

See the USA, in just over four days

Ben Wear, Getting There

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The point of hobbies is there really is no point.

Case in point: the road trip that Central Texans Curtis and Ray Morriss began Friday and hope to complete Tuesday evening.

If things go as planned — and Curtis said late Sunday afternoon that so far they have — the Morriss brothers will have driven a car through every one of these Lower 48 United States in 100 hours, setting what they hope will be a record. They will have put about 6,850 miles on Curtis' Acura TSX (about 245 gallons, at what they estimate will be 28 miles per gallon, something like \$750 for gasoline), stopping only for fueling and git-er-done-quick bathroom breaks, and grazing on a cache of food in the back seat.

They'll have passed through all of Woody Guthrie's America, from the Mississippi cotton fields to the George Washington Bridge in Manhattan, alongside Chicago's big highway shoulders, under Montana's sizable sky, past a great salt lake and finally a few feet into Arizona.

All to set a record. An unofficial record. Maybe. And perhaps for the second time in a year.

And to raise some money for a Leander school district volunteer program, though Curtis said the pledges have been minimal so far.

This trip is to transportation what scarfing a two-pound bag of M&M's is to eating. Empty travel calories made up mostly of interstate highways.

So, Curtis' wife, Kathy, back in Leander probably considers this behavior crazy, right?

"I don't know that she's actually used that word," he said. "There's been some other words like 'odd,' or 'strange,' or 'I don't get it.' "

The Morriss siblings are part of a fraternity of indeterminate size fascinated by the challenge of devising the most efficient way of driving through or barely grazing every state aside from Alaska and Hawaii (Washington, D.C., also gets skipped). There are even 10 rules for this, er, sport, according to the 48in96.com website, a production of one such group of explorers, Jay Lowe and Ted Jacobs. Lowe and Jacobs live in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Anyway, the website includes the rules first set out by the Guinness World Records people, plus what Lowe and Jacobs regard as the seminal rule: If you get a traffic ticket, the drive becomes invalid. The rules also stipulate that the start time and place be authenticated, and that there be two drivers and a nondriving navigator. Curtis says they have a GPS device that will digitally record the path of their trip.

Curtis, 47, a civil engineer with Baker-Aicklen & Associates Inc. in Round Rock, and Ray, 45, currently in between careers, will be ignoring that last rule. Which is OK, because Guinness is now ignoring these trips. Curtis says the Universe's Authority on mostness, fastness and bigness some years ago decided it was not so good to honor greatness in an activity that might involve inappropriate highway speeds. So, 48-state driving has devolved into a sort of Wild West affair.

Lowe and Jacobs, who in 1994 set the last official Guinness record of 118 hours and 15 minutes, on their website claim the current record of 104 hours and 57 minutes. They plan to go back out on the roads in June, the site says, and break the magic four-day barrier. Thus, 48-in-96.

Au contraire, Curtis would say, if engineers from Leander ever unholstered random French. Curtis says he and his brother did it in 101 hours and 29 minutes a year ago, their first attempt. The goal this time is 100 hours.

None of this occurs by happenstance. The route is carefully crafted to make the trip as short as possible (Lowe and Jacobs will no longer reveal their super-duper-secret map; the Morriss map is open to all), with 10 of what Curtis calls "U-turn states," places where they'll simply drive a few feet across a border to check that state off the list and then go back the other way.

They knocked the first three states off in the first minute. After leaving Austin on Friday morning, the Morrisses late that afternoon arrived at their starting point, the Downstream Casino Resort right on the Oklahoma-Missouri border. The parking lot is in Oklahoma, Morriss said, the driveway in Missouri and Kansas just three-tenths of a mile down the road. Boom, boom, boom, 45 to go.

Then it was across Arkansas and Dixie, up through the Mid-Atlantic and into the big Northeast cities on the weekend and, when possible, at night to ensure the least possible traffic. Trading off six-hour driving shifts while the other brother dozed, they were in Gary, Ind., late Sunday afternoon. By the time Statesman subscribers read this, the brothers should be barreling across South Dakota.

Tuesday evening, if all goes well and state troopers are held at bay (Curtis says his car does NOT have a radar detector), the Acura will arrive at the Four Corners area, knocking off Colorado, New Mexico and then Arizona in a frenzied few final minutes. Then it's off to a truck stop as quickly as possible. Remember, there will have been no time to shower. For more than four days.

No matter the final time, Curtis says his wife has assured him this is in fact the final time. No more such drives. Except that in July, he and Kathy and their children Sarah and Amanda will motor up to Moab, Utah, on a family vacation.

"I just like long drives," Curtis said.

Apparently so.

Getting There appears Mondays. For questions, tips or story ideas, contact Getting There at 445-3698 or bwear@statesman.com.

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