty straightforward, both literally and figuratively.

The lunch/refueling stop was made more interesting by the presence of a food truck selling fresh boiled peanuts. I had been curious about this southern



TTS Hop 6

delicacy(?) for a while, so I plunked down \$3 for a pint-sized bag. I ate about 20% of them and tossed the rest. They weren't totally disgusting, but they weren't appealing, either. Kind of like eating peas in a soggy chewy shell. Roasting them would have been a much better path for them. I would have eaten them all if they had been roasted.

Our home for 3 nights in Asheville was the [Bear Creek RV Park](#). The location of this park was very convenient. It basically has its own exit off of I-26; it was straight at the exit and up a short hill and the reverse to get back on I-26. I like that convenience. But I didn't much like that the park was very hilly, with small, narrow sites. I can't help but reflect on the comment of the person who checked me in: "Oh, that's a HUGE site!" Believe me, the site was anything but huge. We had to back in right to the fence in order to leave enough space in front to park the truck sideways. It was probably the most cramped site with have had in the past 2 years. To be generous, maybe she was thinking of the site across from us which was larger, though not, I think, "huge."



Cramped Bear Creek site

The site did offer a nice view out the back window - a nice panorama of the very pretty mountains that surround Asheville.

One quirk: we were given a remote control to access the channels of the park's cable system. This is unique in our experience. Apparently each site has a cable box the picks the channels. I don't know what the advantage, if any, of this arrangement might be. It certainly didn't improve the quality of the cable reception, which was pretty poor.

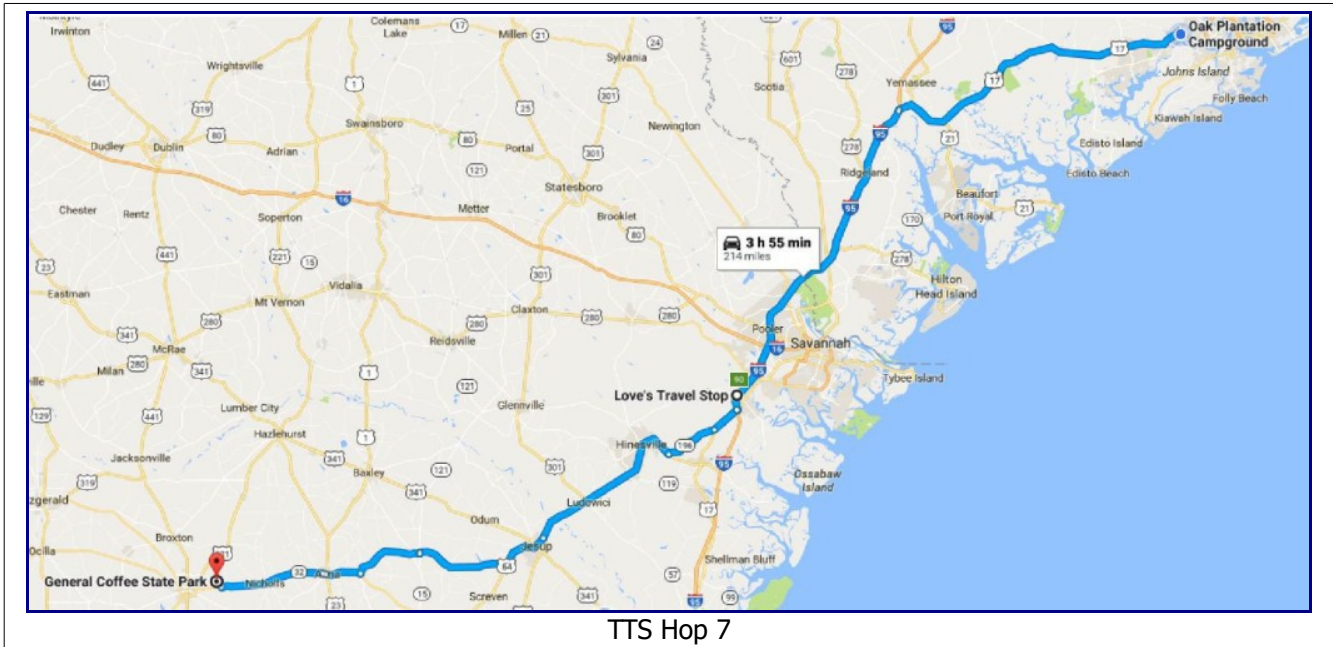
Overall, not a bad park but probably just a 4 on a 10 scale.



View out the back of the RV

TTS Hop 7: Charleston SC to Douglas GA

9 Nov 2016



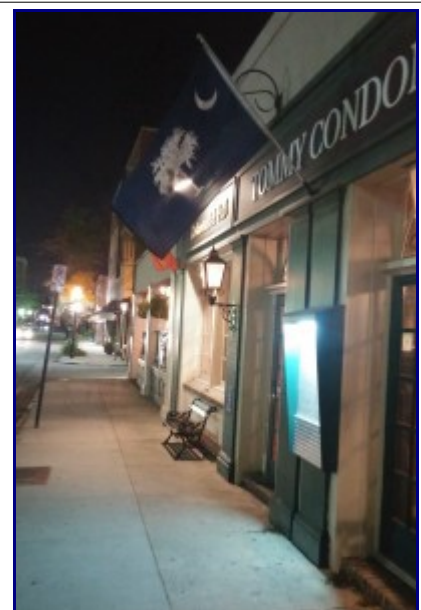
216 miles via US 17, I-85, GA 196, US 84, GA 203 and GA 32. Cumulative tow miles: 1,653.

This was a 4-hour trip with a midpoint lunch stop - no fuel, just lunch - mostly on roads that we had not taken before, except for I-95. I was expecting the roads to be narrow, but except for portions of the final stretch on GA 32, all were 4-lane roads in good repair. The traffic was fairly light and the weather was fine (partly cloudy, low 70s), so it was a pretty pleasant jaunt. Jett, who is still not feeling great, slept for an hour.



Shrimp steampot

Because she was not feeling well, the 4 days in Charleston were less adventurous than we had planned. We made it into town just twice - on Saturday to walk around a bit, do some gift shopping and dine at the [Charleston Crab House](#) - and on Monday to dine at [Tommy Condon's](#), the



Entrance to Tommy Condon's

Irish Pub that was one of the highlights of our first visit. We remember their fried green tomatoes - hand battered and served with a corn chutney. It was then - and is still now - the best friend green tomato dish that

we have encountered anywhere. We also had some fried green tomatoes at the Crab House but there is simply no comparison. If you want fried green tomatoes in Charleston, go to Tommy Condon's.

My entrée at the Crab House was a "shrimp steampot", a nice steamed concoction featuring peel-and-eat shrimp complemented with a few red potatoes and chorizo sausage. Very good. My entrée at Tommy Condon's was fish and chips, accompanied by a local ale. Excellent! Again, decision to Tommy Condon.

Our home in Charleston this time was the [Oak Plantation Campground](#), a very highly-rated RV park about 10 miles west of Charleston. It was our second choice. We had wanted to return to the Campground at James Island Park, but they had no availability on the weekend. As a second choice, Oak Plantation was pretty good. Our site was huge, there was a dog park nearby and the other amenities looked very nice. However, the water was harsh and made for very bitter coffee and the check-in process was strange and quite annoying. They had lost my reservation, which delayed the checkin for about 10 minutes, then I had to sign a pledge promising I would clean up after my pets. That is a first. Almost every park has that as one of their rules, no surprise, but a separate signed form on which I had to list the *names* of my pets? Not their breeds or their sizes, mind you, but their names. Were they going to file complaints against the individual dogs if they fouled the property? Makes no sense. Just bizarre.



Oak Plantation



Our site at Oak Plantation

TTS Hop 8: Douglas GA to Carrabelle FL

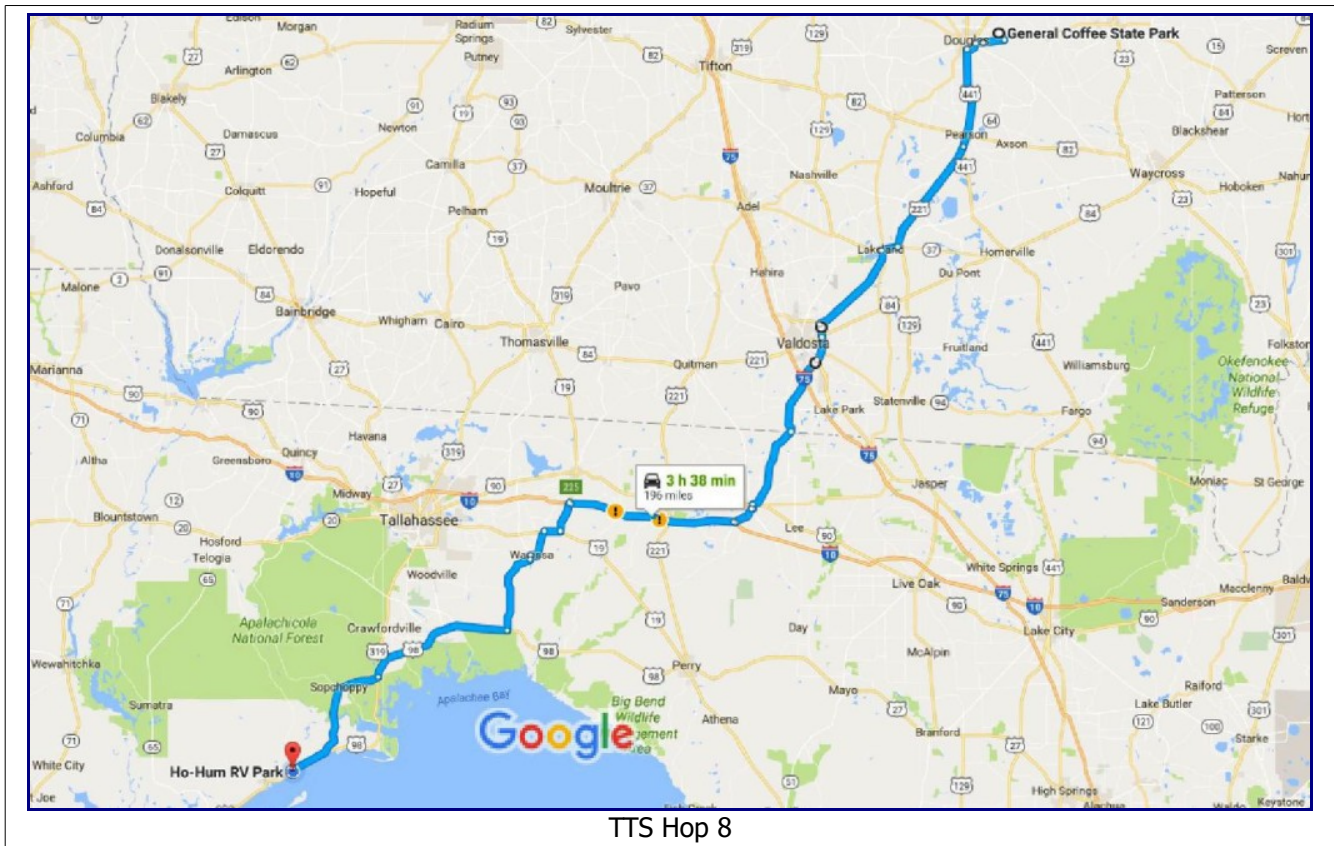
11 Nov 2016

196 miles via GA 32, US 221, US 41, GA 31, FL 145, FL 14, I-10, US 19, FL 59, US 98 and US 319. Cumulative tow miles: 1,849.

Does that route sound complicated? It was. This was arguably the most complex route we have had on any hop in any of our trips. The Google map initially offered 3 routes and I waffled back and forth over them for hours. The shortest route had too many turns. The middle route took me down a narrow street and through a roundabout. So I opted for the longest of the 3 routes.

Naturally, the GPS couldn't find it. So I traveled over 50 miles along the route, hoping that the GPS would eventually catch up. It didn't. I came to an intersection where - God forbid - I had to use my gut instinct and chose to continue further on US 221. So the route we took ultimately was "none of the above."

This made for a pretty stressful trip. I was comforted only by the knowledge that I was traveling in approximately the right direction (thanks, compass) and that there were no low bridges within 100 miles (thanks, Low Clearances). Despite being, in a sense, lost, the route ended up shorter than the route I had planned to take.

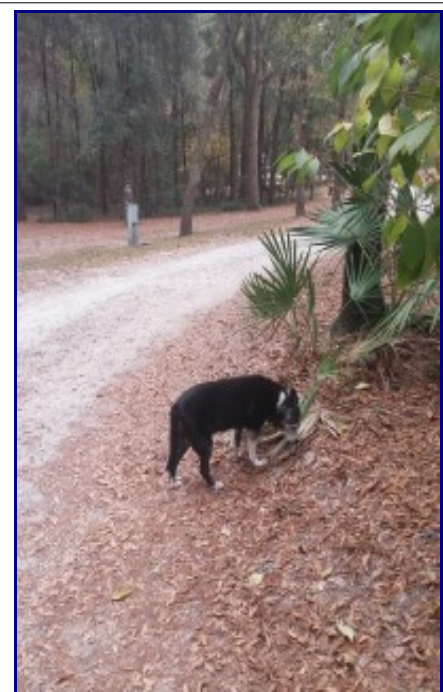


The final error was that we entered the wrong destination address, using "US 98 W" instead of "US 98 E". I was cruising along, thinking I still had 8 more miles to go, when our target - the [Ho Hum RV Park](#) - suddenly appeared on our left. Some quick braking and a sudden left turn and we were home. Whew!

Our overnight stay the night before the hop was the [General Coffee State Park](#), about 7 miles east of Douglas, GA. This was just an overnight, but it was special in that it was our very first state park campsite. We have avoided state parks because most either don't have RV camping or don't have RV camping for a big rig like ours. General Coffee not only had RV camping but had lots of spacious sites. Most of them were 30-amp electric sites but they did have a couple of 50-amp sites. None of the sites have sewer, but they do have a dump station and in any case the lack of a sewer connection for a single night is no real problem.

We got there just before sunset and didn't have a lot of opportunity to look around, but I liked what I saw. First, the park is huge - we had to drive 2 miles into the park to find our campsite. Second, it seems to have a lot of amenities. Beach (apparently with canoe rentals) and possibly horseback riding as we passed a stable with 3 horses. Very nice. I don't know what else is in the area - Douglas itself doesn't have anything that would attract me - but if you ever find yourself looking for a campsite near Douglas GA, consider General Coffee State Park.

We picked a site (yes, they let you pick your own site) that was heavily wooded and pretty secluded. Very, very quiet and very, very dark. One negative: there is absolutely no television reception. No cable, no over-



Morning walk

the-air. It was a quiet night with DVDs.

The dogs enjoyed the nature trail walk in the morning.



Campsite at General Coffee

Carrabelle FL

12 Nov 2016

I don't usually blog about small towns that I visit just once, but our trip into and through Carrabelle, FL (pop. 2,778) was interesting enough to warrant its own post.

First, we, quite by accident and more due to laziness than an actual plan, headed west into Carrabelle just in time to catch the sunset. The spectacular, breathtaking sunset. I simply admired it for a few miles, then realized that I should be taking a few photos. I caught the tail end of the sunset, so some of the colors had faded, but it was still stunningly beautiful.

Second, because it was late and we were hungry, we decided to dine out. Carrabelle doesn't offer a wide variety of dining options, particularly if you exclude Subway and pizza joints. But we passed the [Fathoms Steam Room and Raw Bar](#) on our way through town and Jett thought it looked sufficiently interesting to give it a try. We almost missed it on our return trip, because it had gotten quite dark, and when we stopped we almost moved on as there



Seared tuna sandwich

were some very sketchy guys hanging out, with a few Harleys outside. But our hunger got the better of us and we decided to take on chance on what we thought was a biker bar.

We are glad we did. Jett ordered the crab leg dinner which was, in her view, quite good, with a steamed vegetable medley (well, more a duo than a medley - broccoli and potatoes) that was arguably tastier than the crab. I opted for the seared tuna sandwich. I like seared tuna, but have never had it in sandwich form. It was spectacular. Perfectly seared and seasoned, in Texas toast. I think it was one of the best sandwiches ever. Outstanding!

Fathoms is rated only #4 of 11 among restaurants in Carrabelle (where are the other 10?), but I would give it 5 stars. If you are ever in Carrabelle (and why would you be?), give it a try.



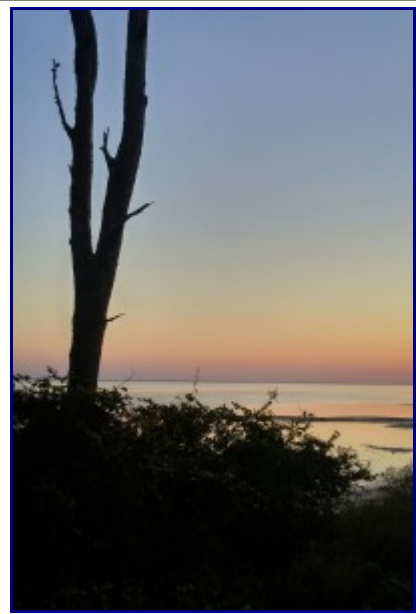
Interior of Fathoms



Crab leg dinner



Sunset in Carrabelle



Sunset in Carrabelle



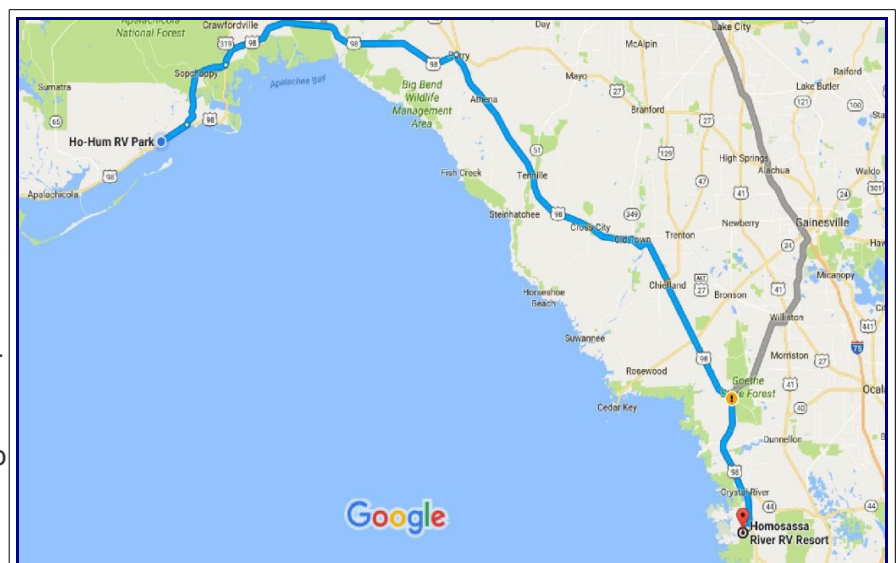
Sunset in Carrabelle

TTS Hop 9: Carrabelle FL to Homosassa FL

13 Nov 2016

200 miles via US 98 and US 319.
Cumulative tow miles: 2,049.

This hop was more difficult than it should have been. Yes, the navigation was a breeze: just turn right out of the RV park and keep going until we were within 3 miles of our destination. But it was complicated by the fact that there were no gas stations with diesel near Carrabelle (or at least none that showed up on GasBuddy), so I had to use the 4 gallons of reserve fuel to get us the 40 miles to a refueling stop (we did pass 2 other gas stations along the way that offered diesel, so don't always believe



TTS Hop 9

GasBuddy). When we got there a tanker truck, delivering gasoline, was blocking the diesel pump, so we had to wait about 20 minutes for it to finish and depart. Then Grace decided that today was the time for her to have a very smelly "accident" in the back seat. Another 20 minutes to clean that up and dispose of the carpet that covered the seat, just in case of incidents like this. Next, when we arrived at our destination we discovered that the cable hookup was not functioning. And no over-the-air reception either. So 2 nights off the TV grid.

But the route itself was wonderful. I **love** US 98! Four lanes, very flat, very smooth, almost no traffic. Just cruise along. If only all roads could be like 98...

Our home for the 3 nights in Carrabelle was the [Ho Hum RV Park](#), right on the water. A strange name for an RV park, but the staff embraces it; they greet you with "Good morning, I hope you have another Ho Hum day!" The upside of being right on the water is the spectacular Gulf of Mexico scenery. The downside is all of the sand that inevitably gets tracked into the RV. We put down our outdoor carpet, but that only reduced the mess.

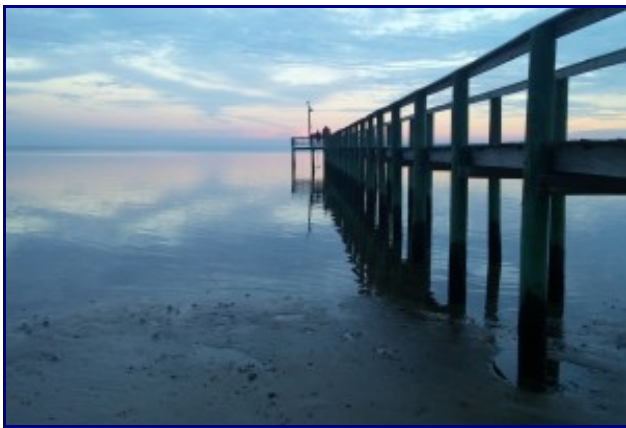
This is a small park - maybe 50 sites - with few amenities. But who needs amenities when you have the Gulf at your doorstep?



Back-in sites on the beach

When we arrived they couldn't find my reservation. Probably my fault (shhhh... don't tell Jett); I think I gave them the wrong dates. Fortunately they had a place for us. Jett was annoyed that I didn't spend the extra \$7 per night to get a back-in spot right on the water (which they may not have had, but I didn't ask as I was just so relieved that that had a spot). Usually she prefers the pull-through sites because they are more convenient, but in this case she would have preferred the back-in. Note to self: get a spot on the water if possible.

The dogs enjoyed the walks on the beach and I loved taking photos. I hope you enjoy them.



Fishing pier



Beach stumps



Dog walking on the beach



Ho-Hum RV Park



Gulf view

TTS Hop 10: Homosassa FL to Ft Myers Beach FL

16 Nov 2016

214 miles via US 98 (with a truck route detour around Brooksville), I-75 and county roads to the destination. Cumulative tow miles: 2,263.

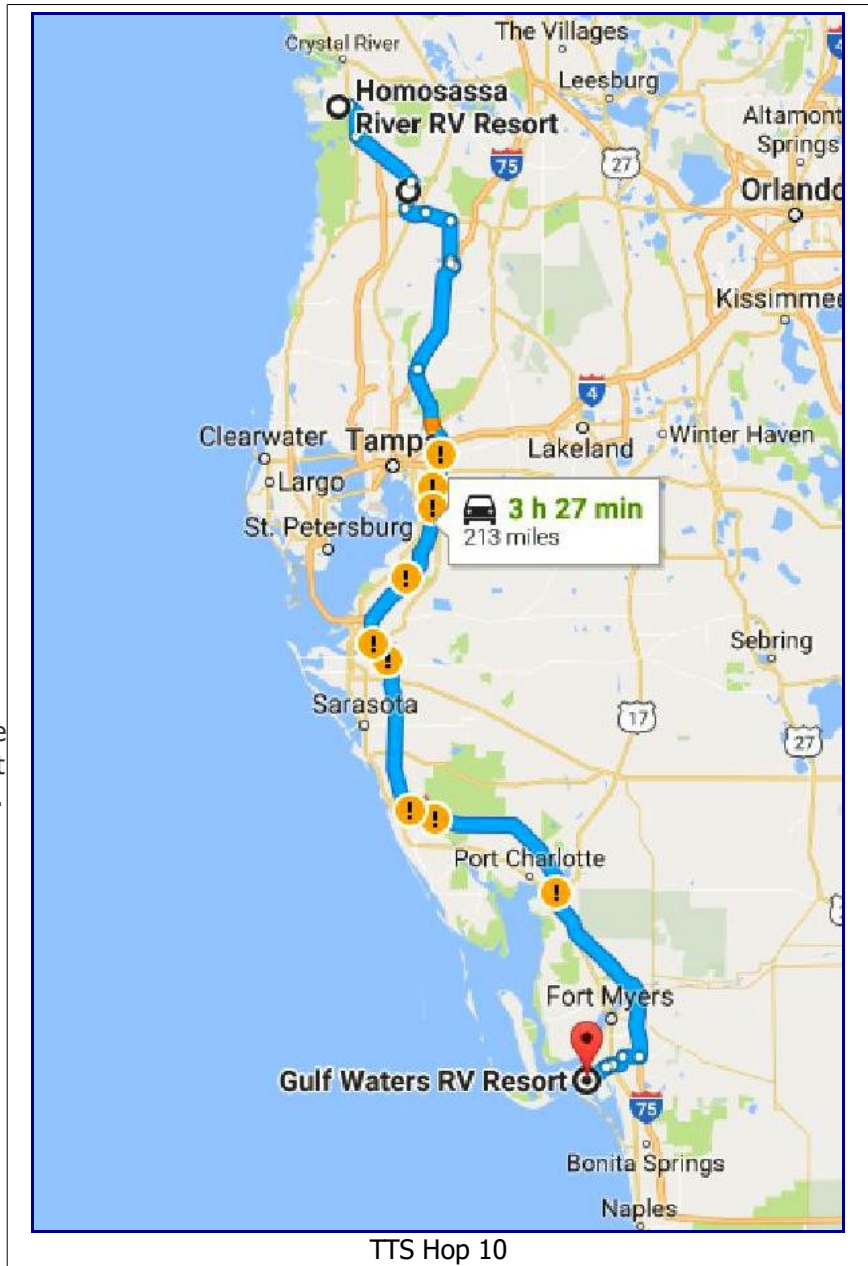
We have done this route several times before, so there were no surprises. US 98 is always a pleasure. I-75 is always busy. But they are both relatively smooth and flat, so it was a cruise control trip most of the way. We made a lunch stop at a rest area near Tampa and arrived at our destination before 3pm.

Thus ends the TTS. The TTS will be designated "the trip without dings". No accidents, no blowouts, no truck engine failures... nothing that required a deviation from the original plan. The only real deviations were in our hop destinations. This was a trip in which I, for the first time, did not book all of the destinations in advance. We started out booked only for the first 3 hops, to MD. In Maryland I booked the next 3, to Charleston. In Charleston I booked the final 3. I think this was a good strategy as it allowed for the possibility that circumstances or interests would change (they didn't). And it gave me time to consider some options for the final 3 hops. The original plan was to do a "space coast" (Cape Canaveral) route, but Jett was not interested in Cape Canaveral and I don't like I-95 and I-4. So we opted for a trip across Georgia, to the Florida panhandle, and then down US 98 and I-75. That gave

us an opportunity to spend a few days in the Florida panhandle and Homosassa, both of which held more appeal for Jett.

The final mileage: 3,070 which includes just over 1,000 non-tow (i.e., driving the truck around) miles. Half of those were in Massachusetts during our 6-day stay there. The rest were visiting points of interest and doing chores (eating, refueling, shopping). The truck, with its repaired engine, performed admirably.

The highlights of the trip? Biltmore, Ellie Schiller Wildlife State Park (more on this in the next post), the Blue



TTS Hop 10

Ridge Parkway, Cherry Hill Park, General Coffee State Park. The lowlights? Jett's health (she is still coughing) and the 2016 election. I try to not be political here, but the fact is that when I think of this trip I will think of the sleepless night in General Coffee when the scope of the election disaster became apparent.

Our home for the two nights was the [Homosassa River Sun RV Resort](#) in Homosassa, FL. This park's main advantage was proximity to Crystal River and our site's proximity to the laundromat. We had a large cache of dirty laundry that needed washing, so getting a site next door to the spanking-new laundromat was a boon. I also got to watch the first half of the Patriots/Seahawks game (they lost!) at the [Suncoast Bar and Grill](#) in Homosassa. I went there specifically to watch the game, but also decided to eat there, to stretch out my stay. I was expecting the place to be busy but in fact I was the only patron. So I got a chance to meet and chat with the owner and his barmaid wife. Nice folks. He also makes a very fine blackened chicken breast sandwich. It was better than fair - one of the better sandwiches I have had lately. It was a fun experience, tempered only by the fact that they shut down at 10pm, during halftime at the game. I didn't get to see the disappointing (for the Patriots) finish. Probably not a bad thing.

The RV park was a mixed bag. Yes, the site was large and, for our purposes, the location adjacent to the laundromat was perfect. But the office had misplaced my reservation, the office was hard to find (no signage - probably due to their recent name change - but "Office" would have been simple and effective), the roads were narrow and the cable didn't work. We had two quiet, TV-free nights to end the trip (ironically, the cable was out when we got to our destination, so the cable-free nights stretched to 3). Most annoying was the fact that they neglected to inform us that they would be repaving the driveway Monday morning, so we were delayed getting on the road. And no one told us what to do - wait or go to the emergency exit (one resident told us to do that but another resident immediately disagreed and said that the back exit was locked. We had to call the office to find out what to do (wait a few minutes for the paving equipment to clear the driveway). The whole experience left me feeling that they just didn't have their act together. Not recommended.

I seem to have either gotten no pictures of Homosassa River or have lost them. No great loss.

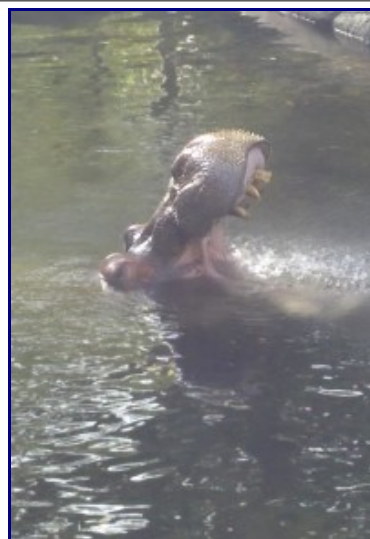
Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park

19 Nov 2016

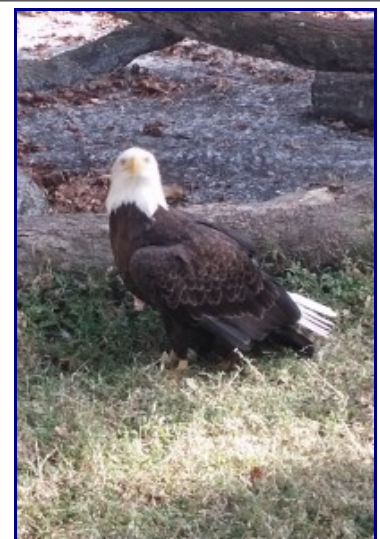
On Sunday, Oct 13, the day before our final TTS hop, Jett and I visited the [Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park](#) which was just a mile from our RV site. We almost didn't go as it was competing with a large annual seafood festival in Homosassa Springs, which also sounded interesting. But I had seen the crowds at the festival and it looked like it might be a hassle just getting there, so we opted for the more "gentle" outing to the state park.

We are glad we did.

This is a beautiful state park/zoo. It offers wonderfully landscaped walkways, interesting animals and opportunities for



Lu getting hosed down



Rescued bald eagle

photos at every turn. We were there just over 2 hours and I snapped over 50 photos. And the weather cooperated - low 70's, sunny, light breeze. A great day to enjoy the wildlife.

The park had a long history as a private tourist attraction and was home to a number of animals that appeared in Hollywood films. The only one remaining - and the only resident animal not native to Florida - is "Lu", a 60-year-old hippo that was made an "honorary resident of Florida" and is being allowed to live out her life in this beautiful park. Lu spends most of her time in the water and enjoys drinking fresh water from a hose.



Bird sanctuary



Free-range vultures



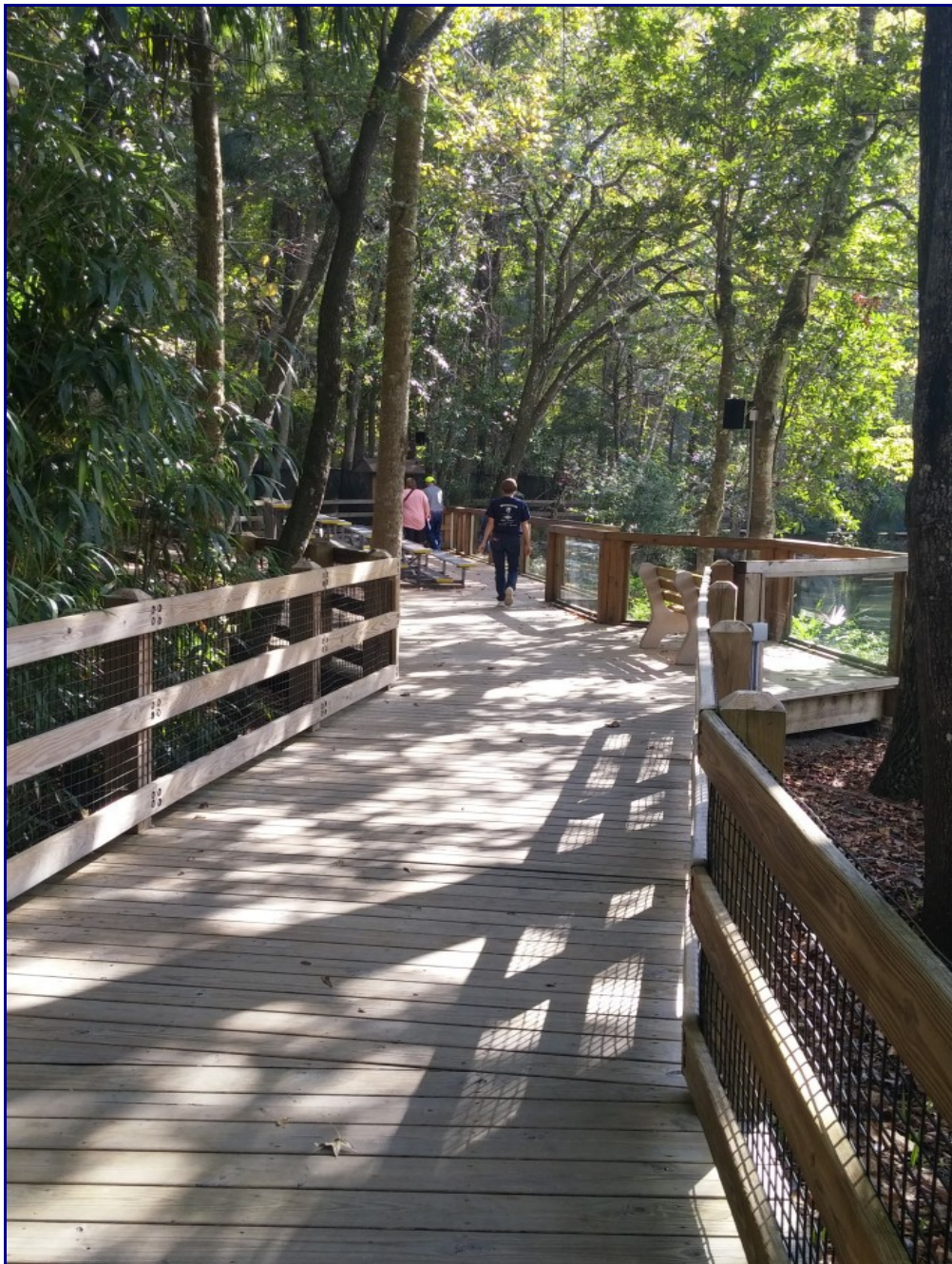
Feeding manatees

Most of the animals in the park are ones that were injured, rescued and treated, but were, due to their injuries, unable to survive in the wild. The bald eagle - minus a right wing - is one such animal.

The injured birds, because they can't fly, were in open enclosures. There were also many other birds - including

lots of vultures and herons - that were also free to come and go as they pleased, but they obviously chose the park as there were hundreds of them. Free food, I imagine. But it was a memorable up-close-and-personal encounter with some very large vultures.

The highlight, though, was the manatee feeding and the below-water-line observation deck. This was a wonderful opportunity to see manatees as they were feeding. There are 3 manatees - the "ladies" that are permanent residents of the park, but during the winter months the gates are opened and other manatees enter the park to bask in the 70-degree spring water. These are huge (2,000 pounds), lumbering beasts. A sight to see.



Pleasant walk on a beautiful day

"Gideon's Corpse" by Preston and Child

21 Nov 2016

Grand Central Publishing, 2012

This was my first Preston and Child book featuring Gideon Crew, a nuclear physicist on loan to the FBI. I may have read another Preston and Child book from their Pendergast series (Jett tells me I have), but if so I can't recall it. Preston and Child are one of Jett's favorite authors, so I borrowed this one after she finished it.

You can read the [synopsis](http://www.prestonchild.com/books/gideonscorpse/) (<http://www.prestonchild.com/books/gideonscorpse/>) yourself.

The plot reminded me a bit of the kind of plot you would find in the Jack Reacher series by Lee Child (no relation?): an over-the-top, the-nation-at-risk threat, thwarted by the actions of a single man. But the Reacher plots are, somehow, believable. I had a hard time believing this one - a man on the run from 22 federal agencies, involving tens of thousand of people, yet he is able to move freely around New Mexico, drive cross-country to Maryland and pass easily through security at both Los Alamos and Fort Derrick. Yeah. Either he was really lucky or our security agencies are totally incompetent.

I was also surprised at the Indiana Jones flavor of the action. Crew goes from one life-threatening predicament to the next with barely time to catch his breath. The surprise was the Jett enjoyed this as it just doesn't seem like a plot she would enjoy. She told me afterward that she prefers the Pendergast series, but that the Crew series was "ok". Well, in my view "ok" is a compliment.

4 on a 10 scale.

Thanksgiving buffet

25 Nov 2016



Thanksgiving buffet

Jett and I have twice done Thanksgiving via [Cracker Barrel](#). They offer a take-out Thanksgiving dinner for about 6 for just over \$70 - a pretty good deal. You get a hefty portion of turkey, a lesser portion of ham, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, vegetable and dinner rolls. A hearty feast.

This year we wanted to do something different. We debated going to Perkins or the local restaurant, Sunshine Cafe. But we opted to stay in the RV park and participate in the Thanksgiving buffet. The park provided turkey, ham, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy and coffee/tea. The residents brought hot dishes, salads and desserts.

Jett and I aren't huge fans of buffets and we weren't very optimistic that it would be any better than the church social buffets that dotted my childhood and adolescence. But I was pleasantly surprised. The turkey was just about the best I have ever had (sorry, Mom!) and the ham, while dry, was tasty. Even the resident-supplied dishes were quite good. So, for the cost of some salad fixin's we had a Thanksgiving dinner that was better than Cracker Barrel's.

The other benefit of a local buffet is the opportunity to introduce ourselves to the community. We sat at a table of 8, so we met 3 other couples. All were friendly and the conversation was interesting. Time will tell whether we made any lifelong friends, but it is not out of the question.

"Think Twice" by Lisa Scottoline

26 Nov 2016

St Martin's Press, 2010

This is one of a series featuring Bennie Rosato, head of an all-female law firm in Philadelphia. Most books in this series are mysteries, with a strong cast of characters and a lot of time spent on romantic and family relationships, sometimes at the expense of the mystery. But, overall, I find the books enjoyable because the characters are robust and the romantic and family dramas are interesting. This one, *Think Twice*, is a bit unusual in that there really isn't a mystery. It probably should be classified as suspense.

The plot, basically, is that Bennie's identical twin - an evil doppelganger named Alice Connelly - tries to kill Bennie, assume her identity for a few days and steal all her assets - over 3 million dollars. She, of course, almost gets away with it, but not quite.

I enjoyed the book, but I enjoy good mysteries more, so it being suspense rather than mystery did not elevate it in my esteem. I also didn't buy the way Bennie escaped being buried alive. In a situation which should have killed her in a matter of a few hours, Bennie seems to have survived for over a day, then she had to battle a coyote to get out of her grave. Meanwhile Alice was assuming her identity so well that no one at her office, or any of her clients, detected the substitution. Even more unbelievable was that Bennie's ex-boyfriend returns unexpectedly and resumes the interrupted romance, thinking that Alice is Bennie.

Finally one of the lawyers at the office begins to suspect something is amiss, but not because Alice was a dolt at law, but because a crazy woman from Italy who claimed superhuman powers identified Alice as an "evil woman."

Lisa Scottoline is a skilled author who knows how to relate a tale. But this tale was too much of a stretch for me.

5 out of 10

Data plan

29 Nov 2016

I have read some chronicles of full-time RVers from long ago - like way back in the 1980's - and life for them was indisputably more difficult than it is for us. The RVs were less robust, the leveling systems were primitive, diesel fuel less available. Almost all bills had to be paid by mail and banking, too, had to be done remotely unless you could find a local branch of your bank. But the biggest difference was telephone. Before cell phones, an RVer would have to stop at a truck stop to make a call. If you had a computer with an acoustic modem, you had to find a telephone that you could use long enough to do anything of value. And the internet, still in its infancy, was more of a curiosity than a real tool for getting anything done.

Today we can call anyone we want anytime we want from almost anywhere. Yes, there are still "dead zones" where there is no signal, but they are rare. I have more often been surprised by the high quality of the signal in places where I expected none than finding a poor signal when I expected a good one. Banking is done electronically using a cell phone app. Almost all bills are paid electronically via debit or credit. News, sports and information of all kinds is available via the internet. Social media make it a snap to keep up with friends.

But all of this modern electronic convenience upon which we now depend as full-time RVers requires a cell phone data plan. Bandwidth is money to the cell phone companies and they don't just give it away. Jett and I have a shared data plan with Verizon that, with equipment charges and taxes, runs about \$200 per month. We have to share 24GB of data. That means that we cannot stream anything of any size. Netflix? Forget it - a single movie is several gigabytes. We even have to be careful with social media. There are so many video clips of children, cute cats and dogs and people doing stupid stuff embedded in Facebook postings that, if we aren't careful, we can use a gigabyte in a day.

A year ago we were averaging about 12GB per month. We are now nearly double that. Are we using the internet more? Possibly, but I don't think our usage has changed dramatically. What I have seen develop over the past year is an insidious hidden usage of my data bandwidth by websites running in the background of my browser. For example, unless you specifically block it, Windows tries to back stuff up to the "cloud". That is real data, in big chunks at times. Facebook, if left running in the background, seems to continue to use data (for what I don't know - maybe those cute cats continue to roll around when I am not looking). There have been times when I have checked my usage in the morning and find that 4GB of data have passed through my router while I was sleeping! I have had to buy "extra data" several times to avoid ridiculous Verizon surcharges.

We tried to train ourselves to shut down our laptops at night. I even tried to routinely shut off the router before bedtime, though wasn't very successful at that - too tired to remember, I guess. But still the puzzling data drain continued. I finally got sufficiently frustrated that I called Verizon to get some insight into what was using the data. They couldn't really tell me that; they are, after all, just an internet provider. It would be like asking the city where my water was going; they can only tell me how much water flowed through my meter. But Verizon did offer me a plan with more data for less money. Why didn't they notify me sooner that such a plan was available? Because they aren't stupid, I guess. But it was a bit annoying that I had to complain before they 'fessed up that, yes, there was a better way.

Even with our kinder, gentler data plan we still need to be careful about what we leave running in our browser windows. I believe Facebook and other social media sites suck up data like a black hole. And even portal sites like msn.com consume data at a rate much higher than I would expect. Our current strategy is to close such sites when we are done with them - we try to NEVER leave them running in the background. This strategy has stabilized our data usage, though still at a higher rate than I can explain - about 600MB per day. But that is ok. Because that level of usage fits into our data plan and our data plan makes our RV lifestyle feasible.

"Deception Point" by Dan Brown

10 Dec 2016

[Pocket Books, 2001.](#)

Dan Brown is best known for *The Da Vinci Code* and its sequel, *Angels and Demons*, both of which were made into movies starring Tom Hanks. *Deception Point* was published between those two blockbusters, but the story is unrelated, has a different cast of characters and, as yet, has not been made into a Hollywood movie.

But it will.

The plot has plenty of action, suspense, dramatic settings and pyrotechnics. How could Hollywood resist?

The book has more than the average number of twists and turns that populate suspense/action novels. The story centers on the discovery of a meteorite, buried for thousands of years under polar ice. This meteorite turns out to be rather special in that it contains fossils which prove, beyond doubt, that not only does life exist elsewhere in the universe, but strongly suggests that life on earth was seeded by just such meteorites. Needless to say, this is huge news and just happens to occur in the middle of a contentious campaign for the U.S. Presidency. The current President, who is in trouble in the polls, latches upon this discovery to boost both his popularity and NASA's, the agency that discovered the meteorite. To certify the validity of the discovery, the President assembles a team of 5 civilians to review the data. One just happens to be the estranged daughter of his opponent, who holds a senior position as an analyst with the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), an agency with the mission statement "enabling U.S. global information superiority, during peace and through war." Part of her job is to interpret classified data and to brief the President and other White House staff. In this role, the President sends her to the arctic to get her take on whether the discovery is, indeed, real.

It is, she tells the White House.

But no sooner had she briefed the staff at the White House than doubt about the discovery starts to creep in. Before she can take back her certification, she is running for her life, pursued by Delta Force soldiers. Something is very, very wrong here.

Well, it won't spoil the plot to tell you it is all a huge fraud, but the fun is in who concocted the plot, how it managed to fool the best scientists on the planet and what the motive was.

The first 100 pages are a bit slow and it isn't clear where the story is headed for a while, but once the fraud starts to unravel the action picks up and never lets up. The final 450 pages are can't-put-it-down fun.

9 out of 10.

Christmas lights, 2016

16 Dec 2016

We are all decked out for Christmas. It took us maybe 2 hours to get the job done. A wreath on a palm tree, a stupid little green solar-powered snowman light (why a green snowman?), two spiral tree decorations and, inside the RV, a Charlie Brown tree. Compare that to the all-day effort - usually in below-freezing temperatures - needed to put up the lights and the lawn doodads (like the wire-frame reindeer) at our house in years past.

I like the minimalist decorations. And the minimalist effort to put them up. I will probably be able to take them down and store them away in under an hour.

I am not a big Christmas fan anyway, but I am more likely to be Bob Cratchit than Ebenezer Scrooge if it

doesn't take much effort to decorate for the holiday.

Please take note of the miniature RV beneath the tree, with a light inside. Jett is very proud of that detail.



Charlie Brown tree



Double spiral trees

Christmas morning, 2016

25 Dec 2016

Christmas 2016 is going to be very quiet for us - nobody to visit, nobody coming to visit. There will be some phone calls and some email greetings, but mostly it will be a day like any other. But it is Christmas in Florida and it is serene. The picture on the right is a photo I took this morning looking out the side window next to the sofa. I had my first cup of coffee while watching dawn break over the palm trees. Beautiful.

A few hours later, when the dogs decided it was time to rise and pee, I took them for a walk. And found a family, in the RV park for the weekend, opening gifts on the patio. I liked that. No pine tree, but why not have the gifts under a palm tree? I think it is more likely that Christ was born near palm trees than pine trees.

Anyway, I hope your Christmas is as serene as ours.



Christmas dawn



Opening gifts on the patio

"Shadows of Steel" by Dale Brown

27 Dec 2016

[Berkley Edition, May 1997](#)

If you are familiar with Dale Brown's books - particularly those that feature Patrick McLanahan as the protagonist - then you will already be aware that this book is chock full of whiz-bang military hardware, outlandish military threats to the United States and save-the-country heroics by McLanahan. In this case the bad guys are the Iranians and they aren't threatening the U.S. as a whole, just the U.S.'s aircraft carrier group in the Persian Gulf. The action kicks off with the Iranians detecting and destroying a U.S. spy ship and capturing 13 of the "civilian" crewmen - most of whom were, in fact, spies. Nevermind that the U.S. was doing something that is really shouldn't have been doing; we needed to kick some butt to get the Iranians back in line. But how?

The obvious answer: take an experimental B-2 strategic bomber, equip it with the latest in high-tech gizmos,

assign it to a super-secret intelligence agency and assemble a crew of mostly *civilian* crewmen, led by McLanahan, to act at the "tip of the spear." Yes, I know this all sounds highly implausible and it is. So if you aren't willing to suspend your disbelief and go along for the whole implausible ride, then just forget about this book.

It is wordy and Brown always gets way deep into details of military hardware that may or may not be accurate. So the appeal is mostly to military geeks and those who like military escapism.

I had a hard time letting go of my skepticism on this one.

4 out of 10.

Dizzy dog, 2016

31 Dec 2016

There must be something about December in Florida that Grace does not like. It was just over a year ago, in early December 2015, that Grace had her first [bout of vertigo](#). It wasn't funny as I thought she was dying. But she recovered. Mostly. She has had some stability problems ever since and generally is more feeble than she was before she got dizzy. It was a significant event in her life and it prompted Jett and me to have our first serious talk about when to put Grace down. The conclusion: it would be time when she seemed to no longer be enjoying life.

Well, she has been enjoying life. Yes, she is 15 and is feeble, but she still wags her tail. On good days she still romps like a puppy. But on Monday this week she suffered a second bout of vertigo. It was not as severe as the first - she didn't fall over when she shook her head - but this time she seemed to be incontinent and generally "out of it". She had no appetite - not even for a slice of bread, which she usually gobbles down. We were concerned that she had had a small stroke.

We had "the talk" again and decided, on the assumption that it was "just vertigo," that we would give her a couple of days to recover.

It is now Saturday and she has not fully recovered, but she is slowly improving. Last night she wagged her tail. So it appears that we will have her for a few more days. Or weeks. But not forever.



Dizzy dog with bread



Jett and Gilligan



Squinting Sparky

