

# **Travels in a Tin Can**

By

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## **Prologue**

In September 2003 my wife (then fiancée) Emma emerged after an eight-year sentence. The crime? Choosing to be a Clinical Psychologist. The sentence? Studying for this career. Although Emma voluntarily took this path to becoming a doctor, it was not with a full understanding of the lengthy consequences of her decision. I think that if there had been a comprehension of how long she would have to spend working towards her goal she might have just torn up the UCAS form and embraced a promising career at Pizza Hut. However, the fresh faced 18 year old who enrolled at York University in 1995 did escape Royal Holloway University eight years later and still with a fairly fresh face.

In order to mark this return to freedom we decided to go away on holiday – for 13 weeks. Emma and I had discussed going travelling for a long time, and increasingly as her studies were coming to an end. In fact travelling was the light at the end of the tunnel that helped Emma keep going through her doctorate. She had certainly earned a rest and for my part I was ready for a break too. For one thing, it is surprisingly all consuming when a loved one undertakes such intense and lengthy training. Plus I could not let her go and have all the fun on her own.

For our destination we chose the USA. There were two reasons for this decision. One, we like the country and had a long list of places that we wanted to visit there. Two, we did not want to do proper (hard) travelling. In other words travelling with backpacks and one pair of pants, in countries where we did not understand the language or the culture. America struck us

as an easy place to cut our travellers' teeth. Although as it turned out we understood the language and culture only about 50% of the time.

13 weeks was to be our travelling time, not due to an obsession with this unlucky number, but for a far more practical reason. Travel to the USA without a visa is only possible for 90 days, so we went for 89. The longest holiday we had been on before had been a three-week camping trip to France to celebrate the end of our undergraduate degrees, so 13 weeks was a serious step up from this. But then becoming a doctor warranted a little bit more of a celebration – and a big bit more recuperation.

Of course 13 weeks also required a lot more than the customary four-week allowance of annual leave. Now if Emma and I had been teachers then this would not have been a problem (as teachers get about half the year off, don't they?) In fact finding 13 weeks of holiday was not a problem for Emma, former student and currently unemployed. For me there were two options available by which to secure a three-month holiday. Get a sabbatical from work, or hand in my notice. Amazingly I was granted my request for an unpaid sabbatical, and promptly handed in my notice a few days later. It's a complicated story, but basically I already had a new job lined up, due to start three and a half months later. Having made sure that we both had time off to go travelling, all we needed to do was organise the trip. 'All' being the operative word.

Before we left England in November 2003 we organised our accommodation for the first week, mapped out a route and secured our transport for the entire adventure. Almost everything else we would book as we went along. Although this sounds risky it was not really hazardous

because our transport was also our home, a Recreational Vehicle (RV) (a motor home). We named this our 'Tin Can', because we were convinced that we would spend 13 weeks squashed inside it like sardines.

As you read on you will discover, perhaps unsurprisingly, that this book is about our travels. I spent about an hour each night making notes about everything we had done that day, although for the purposes of this book I have changed the names of everyone we met. This is for protection of the individuals concerned...and to avoid being called to court for slander.

Throughout the story you will notice that I follow the American convention of assuming that people have very little general knowledge about where places are. So, for example, I will write Orlando, Florida, rather than just Orlando. You may find this at best trying and at worst irritating, for which I offer no apologies. We had to endure this practise for three months, so why shouldn't you?

David Thomas

York, England, The World

## **1. New York, New York.**

Our adventure began in an airport, as most adventures do in this modern age where crossing the Atlantic Ocean by boat is generally a pursuit enjoyed by people with time, money or a phobia of flying. Birmingham International Airport to be precise, at about 7.30am. In a generous attempt to help us pass the tedious hours before take-off, staff engaged us in the delightful activity of "the bag search". Security is, of course, increasingly important and we did not have anything to hide, so I really should not complain. However, Emma and I always seem to get searched when we are leaving the country. Five years earlier when we finished at university and were heading to France for three weeks in our car, passport control stopped us and they rifled through everything. Everything in this case included numerous plastic bags of cash that we had taped inside the car – through fear of being mugged and losing all our money. OK, so perhaps they do have "just cause" to always search us.

On the present occasion, as we stood on the verge of our adventure, the bag that staff decided to check was the only one that actually did contain some things that we did not pack ourselves. This was not drugs, guns, or even nail scissors; no Emma's parents were sending us off with some Christmas presents to enable us to participate more fully in the festive season while on the other side of the world. At least the security officer did not unwrap the gifts, however neither would she let Emma's mother whisper what the contents were (why ever not we could not imagine!) Instead she insisted that they be put through the X-ray machine. Fortunately the officer restrained from

revealing their contents to us by saying things like: 'Oh look, a hand-knitted jumper, how lovely!'

Once we had repacked the bag we had to endure about two hours until our flight departed - plenty of time to browse in the two branches of WHSmith and get fleeced for breakfast. We also devised airport games to help the time pass more quickly. Our favourite of these was to go to the arrivals area and then take it in turns to 'arrive'. To do this you need to go behind the barrier with your trolley and join the crowd filtering through from baggage claim. Then look around with a vacant gaze as you approach the people waiting for family and friends to arrive. Eventually you should spot your travel companion who will be waiting with a large sign with your name on. If you are travelling alone then we suggest that you walk up to a complete stranger and ask them if they are waiting for you. Or, if you are feeling particularly friendly run up to someone who is really arriving after a long flight and hug him or her like they are your best friends. You may find that you will not be travelling alone for long. Or, you may find that you get arrested and miss your real flight. Try it sometime.

The flight itself was fairly excruciating, consisting of eight hours of children crying, and therefore a lack of the much-desired sleep that helps flights pass more quickly. Well, I thought, at least there is television to watch. This, as it turned out, was a misplaced hope. Television there was, but of a type to endure rather than watch.

The film was "Monday Night Mayhem" (some "made for television" movie about American Football) and this was followed by an episode of "The

Beverly Hillbillies". Perhaps the airline was preparing us for American television? In which case I was extremely glad that our campervan included only a refrigerator and a microwave in the way of electrical appliances.

The flight was made more bearable by a question I heard a hostess ask a passenger: "Would you like the window open?" I sat chuckling to myself for hours following this question, until the same hostess asked me to 'kindly keep the noise down or else step outside until I could regain my composure.' Perhaps she does not quite grasp the concept of pressurised cabins?

We flew into New York because we had decided to spend a week there in order to familiarise ourselves with the US way of life, the different time zone, and of course to sample the sights, before our real travels would begin in the campervan.

Our first hour on US soil could have been better. First, five minutes with passport control answering questions about how long we were staying in the country. Following this, the woman dealing with us informed me that because my name is common I would have to be taken away for further questioning. Emma was told to wait for me, probably thinking, "wow, he's hidden his past well, I've known him 8 years". And I was escorted away by a large man with an even larger gun.

I was taken to a small room resembling a waiting room in a doctor's surgery - except without the pile of 20 year old magazines. It even had a receptionist's counter – although this was about five foot high. There were about eight people in the room, sitting waiting their turn and looking nervous, and the



security staff that were conducting these additional interviews were armed with large pistols. This was not the America I remembered - but then I had only visited DisneyWorld before.

As I sat, feeling nervous but trying to avoid looking like I was trying to hide something, I attempted to work out why the other people were being questioned. First there was a man who was a career gambler, chatting to the security personnel about Las Vegas and blatantly trying to smuggle his winnings out. Next, a very burly guard took a woman who looked very uneasy away to another room - obviously a Madame running a cartel of brothels around the world. Several of the other people also looked like criminals – at least to my untrained eye. And then there was me. Yes, David Thomas is a very common name, but I believe the real reason I was taken away was because I had not shaved for a week and therefore I too looked like a criminal.

When my name was called I approached the extra-height counter - more like a judge's bench - and with some trepidation I faced my interviewer. Again I was nervous about appearing nervous, and that does not help. However, within ten minutes I was back with Emma. Basically they just wanted to check that we had funds to support our 13-week stay in the country. And so I nearly blew things by saying 'Oh, we have \$500 with us'. The terse response to this from my scary interviewer was: 'That is hardly enough for 13 weeks.'

To which I hastily added: 'Of course, we also have four credit cards. Please do not shoot me.'

At this my interviewer's demeanour changed entirely: 'fine, we don't care about your debt problems. Have a nice day!'

Fortunately they did not interview Emma... our secret is safe.

Finally, having claimed our bags, we were stopped one last time to be interrogated, this time by means of a somewhat bizarre quiz about the tourist sights we were planning to visit. We must have passed, because we were allowed to leave the airport. Perhaps they just wanted to make sure we were really tourists?

Our next challenge was to get a taxi to our hotel. After careful research on the Internet we had estimated that this 45-minute journey from Newark to Midtown Manhattan would cost us \$50. When we reached the queue for taxis the man in charge told us it would be \$60, plus tolls. The eventual charge? \$84, slightly worrying given our tight budget for the next three months. Our first taste of the Big Apple? Sour. The American Dream? A nightmare.

Things did get better once we were inside our hotel, the oddly named "Jazz on the Town by Habitat" (not, I think, the UK furniture store). First, we were upgraded! From a trundle bed (?) to a three-quarter regular non-trundle bed! Second, we found out that breakfast was complimentary. OK, so it was bagels (huge boxes of them that were never replenished with fresh stock during the week we were staying there) and instant coffee with creamer, but on a budget everything helps.

By the time we had unpacked it was about 6pm - which felt like 11pm to us due to the time difference from the UK - and all we wanted to do was crash out. However, we knew that in order to get over our jet lag we had to try to go to sleep at a time at least approaching sensible for the time zone we were in, so we endeavoured to stay up for four more hours - of which we managed three. We also knew that we should try and eat, although a combination of changing time zone and being fed "multi-meals" (??) on our flight meant that our appetites were somewhat dulled. We asked the hotel staff for a recommendation and they pointed us across the street to a Pizzeria, the exotically named Belmora.

When we reached the restaurant we were rather dubious about going in as it had a distinctly "greasy-spoon" feel, however, it was full of people and popularity tends to be a good sign when it comes to eateries, as people do not tend to be "just browsing". By the time we went in and approached the counter our appetites had been sharpened by the aromas coming from the kitchen. In fact, we were ravenous and planned to share a whole pizza - although the prices seemed high for the type of restaurant. In fact seeing the menu outside had given us another headache about our budgeting. On top of the larger than expected taxi bill we now imagined that one-week would bankrupt us, let alone 13 weeks. Fortunately we saw the size of the pizza before we ordered and settled on three slices between us - and we only just managed to finish these!

Five minutes later we were settled at our plastic table beneath baskets of imitation flowers, happily munching excellent pizza topped with whole

broccoli florets and served on paper plates. To complete the picture? The pizza was served wrapped in tin foil, such finesse! Around us we observed a real cross-section of New Yorkers - from youths to suits. It really felt like we were living like natives, especially when someone ordered some "quaffee".

Like classic tourists we decided to "do" New York in six days. Now, you cannot "do" any decent sized city in six days, but we gave it a go - walking about 40 miles and visiting 15 tourist attractions in that time. Emma's feet are still undergoing rehabilitation following this gruelling schedule.

Starting with the Empire State Building we visited: the Intrepid - Sea, Air Space Museum, the Guggenheim, the Natural History Museum and Ellis and Liberty Islands. We walked through Central Park and Times Square and in or by various famous buildings including Grand Central Terminal and the Rockefeller Centre. We also saw these famous sites by air in a helicopter and by river via ferry. What connected these "attractions" was not just the souvenir shops - which sold the same stuff as each other as we expected - but the shadow of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Increased security when we were entering museums or boarding ferries was not even the most striking aspect of 9/11 aftermath. What was remarkable was the number of references to that tragic day - from displays and memorials in the museums to snatches of conversation almost everywhere we went. The most touching of these occurred on our third full day in the city.

We spent the evening on a boat cruise to see the Manhattan skyline by day and night. Being November it was not very warm, and once we were out

on the river the temperature plummeted further. Luckily the boat had a large cabin from which we could admire the views whilst retaining the feeling in our fingers and toes. Not that Emma and I took advantage of the cabin. We were there for an open-air cruise, and a little thing like frostbite was not going to stop us from enjoying the full experience. Besides, being outside gave us the pick of the seats...in fact as we were almost the only people outside we had about a hundred seats each. Our only companion in this frigid environment was a young German girl with whom we quickly struck up conversation – mainly so we could huddle together for warmth. Actually the cruise, the sites and the narration, was so interesting that we hardly noticed the cold...once our bodies went numb.

As we docked the narrator made a moving speech of gratitude to all of us for coming to America and New York and helping to revive the tourism industry. He told us that the day before September 11<sup>th</sup> hotel occupancy was about 96% but that it fell to 9% the next day and was only now getting back to about 70% more than two years later.

We had already planned to seek out the World Trade Centre site and our visit to Ground Zero was made more poignant by this initial exposure to the impact of the tragic event. Even though we had seen the gap left in the skyline when we were flying over the city, we were not fully prepared for the size of the destruction zone. You can view Ground Zero via a huge chain link fence that runs around the entire 16-acre site. These fences carry a repeating series of brief information panels that list those who lost their lives and tell the story of this part of New York. When we visited, on a weekday in late November, there was a constant crowd of people along the length of the

fences. Sadly, but not surprisingly, there were also a number of "entrepreneurs" cashing in on the disaster by selling photographs telling the story of the twin towers. Fortunately most were keeping a respectable distance from the fence, signs prohibit the selling of goods near the site but obviously this is virtually impossible to enforce without a huge input of manpower. The scene called to mind the vast and continuing trade in images of Diana, Princess of Wales that began in 1997 when she died.

After viewing the site through the fence, we went into another part of the World Trade Centre, the Winter Garden, where you can view Ground Zero through glass and from a slightly higher elevation than the fence - an even more moving vista as it is less obstructed.

The subtlest impact of 9/11 seems to have been on staff in shops and tourist attractions. We were consistently met with brusqueness and poor service, ranging from chatting to colleagues while - or instead of - serving us, to not bothering to give full information about services available. I had a feeling that most of this rudeness and inefficiency has arisen due to people being under increasing pressure and stress since the terrorist attacks over two years ago. Perhaps the greater need for security checks has made simple courtesy an unnecessary duty for some staff? A classic case of this mixture of paranoia, increased security and brusqueness occurred when we visited the beautifully constructed Guggenheim Museum. Emma was studying a painting by Van Gogh, standing about a metre away, when a burly security guard grunted: 'You want to step away from the painting, ma'am!' And yes, he had a gun.

In stark contrast to the rudeness that we encountered from service providers, the 'average Joe' on the streets of New York was very helpful and polite. For example, whenever we got our map out on the subway or on the street two or three people would immediately offer help with directions. On one occasion in Central Park a young man approached us and started telling us what there was to see in the park. He had been attracted to us by our British accents and used the excuse of providing information as a means of trying out his 'English' on us, using such common place British phrases as 'Jolly good.' It really is hard to keep laughing after the 50<sup>th</sup> time....

Interactions such as this with 'real' people were at least as interesting and memorable as visiting such famous landmarks as the Statue of Liberty. We made a concerted effort to visit places that were off the tourist path. On our first day in the Big Apple we spent the morning in the Empire State Building, (the one foggy morning in a week of blue skies – good choice!) but the afternoon walking around Greenwich Village. This walk included one of our highlights of the week, watching canines and humans socialising together at the local Dog Park. It was very entertaining observing the smallest dog trying to 'make friends' with all the other, bigger dogs - or in fact with anything that moved. We would have been happy to stay there all afternoon but wanted to follow a walking tour through the Village before it got dark. The walk was lovely and included our first proper look at the Hudson river and the Statue of Liberty, unfortunately the walk also took longer than we were expecting and night did catch up with us while we were still deep in the Meat Packing District

(!) and our immersion in the 'real' New York nearly became too real as a man started following us. We began walking faster and faster, heading towards the nearest subway station and only felt totally safe when we were back under street lamps and among stores such as 'Stella McCartney's'. Surely no one would mug people near such an establishment?

Not completely deterred from 'going native' we spent several evenings in genuine 'locals' establishments. These included a bar in Soho that could have been the set of Cheers, were it not in the wrong city. Regular patrons had their own seats at the bar - I wonder whose livers we saved that evening by sitting at the bar ourselves? - and the barman wandered round showing his holiday photographs to various customers. We also visited a diner described as a 'cop and taxi driver' place where the service was not exactly 'silver'. This included smearing the jello topping from our cheesecake onto the inside of the glass fronted refrigerated counter, and leaving it there to drip off. However, the food was good and inexpensive. The only disappointment was that we did not see any cops, unless they were undercover. There were taxi drivers eating there and this was handy when we decided that we were too scared to walk back to our hotel.

Along with the 'real' America we also got a few snapshots of the 'unreal'. At the end of our first full day in the city we decided to go to the cinema and beat our jet lag by staying up late by US time - very late by British time, which was the zone we were still stuck in. We bought tickets to see *Love Actually* in Times Square and then went for an excellent meal nearby at Joe Allen's. On



our way back to the cinema we were about to cross a busy road when we were stopped in our tracks, not by a red 'Do Not Walk' sign, but by a woman walking her pet. Now, this might not sound like a reason to pause, except that her pet was a lamb wearing a nappy. We rushed on because we were nearly late for the movie, but before we could ask each other if we had imagined the domesticated grazer a New Yorker remarked to us in a deadpan voice: 'that was a lamb... in a diaper.'

By the end of the week we realised that this sight was not so unreal for New York, after we saw a rabbit being walked on a lead down the busy streets. As for the movie that we were rushing to see, well *Love Actually* helped to ease our jetlag and homesickness. It also provided us with an interesting view of American perceptions about the British and our country. The US audience laughed not at the carefully scripted gags, but at more obscure moments - such as when red buses or phone boxes were on the screen.

Our adventures in New York concluded in a similar vein to how they had begun, in an airport being stopped by security. Fortunately this time the tone was more light-hearted and the person singled out was Emma - or rather her boots. Having set off the metal detector, Emma was asked to remove her boots. Easier said than done because these were her walking boots - which take up too much room in the suitcase - and unfortunately they were new and not easy to remove. The male member of staff offered advice on how to get them off easily, remarking with great authority:

'I'm a Texan, we know about removing boots'. And then laughing as Emma nearly fell over whilst trying to follow his guidance.

Once eventually removed and x-rayed to confirm their absence of trick knives or explosives, the boots were returned for the equally challenging process of putting them back on. During these struggles the female security officer helpfully pointed out, 'Look, that old man has got his back on quicker than you.'

Still, humiliating is much better than scary as airport experiences go.

Once shod we were able to board our flight for San Francisco and the start of our true 'Travels in a Tin Can'.

## **2. Harvey the RV**

On the day that we flew from the East Coast of the USA to the West Coast, we spent the night in a hotel close to San Francisco airport. Mostly this was because we flew in too late in the day to pick up our 'Tin Can' from the rental company. However it also gave us a chance to recover from our second bout of jet lag in the space of a week, something that both the vehicle's owners and we were pleased about prior to us hitting the road.

We had already organised the details of the rental whilst still in the UK - including pick up and drop off times and locations; insurance; and the mileage we intended to cover. We had even viewed photographs and floor plans of the different Recreational Vehicles (RV) available and chosen the smallest one, which still seemed fairly big at 19 foot. Most of these plans had been made in cyberspace via one of the company's agents. However, where some of the details were not available on the company's website, or we needed information more quickly, we resorted to telephoning the USA. This was a very novel and exciting experience for us and the calls were always started with the phrase: 'I am calling from England, so I cannot stay on long'.

What made these calls really special was trying to avoid laughing while listening to the agent, who we nicknamed Arnie because he sounded like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Since we were calling California, we began to wonder if this was a little moonlighting by the new Governor to help the state economy. Every time that he had to break off the conversation to search out some information he would even remark 'I'll be back.'

Sadly we did not get to meet Arnie and instead completed the details and picked up the van with another agent – Fred 'Zak' Isaacson. We were collected from our hotel around midday by a young man who we took to be a junior employee. We had to take a fairly circuitous route to the Company's area office because another customer was being picked up too. During this time we got to see quite a lot of San Francisco from a distance. We saw the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz Island, but what was most striking was how the city contrasted with New York. The architecture seemed quite different, as most of the buildings were small and white compared to the towering grey skyscrapers in the Big Apple. There was a distinctly Spanish feel, certainly to the buildings on the outskirts of the city, and there was also more space between the buildings. Most of these differences are presumably due to the city's precarious position on the San Andreas Fault.

Whilst travelling to the office we also discovered that our driver was in fact Zak, and was in charge of the San Francisco office and only picking up customers because of a lack of available staff. We gathered this when he repeatedly referred to 'my vans' and 'my staff'. In fact he seemed very possessive of the vehicles, speaking in a tone of voice where 'my babies' could easily have been substituted for 'my vans'. We began to wonder whether he would actually let us take the van away.

Once we arrived at the office we spent the next hour or so filling out contracts and being shown the vans. Zak dealt with us and his other customer at the same time because we were both hiring the same type of van. This meant that he took very little interest in the personal details of our itineraries. This

was not really to our best advantage, though it certainly was to his, because while we were "RV virgins" the other customer had hired one before and it was at this level of experience that Zak aimed his instructions about the van. The result was that following the tour we had to ask several questions. This was not really a big deal, except that Zak did not make much effort to answer them, and, we soon realised, this was not only as a result of a lack of interest but also a lack of knowledge about camping in an RV. Fortunately we had a fairly detailed manual (complete with illustrations and a helpful German translation) in the van, and we also picked up tips as we travelled.

The RV that we rented was a converted Dodge Van, referred to as a Eurocruiser. When we first saw it we both had the same thoughts - that it was smaller than we expected and, when we looked inside, where would we fit all our stuff?! However, the inside had been very well designed with enough cupboard space for us to fit everything away without it all being crammed in together. The word TARDIS sprang to mind, but without the dodgy plastic interiors and wooden acting. The interior also grew during our travels, or so it seemed. Apparently this is quite a common phenomenon experienced by people who spend prolonged amounts of time in cramped quarters - for example in cabins aboard ships. In fact when we reluctantly reached the end of our adventures and started packing our bags we were stunned by how much stuff we had, and ended up having to leave a lot of it behind.

The main problem that we encountered in the van during the daytime was a lack of surface space, such as to prepare meals on. Essentially, all we had was the top of a cupboard, which was always covered in books and

paperwork, and the space next to the sink, which was largely taken up by two hobs, making a rather uneven surface on which we balanced plates. This lack of space was not entirely due to poor interior designing - in fact the only thing that could have been done differently would have been to provide covers for the sink and hobs. The main area of work surface was a table, but unfortunately this and the surrounding seating area converted into the bed, and in order to make our lives easier we only converted it once - therefore depriving ourselves of a table for the rest of our travels.

This was actually only partly due to laziness. It was also because we were happy to perch on the bed to eat our meals, but mainly it was because it was so hard to make the bed. Imagine trying to pull a sheet tight over a mattress that is in four parts, has walls on three and a half sides of it and is shoehorned into a space too small for it. The base of the bed was formed from the tabletop suspended between the two bench seats and the mattress was the four bench cushions - just like in a caravan. The bed was comfortable enough, as long as you were only about 5 foot tall! Certainly it was the most problematic part of the van. We only converted it back into a table on the day we dropped it off.

The external dimensions of the van were 19 foot long and 10 foot high - and width, well, not wide enough to lie down! We had to know these dimensions precisely because our insurance policy meant that we were liable for any accidents caused by us reversing - for example into a signpost outside of San Diego - or striking anything above us - such as a low hanging branch in a car park on the Big Sur coast. Fortunately neither of these ever happened... at least not to the extent that they left a mark! After our initial concern that the

van would not be big enough we quickly realised how advantageous it was to have chosen the smallest model. It was easier to drive into towns than a bigger rig would have been, in fact we could park it (sort of) in normal car park spaces.

In terms of facilities "Harvey the RV", as the van quickly became known, was well equipped. We had a microwave, two propane hobs (which we never used), a refrigerator, heater, air conditioner, chemical toilet and outside shower. Pretty much all the comforts of a regular home, although these last two pieces of kit probably need, and deserve, more of an explanation. First, the outside shower. We knew that this was included in our van when we chose it over the Internet, but we did not know quite how it would look in reality. Zak ended the suspense when he opened a small flap on the side of the van.... And revealed two ordinary taps and a shower head on a hose. We were going to be travelling across America during the winter and therefore had a strong suspicion that we would not be using the shower. However, when we reached the end of the trip we were in the Florida Keys and it was both sunny and hot, perfect conditions for a fresh air shower. So did we use the shower? Well, maybe we would have done if it had come with a shower curtain. Fortunately it did not!

The chemical toilet on the other hand proved extremely useful, and entertaining. The utility is, I hope, obvious. The entertainment came from the fact that the toilet - a small plastic affair like a glorified potty - was stored in a wardrobe-sized cupboard. Mercifully, this cupboard was not required to store anything else so we had room - barely - to sit in the cupboard on the toilet. The first time we had a dry run to see if we could fit we laughed until we cried,

and over the next three months it continued to raise a smile because all the person not using the toilet could see was a head, shoulders and knees poking out of the cupboard. The 'user' had to reverse bottom first into the cupboard, as it was barely wide enough for our shoulders, let alone to turn around in. It was certainly not deep enough to be able to close the door once occupied. Interestingly Zak remarked: 'you will want to move the toilet somewhere more private when you use it'. Where exactly? We wondered as we glanced around our cramped quarters, under the bonnet of the van perhaps? So it stayed where it was and the cupboard became the place where we 'made our toilet' (as the Americans put it).

In addition to these luxurious built-in facilities we were also provided with a toaster and pots and pans and a bucket, broom, dustpan and brush. We paid extra to have two "comfort" packs included as well. These contained bedding, crockery and silverware and a torch. Unfortunately they did not contain pillows, so that was not very comfortable! This problem was rectified the day after we picked up the van and a phone call to Zak confirmed that the company would reimburse us for some pillows, we just had to go and find some to buy. This done we were ready to embark on our adventure with Harvey.



### **3 - A Bit *Blair Witch* and Too Many Hicks**

The first leg of our road trip was spent driving north from San Francisco towards, and through, the Redwoods. We spent two days travelling up the west coast, first on Route 1, which runs right beside the Pacific Ocean, and then on roads slightly further inland. The scenery was simply breathtaking as we were often afforded panoramic views of the sea on our left hand side whilst on the right cliff walls towered above us.

The highway was fairly narrow, and included so many slopes and sharp bends that we made very slow progress. What made these obstacles more challenging was the fact that Emma was getting used to driving a vehicle much larger than that to which she was accustomed, and driving it on what felt like the wrong side of the road. The incredible views, occasional wildlife - including birds of prey and a herd of elk - and the open roads stretching ahead of us went a long way towards making up for the lack of miles covered. However, by the end of the first day we had only driven about 143 miles, less than half of the distance that we had intended to cover. We began to be concerned that we would have to make drastic alterations to our schedule in order to reach Miami in time for our flight back to England. Now, this probably seems like a bit of a melodramatic reaction because we still had nearly three months left of our vacation, but when we looked at the maps at the end of that first day on the road we were a little freaked out.

As it turned out, we only needed to make some minor changes to our itinerary because after that initial drive we discovered the miracle of the modern transportation network - the Interstate. Obviously this could not help

us when we found ourselves caught short on our first day on the road, 173 miles south of Crescent City, California, our intended destination for the night. Therefore, we had to scour our campsite directory for the nearest RV Park. We settled on a very small town called Leggit with a campsite just north of it.

We arrived after dark but fortunately the office was still open and the owner, Mavis, had a vacant spot for us – in fact she had about 300 vacant spots. We soon discovered that our saviour was British, which seemed a little coincidental considering the number of campsites in the area. Although we soon found out that we had a talent for attracting patriots wherever we went.

We woke up the next morning to a magical sight. Our van was parked among giant redwood trees, the tops of which were shrouded in fog. The setting was reminiscent of the Ewok village on Endor's moon in the *Star Wars* film, *The Return of the Jedi*, or *Fangorn*, the Ent forest in Tolkien's *Middle Earth*. The charming atmosphere was quickly spoiled however, when we noticed piles of acorns placed on the ground and on posts around our van! The creepy mood intensified when we saw Mavis' cat - it had only one eye. *Very Blair Witch.*

The perception of being in a magical, yet creepy, place intensified as we left the campsite to continue north. Across the road from Mavis' park was a huge sign 'Confusion Hill. Is seeing believing?' and next to this was a large totem pole shaped like a bear. It appeared to be the entrance to some sort of theme park. The rather bizarre tone for the next few days was certainly established.

We resisted the theme park and drove on, spending the day passing through several redwood groves. These were the coast redwoods, the tallest trees in the world, as opposed to the giant sequoias - which are bigger in terms of volume, but shorter....but then, is size really everything? Coast redwoods can live up to 2200 years, and reach heights of 367 feet (which makes it extremely hard to take photographs of a whole tree in one shot!)

The scenery was very different from that which we had seen the previous day but equally impressive in its vastness and natural beauty. When we reached the Avenue of the Giants, which really does what it says on the tin and is a scenic detour from the main road, we stopped for a closer look at the massive trees. The visitor centre was closed because it was Thanksgiving but we went on several short hikes into the woods.

Stepping into the redwood groves was like walking into a cathedral. Our eyes were drawn upwards by the massive trees, and the canopy overhead gave the impression of a vaulted ceiling. The woods were also very peaceful and quiet as there were few people visiting them, partly due to the weather - it was a drizzly day - but mainly because of the national holiday. We found ourselves naturally talking in low voices as we walked among the ancient woods, as you might do when visiting a church. In fact, we did not speak very much, merely reading from a leaflet guiding us through the forest and exchanging the occasional comment on our surroundings - generally 'awe inspiring'. Actually most of the time we just said 'wow!', but awe-inspiring sounds so much more intellectual.

Returning to the main road we pushed on towards Klamath, a town that had

several campsites dotted around it and that would provide easy access to the Redwood National Park the next day. When we reached the town we found we had time to drive by a few of the campsites in order to pick one before it got dark, a luxury we had not been able to afford the day before - or on many subsequent days as it turned out. So we spent the next half hour or so looking at three different campsites. Following this scouting trip our decision was simple - move on! Perhaps it was seeing them by daylight, but the camps did not look pretty, popular, or even open in the case of the third one, which seemed instead to be a machinery graveyard. We decided to head on to Crescent City where we knew there was a larger, more expensive RV park - part of the Kampgrounds of America (KOA) chain. We also decided that Crescent City would contain more restaurants and, well, civilization than Klamath seemed to. As we left the town however, we saw something that nearly made us turn around and change our minds. A huge house-sized sculpture of a man and blue cow guarding the entrance to 'Trees of Mystery' theme park. How often do you see that? We later learned that the giant redwood carving was of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox...not that that helped to explain things.

As the sun set we found ourselves driving right beside the ocean once more. This time we were on a narrow stretch of land, maybe 20 metres wide, with a fresh water lagoon on the right of us as we drove along with the sun extinguishing itself into the Pacific on our left. Simply stunning.

We reached Crescent City after the campsite office had closed so we had to choose our own site and settled on one nestled under the trees. Driving back

into town we quickly discovered that Crescent City was not the large bustling civilisation we had been anticipating and it took us several attempts to find a restaurant. Perhaps we were being picky, but what we wanted on Thanksgiving Day was a traditional Thanksgiving meal. We finished up in The Apple Peddler, a family restaurant that was serving the customary Thanksgiving fare as a special offer. The meal was good, although it did remind us of school dinners. Our plates came crowded with all the elements of a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, almost identical to Christmas Dinner in England but without the sausage wrapped in bacon and with mashed yams instead. We followed this up with a slice of pumpkin pie and gave thanks for the fact that we had found somewhere to eat where the food did not arrive in styra-foam containers.

Crescent City was our first real taste of small-town America, starting with the Thanksgiving meal, where our waitress was so timid that she hardly spoke to us, quite a rarity in the U.S. The waiting staff all seemed shy of us 'out-of-towners' and were seemingly stuck in the 1980s, all sporting huge fringes that were stiff with hair spray. The next day saw our continued exposure to Hicksville - and also to Blair Witch syndrome.

We spent the morning visiting various parts of the Redwood forest and going on several walks, including one that took in part of the forest filmed for *Return of the Jedi* - evidently Mr. Lucas and I have a similar idea about where Ewoks should live. In the afternoon we returned to the hustle and bustle of Crescent City. Actually Denny's (picture Little Chef, but with better food) where we went for a late lunch at about 3.00pm was very busy. Well, we thought it was

about 3.00pm but when we left we were convinced that the town must have its own time zone - all the staff kept saying 'How are you tonight?' And 'What can I get you tonight?' The food was very good and the service fine - if a little eccentric, we were given huge carving knives to cut our sandwiches. What really captured our attention were the other customers. Hopefully they did not represent a cross-section of American society, but subsequent evidence suggested they were common for small-town America. First, you had the permanent resident, a guy sitting at the counter paying for his food in quarters – in a manner suggesting that he did this each and every day - and meandering back and forth chatting to other regulars. Second, there was a group of two adults and two children all wearing matching camouflage caps, jackets and dungarees. Finally, there was the guy who just stared at us the whole time - something we got very used to during our travels.

Our perception of Crescent City being small-town America (and a little backward even for small towns) was confirmed shortly after we left Denny's. We decided to go to the cinema as the weather had turned and it was raining. Our conversation with the woman who sold us our tickets went something like this:

'Oh we don't take credit cards - we're not that modern here' the server informed us as she smiled in a grandmotherly way. Then she added 'What's with the British accent?'

To which the reply was obvious 'Well, we're British'

The woman's response convinced us of our perception of Crescent City: 'I could listen to you all day, you speak so proper and we're such hillbillies!' From the horse's mouth. Fortunately, she did let us go in to watch the film rather than speak to her all day.

When we returned to our campsite we were not in the best of spirits. It was raining, Crescent City was not pleasant, and the campsite seemed darker than the previous night. As we drove into our spot among the trees creepy became creepier when we realised our water connection pipe - which we had left attached to the site tap - was missing.

According to the campsite staff - a real 'surfer dude' who could not have cared less about the theft - nobody had been around. We did briefly consider the possibility that he had taken it himself, to sell in the campsite store perhaps?

So we retired to our van, locked the doors and tried not to get freaked out by every little noise during the night. The next morning we headed south and 'got the hell out of Dodge'.

We spent the morning and early afternoon driving through more magnificent woodlands, first south on the 101 and then east through the Trinity Alps on the 299. The scenery was stunning but also made bleak by the fact that we were driving in and out of the rain. The Trinity Alps were particularly beautiful, with patches of forest interspersed with bare rock face. In the distance we could see fog drifting over the mountainside like columns of smoke. We also saw lots of shops by the road selling chainsaw art, 'functional sculptures',

most of which were wooden bears and 'Big Foots'. Although we were sorely tempted to make a purchase we were prevented from doing so by two factors. One, the size of our van did not leave room for huge wooden souvenirs. Two, good taste.

By the evening we reached Dunnigan, not far north of Sacramento, having abandoned the scenic roads in the afternoon in favour of Interstate 5. Faster, if more congested, the Interstate was not without great scenery as we drove with mountain ranges in the distance on either side of the road, the coastal ranges to the west of us and the Sierra Nevadas to the east.

We had covered more than a hundred miles since leaving Crescent City and the campsite in Dunnigan suggested that we were back in civilization. It was lighter, friendlier and even had a golf course – a sure sign of civilisation if ever there was one! We were also able to buy a new water hose. However, when we went out to dinner we soon realized that we had not left small-town America.

Outside of a restaurant a middle-aged man was standing looking into some bushes. When he saw us he called us over, shouting 'There's a cat, playing with a mouse.' We wandered a bit closer and noticed the man's wife sitting in their car shining the headlights on the said cat. I remarked 'That's a bit mean' and she agreed, but added 'its entertainment.' We walked on, smiling and nodding to avoid causing offence; obviously there is not much to do for kicks in the sticks. But at least *Tom and Jerry* are alive and well. Though it looked to me as if *Jerry* was in line for an early grave.



Our ultimate destination when we left Crescent City had been Yosemite National Park, however we knew we could not get there in one day and Dunnigan was the closest town with campsites that we were able to reach before evening. We also wanted to visit Sacramento, the biggest town in this area of California, before leaving 'civilisation' again and heading into the National Park. Dunnigan provided a convenient location from which to do this and we spent the next morning in Sacramento.

Now, people might wonder why you need 'civilisation' when you are on a road trip. For us the need arose from being slaves of the modern world - we needed to find somewhere to send emails, and we needed to download photographs from our digital camera onto compact discs. Consequently, almost all we saw of Sacramento was a shopping centre and public library - it seemed like a lovely city though. As we drove through we saw lots of small wooden houses, many murals and gorgeous trees shedding their colourful fall leaves. It was just a shame that we were in a hurry, and that it was raining.

We reached our intended campsite, close to Yosemite National Park, by nightfall. This was another KOA site outside of Mari Posa. We then spent the next day in Yosemite.

Yosemite is the country's number one National Park and is visited by some 4.1 million people each year. It is also vast, although we only visited one part of it, Yosemite Valley. Once again, the scale of the natural features was the first thing to strike us. Giant trees, huge outcrops of rock, and – at 2425 feet – Yosemite Falls, the tallest waterfall in North America. We quickly realized that

we should have scheduled in more time to visit the park and began planning to return on another trip to the U.S.

Fortunately the rain that had plagued us for the last couple of days held off for most of the day and we were able to fit in several walks before it got dark. Unfortunately, we had taken public transport, a special coach, into the park because we were concerned that snow on the roads - and our lack of snow-chains - would stop us from driving Harvey in. This meant we were forced to leave the park earlier than we might have liked, in order to get the last bus back to our campsite. Still, we got a taste for the park and a sense of how it must look different depending on the time of year. When we visited there was very little water in the waterfalls or lakes, the best time to see these being late spring when the snow on the mountains is melting.

One real advantage of visiting in December however was that the park was almost deserted making hiking the trails more remote and exciting. In fact, our last walk in Yosemite was almost too exciting. Rushing back to Curry Village (don't ask, I don't know) in order to catch the last bus out of the park we saw three mule deer just off the path. We stood and watched them for several minutes, taking photographs and cooing. We later found out that we should not have been so complacent. Apparently the docile looking deer account for the highest number of attacks on humans than any other animals in the park, including the mountain lions! This is probably because people are more likely to approach a deer than a mountain lion.... or maybe they are just a bit blood-crazy? Whatever the reason there are no Bambi's here! Fortunately we had kept to the path.

The next day we dashed west to San Francisco, via some serious farming country. On very straight roads, passing very wide flat fields we covered 267 miles. We also passed through 'Garlics-ville', a small town near Gilroy full of garlic farms. The smell hit us miles before the town, but then there are worse farm smells!

We reached 'Frisco' by late afternoon, ready for our next leg of the journey, and ready to explore another city after spending a week in the wilds!

#### 4 – Wherever I lay my hat....

If you are travelling in a RV then one of the most important aspects of your vacation is deciding where to park up for the night. This was definitely on our minds as we headed west towards San Francisco. So here's how it works.

Harvey was our hotel room throughout most of our 13 weeks in the USA, and he contained everything you would expect to find in a hotel room - except for the maid (sadly) and the television (fortunately). As I have mentioned, there was a bed, a toilet, a shower, and a fridge. There was even a bible in the cupboard. The Gideons did not place this particular bible there, Zak left it. This bible was also not *The Bible* but it was referred to religiously during our travels as *Woodall's*. *Woodall's USA Campground Directory* contains detailed information for most of the RV parks across America; it is about the size of the Yellow Pages. Included are directions to the sites, lists of the site facilities and recreation opportunities and a guideline of charges. *Woodall's* also rates most of the sites, so instead of sites being four stars they would be Four Ws. Very occasionally we found that the prices were quite out of date, or the quality of the campgrounds did not reflect the W rating, however mostly the details in the directory were spot on. We also discovered that not every campsite had a listing - at least not in the 2003 Directory. But without *Woodall's* as a starting point for planning our overnight stops the experience of 'RV-ing' would have been a lot more stressful.

An average entry in *Woodall's* looked something like this:

**'Stop here! Campsite'**

Directions - North on I10, exit 4, 4 miles east, entrance on left.

Facilities: 200 sites; 100 full hookup (*which meant water, electricity and drains.... plus also modem connection sometimes*); 50 water & electric; 50 no hookup. Dump station. Laundry. Propane. Hideously expensive food store. Semi-private restrooms.

One thing that we quickly discovered through choosing our campsites was that a fancy advert did not always mean a fancy campsite - or even a clean campsite. In fact, some of the nicest campsites we stayed at had the briefest adverts in *Woodall's* – proving without a doubt that size doesn't matter!

Anybody can open an RV site, as long as they have room for the rigs, and we certainly encountered a wide variety of camps. Those we visited can be grouped into three, based on who they were managed by. First, the most heavily advertised sites are Kampgrounds of America (KOA). We found out about KOA while we were still in England and used their Kampground directory to help plan our route, and our budget. They are part of a national chain, and so KOA sites are very consistent in terms of quality - even though the Camps are managed individually. We stayed in about half a dozen KOAs across three different states and they were all clean, with extensive facilities and friendly staff. Unfortunately, they were also fairly expensive, charging about fifty percent more than most of the other sites we used.

The second type of site that we stayed in was the private, individual one. On average these were cheaper than KOA Camps - but in terms of quality it was a case of potluck. In St Augustine, Florida, when we were in our third month of travelling and therefore fairly seasoned we chose a private campsite that had a very nice advert and was quite pricey. We planned to stay there for two nights, but we spent the next morning looking for a new campsite. The problem was the restrooms. At \$40 a night the site was one of the most costly that we stayed at before we reached the astronomical, bank breaking Keys, so we expected nice facilities. The restrooms were old, grubby and had curtains rather than doors on the showers - not very pleasant. On the plus side *Ocean Grove RV Park* had a very warm spa, which was a nice way to unwind after a day on the road. The only drawback was that the spa was close to a main road and not shielded by a proper fence. We transferred from this camp to the nearby state park, which was nearly half the price and had clean, and more importantly secure, restrooms.

Which brings us to the third category of campsite - the national, state and county sites. Initially we avoided these sites because they had the shortest advertisements in *Woodall's* and generally did not have any prices listed. Our decision to steer clear seemed to be well justified when we first visited a state campground near St Louis Obispo, California. When we reached the reception/office we discovered that there were no staff because it was evening. Now, that did not mean we could not check in. Most campsites had a system in place to allow late arrivals to check in - normally just by listing the available plots and instructing campers to choose a site and then pay at the office in the morning. The system at this particular campsite told

customers which parts of the campsite were for RVs and listed the nightly rates for staying. It also provided envelopes to enable campers to pay for their spot straight away. One advantage of this system is that you can look around sites before deciding whether to stay or move on. So, we had a look around. Driving around the individual plots we soon discovered that we would not be the only people staying, which is a very good sign. However, the camp was quite open, rather than having sheltered sites, something that we tried to avoid when possible. Despite this the place seemed adequate for our needs - in terms of hooking up the van on a level piece of ground at least - but we still had to look at the restrooms.

Although our hotel room on wheels had nearly everything we needed - including a toilet and shower of sorts - we did have to use 'facilities' for washing and other grooming needs! Due to this we based eighty percent of our campsite decisions on the condition of the washrooms - once we had chosen a location and price range for the night's stay. Although we became less picky as we became more 'travel worn' we still had standards – of a sort. In essence these were: clean, locking toilet and shower doors, lighting. As you can tell, we did not want much. When we entered the restrooms of *Morro Bay State Park Campground* the decision to search for another campsite was not hard. The toilets were dark, you had to put money in the showers to get them to work, and there were signs that warned users about snakes and mountain lions and told you what to do if 'The Siren' sounded. Okay, so the campsite would have been cheap, but we risked getting mugged by lions for our washroom money. Further justification for moving on was provided by

signs in the area advertising the 'California Men's Colony'. This was justification enough for me, though Emma seemed keen to stay.

Later during our travels we *did* stay at a government-owned park. This decision was due to several factors. One, we had been encouraged to stay at these public-run campsites by a friend before we started our journey. Two, they were cheap and therefore enabled us to spend more of our budget on luxury items such as food. Three, we became braver and less fussy as we became more seasoned travellers. Four, sometimes we had no other choice. This last reason was the main one when we first tried out this type of campsite. Barely a few days after our retreat from Morro Bay we visited Death Valley and stayed in the Ranger-run National Park camp at Furnace Creek. Unlike the county park, *Furnace Creek* did not require any coins for the showers - because there were no showers. The restrooms had cold water only and all the camping spots had no hook-ups for water or electricity - referred to as 'primitive camping'. This was the first time that we spent the night without our lifelines to power and water, and the fact that we survived gave us the courage to try other public campgrounds.

When we reached the Everglades National Park in Florida we therefore had no compunction about going 'back to basics' on another primitive campsite. Again this was partly forced on us by our itinerary, however in between the two National Parks we stayed in three other varieties of the public campsite. First, there was the *Anastasia State Park* in St Augustine - which was the one that we turned to when the private campground we had settled on proved too poorly serviced to justify its expense. The State Park on this occasion did have hookups for campers and had clean, warm restrooms.



This experience further encouraged us to look for more state or county campsites, as did the fact we were in our third month of travelling and on a serious saving spree. When we reached the Space Coast - Cape Canaveral - we stayed at the Port Authority campsite and then, when we visited Universal Studios for a week, we found a real gem in Orlando. *Turkey Lake Park*, a city run campsite, was only \$15 a night - including hookup and nice restrooms - and was only five minutes from the theme park. This was one of the cheapest camps of the whole three months, in a place where all the other camps would have been at least twice as expensive - and further from Universal Studios.

One further benefit of the state/county/public campgrounds was that they tended to have consistently friendly staff - possibly because unlike on private sites they did not have the added stress of managing and owning the camps. In fact, we would have stayed at more state parks, however they were often off the beaten track and also tended not to allow night registration, having padlocked gates after office hours. This sometimes forced us to abandon plans to visit these cheap parks, or at least postpone them. In fact, one important skill we needed for our travels was the ability to be flexible in the face of unforeseeable events.

When we changed our minds about the campsites in Klamath, because they looked like automobile graveyards, we were being a bit picky - having not gone into the offices, chatted to staff and looked at the facilities. Likewise, when we switched to the state park campground in St Augustine we were leaving a serviceable - if a little unclean - campsite, in a slightly snobby move.

However, sometimes the decision to retreat from a chosen destination was much more necessary.

We spent the last week and a half of our travels down in the Florida Keys, with the intention of taking things a little easier and soaking up some sun. We knew this part of the trip would be expensive - even if we spent the days doing nothing - because the Keys are a very popular travel destination, especially at the time of year that we were travelling, but they are not well endowed when it comes to campsites - largely because there is little land on which to have them. Therefore, we decided to book ahead once we were a few days away from the Keys.

We quickly discovered that most of the campsites in the top parts of the Keys - especially Key Largo - were already full. Following some frantic flicking through *Woodall's* and a dozen or so phone calls, we did manage to secure somewhere to stay for each night we would be spending in the Keys - even though we had to change our itinerary. For several of the nights we only managed to secure 'dry sites' - essentially parts of campsites where enterprising owners had realised there was room to park an RV, even though there were not any hookups. In other words, all you were getting was a parking spot, albeit at a reduced rate and with access to the restrooms, swimming pools and other facilities. Fortunately we were able to book sites *with* hookups on either side of the nights on the 'dry' spots. This enabled us to recharge our house batteries, refill our water holding tanks, etc. Being hooked up also allowed us to run our air conditioning unit - increasingly important in the 80°, high humidity Southern Florida environment.

As you might be able to imagine we looked forward to being on full hook-up sites with such a strong desire while we were on the 'dry' sites that we almost hallucinated that we *did* have hook-ups a few times. The importance of being connected to flowing electricity and fresh water cannot be overstated. So, after two very hot nights near the middle of the Keys, Sunshine Key, with no hookup and the refrigerator failing to keep drinks cold, we moved on to *Breezy Pines RV resort* on Big Pine Key, with a sense of excitement at the prospect of air conditioning and re-frozen waffles.

We had called about a week before to book a campsite and had been asked to call on the day to reconfirm our estimated time of arrival (ETA – an abbreviation I will probably never use again in this book...). We duly phoned and the owner of the site seemed very befuddled, explaining that she could not find the note about our reservation, but reassuring us that she still had a spot free on the campsite. Now, alarm bells should have started ringing at this stage, but I think we were too desperate for a nice site, with water and electricity, to admit that something dodgy was afoot. When we reached *Breezy Pines* our impression was that the site needed sprucing up, but we withheld judgement, having only seen the sign and the quality of the camper vans already parked up. We went to the office and the owner told us that she had found our reservation and after we paid in advance and in cash for the three nights we intended to stay she took us to our campsite.

Well, camp 'site' is stretching the definition a lot. In fact, she showed us to a very narrow patch of ground - not labelled up with a site number - between two other, larger, RVs. She emphatically stated that we would fit into the gap without the use of a shoehorn and then went to get her husband to

sort out the hookup for us. In essence, she was renting us the space between two campsites, evidenced by the lack of room (we did fit but could not open our doors properly) and by the fact that there were not any hookups for the site. We would in fact be drawing power and water from the plots either side of us by means of multi-plugs. Once the owner left we stood in shock for a bit, and then went to look at the restrooms - not very nice - and swimming pool - tiny. The decision to leave was a difficult one, as we had already paid, but we went to talk to the owner. Mrs Breezy Pines did not seem surprised to find we were unhappy, but suddenly announced she had four other sites to offer us - and promptly kidnapped Emma aboard her golf cart and sped off (at 5 miles an hour) to the other available plots.

The first was again not a proper site, no hookups for the area itself, and lots of vehicles already parked on it ('Oh, I'll get people to move them dear'). The other three were in a nice shady part of the site, seemingly perfect but all empty because the electricity supply was not working properly ('Oh, its just the connections dear'). Very tempting. Whilst giving Emma the guided tour of her run-down domain, the manager admitted that she had given our reserved site to a person who turned up that morning and wanted to stay two months - charming! Needless to say, we asked for our money back and received it without any hassle - but having wasted half a day driving there. We left 'Greasy Pines' - which going by the woman's accent was the correct pronunciation for the site - and booked back into the previous campground, wasting more of the day. Although this site had no hookups it did have a very nice swimming pool and fortunately still had space when we returned in a foul mood after our 'adventure'.

So, all campsites are different, and the decision about where to stay is not always easy - or final. However, whether we were staying at a private campground, or a state one, a dump or a real five star-er (er...W-er) some things were always the same. But I will tell you about that later.

## 5 - Frisco

Getting back to civilization had definite advantages. It was easier to find places to eat and email and we no longer felt like the last humans alive following a nuclear disaster. Sadly there were disadvantages too. We had to deal with busier roads, crowds and lots more noise. In fact when we left San Francisco four days later we were quite keen to get back to quieter living.

As we drove back to San Francisco the roads got more crowded and also more difficult to navigate. In order to accommodate extra cars in the city the decision appeared to have been taken to make more lanes on the roads. A laudable suggestion except that the roads have not been widened, the lanes have just been narrowed. This made for some rather hairy moments especially because we hit San Fran at rush hour.

Mercifully we survived this traffic baptism of fire and headed straight to our campsite. We stayed at *Candlestick RV Park*, which was the closest one to the City centre and in the shadow of the 49ers stadium (the local NFL football team). The campsite was more like a large car park, but it did have good clean facilities and, although it was in a dodgy part of the suburbs, it was secure. The staff, all oriental, was very friendly. They insisted on referring to us by our formal names: 'Mr & Mrs England', and engaging us in conversation about our home by asking: 'how is the London fog?'. They also informed us that they provided a shuttle service to the city centre.

As soon as we arrived at the campsite we left. This was not the first, or last time that we did this, however on this occasion we were happy with the

site, we just wanted to go somewhere else.

When we had first picked up the van we had planned to visit the Napa Valley, however we did not think we could spare the time before we headed up to the Redwoods. A decision justified when we took all day to get anywhere on Route 1. So when we got back to San Francisco we decided to go up to Napa for a champagne tour. We also decided that we would drive through the middle of town because it was late in the afternoon and that route looked quicker. In fairness it was quicker but it was also more scary not just due to the traffic but because we stopped for petrol. Not normally a scary activity, except for fuel-phobics, but we got hassled by people begging to be allowed to 'fill us up' in return for us giving them tips. This situation was made harder to deal with because the people had very strong accents, so it took several attempts before I understood their intentions and could then say 'no'. They did not even work for the garage, but the garage staff was so intimidated by the beggars that they just stayed inside their office and left their customers to deal with the hassle – what great service! As we left the city our mood was lifted however when we drove over the Golden Gate Bridge. A very impressive sight, but disappointingly not golden. Emma had to rely on my photography skills in order to appreciate this experience fully, preoccupied as she was at the time by not crashing.

We arrived at *Domain Chandon* in the Napa Valley about 10 minutes before the last tour of the day. Just enough time to neck some champagne. To do the tasting before the tour was the opposite of our previous experience of wineries in Italy. However, the quality of the subsequent tour made us glad

we had sampled the wares (six different types between us) first. The champagne was very nice, the tour was a little patronizing, but surprisingly humorous...though possibly that is the drink talking.

We spent three days in San Francisco itself and did all the typical tourist things: cable cars, Alcatraz, Ghirardelli Square and the sea lions. Yes, sea lions. They must be one of the big tourist attractions because they have their own leaflets complete with their own stage name the 'sea lion-ebrities'.... you cannot make this stuff up.

The first day we took the 'shuttle' into town, mainly because we had prebooked tickets for Alcatraz and, not knowing the city, we thought this would be the quickest option. This might well have been true - the journey home in the 'shuttle' took 20 minutes. However, we were driven into town by a 100 year old Chinese man for whom the word hurry no longer existed. The journey took 45 minutes via the scenic route - taking in many exquisite sites... of warehouses. The journey was made less bearable by our driver making very bad jokes based on his incomplete knowledge of the UK. To his credit he did furnish us with a map of the city complete with hand-drawn sketches of the different forms of public transport.

This was vital as soon as he dropped us off because it enabled us to recognize the cable car that we had to take to the other side of town to board our ferry to Alcatraz. Before we did this however, we bought travel passes as the prospect of taking the 'shuttle' again left us cold (and skint). What we did not have at this stage was a proper map of the bus and cable car routes,



something we had found indispensable in New York. Fortunately this did not matter as our first destination was beyond the end of the line and it was easy to know when we had reached this because the driver shouted 'you're on your own!' Friendly.

The Cable Car journey itself was very exciting, if a little vibratory. The fun part (and by fun I mean scary) was when the cable car stopped to let people on and off, as it did this in the middle of intersections, the only level piece of ground.

When we got to Pier 41 to catch the boat to Alcatraz Island we could barely see the vessel. In an ironic turn of events San Francisco was suffering from London fog! It was so bad that the ferries had to use their foghorns to avoid collisions - having to distinguish their own warnings from the racket made by the nearby community of sea lions. Riding through the impenetrable fog made the journey out to the island very eerie and seemed an appropriate atmosphere given our destination. The island appeared out of the gloom only when we were very close to it, and as we disembarked it seemed a very desolate location indeed.

Although the areas of the island that were open to the public were not particularly big, there was enough to keep visitors occupied for a good half day. The island is part of the National Parks Service and straightaway a ranger orientated us about the island, and the talks and tours available. During the day we watched two films, one general history and the other about the island's post prison days; looked round a small museum; took the audio tour of the cellblocks; and listened to a second ranger talk. These last two

were the most interesting.

The talk, performed by a Kevin Bacon look-alike, was about the escape attempt immortalized by the Clint Eastwood film. It was also a bit of a tour, beginning outside. During this part the fog cleared, spookily revealing our guide's visual prop - the neighbouring Angel Island to which the prisoners may have escaped - just as he spoke about it. The tour ended in the cellblocks with a demonstration of the cell doors. Theatrically, or just coincidence, they did not work at first. When they did it was quite scary, especially with the accompanying shout of 'rack'em' by the guide. The mood was slightly spoilt when he told us that the sound of the doors featured as the *Death Star* sound effects in the original *Star Wars* movie - George Lucas must have a thing for California! Following this talk we picked up the audio tour of the prison.

The commentary was excellent, atmospheric and very eerie, especially when you followed the narrator's instructions and went into some of the cells. The presence of other visitors did distract attention a little, but perhaps the experience would have been too real had we gone round on our own. We found that we did not talk to each other much during the visit, and even though Emma had visited before she was not immune to the effect the island, and the prison in particular, have on visitors. When we finished the tour and went back outside the weather had completely changed, with bright sunshine and blue skies. Although a welcome sight, this did not seem appropriate, especially having heard first hand accounts from prisoners who used to spend their days shut away from fresh air. The 'Alcatraz' mood persisted as we rode the ferry back to the mainland, but the spell was broken when we joined the tourist crowds on nearby Pier 39.

Pier 39 is famous for its shops, eateries and street entertainers. We headed straight to a little restaurant for sourdough bowls full of clam chowder. It proved very messy to eat soup out of edible bowls, and to eat the bowl as you went along, but was fun and actually quite practical, saving on washing up. Thus fortified we were ready to hit the shops.

It was quite interesting wandering along, mainly window-shopping because everything was exorbitant. Entertainment wise we enjoyed seeing the sea lions, which crowd the end of the pier. Before we caught a glimpse of these huge beasts our olfactory sense was assaulted by their smell, imagine regurgitated sardines on a hot day, but ignoring common sense we still proceeded round the edge of the buildings to where the sea lions congregate. And there were dozens of them. They covered all available surfaces along one corner of pier 39 and the next pier. When they ran out of room they just sat on top of each other. It was definitely a sight to behold - though not somewhere to linger, even though some people were doing just that – perhaps they were suffering from heavy head colds? We took some photographs, though they did not really do justice to the experience. Perhaps recognizing this fact, one large sea lion tried to help us capture the spirit of the event by regurgitating his lunch while we took a photo. Sadly the seagulls that rushed in to feast before the delivery had even hit the deck blocked the shot. Lovely.

We soon left the pier, after the sea lions everything else just seemed a bit dull, and spent the early evening catching a variety of street cars and buses as we

looked round some of the town including the Castro - the gay part of town famous for its murals (we spotted no street art but did find somewhere to email) - and civic buildings. We spent quite a while walking because the public transport system was not nearly as user friendly as in New York. The city did not feel nearly as safe as the Big Apple either. We spent a lot of our time feeling quite tense, especially when out after dark, and this was not an irrational fear either. People were often quite confrontational, staring, trying to sell their petrol pumping expertise and so forth. In fact, within minutes of being dropped off by the 'shuttle' we saw a man running hell for leather after a robber. However, part of the reason why we did not feel safe was because the area of town where we were staying, and had to walk through late at night, was a very dodgy area. It must also be said that nothing untoward happened to us while we visited San Francisco, or anywhere else in the USA in fact - even when we put ourselves in risky situations. And our faith in human kindness was restored when we lost our travel passes on our last day in the city, only to have them handed back to us by a stranger who found them lying on the street. And she didn't even ask for a tip!

On our second day in the city we decided that we would visit an attraction not on the beaten path, but one that was recommended by our *Lonely Planet* guidebook - our second 'bible'. Armed with our travel passes and map we embarked on a journey that meant taking three buses as we searched for the Californian Academy of Science. Part of the reason for heading away from the city centre for a day was because the weather forecast was for rain and the only other things we had left to do were outdoors activities. The rain did start

just as we pulled up outside the museum, and it did not stop all day.

The Californian Academy of Science is like a one stop shop for your cultural needs. When we went inside, bought our tickets and were given a map, we were immediately overwhelmed by how much there was to see. This is something that commonly afflicts me (probably because I work in museums) when I go into large museums or other attractions. What makes this feeling worse is the provision of various events because as well as planning the order in which to 'do' the exhibitions you have to timetable your plans. Fortunately this particular museum did not have many events on. It did however have volunteers on hand to help you schedule your visit, and we quickly turned to this resource. The elderly couple manning the information desk told us what was interesting - everything - and in return we had to tell them about the UK and hear their travel tales. Fascinating. Thus informed that we should see it all we made a start - with the restaurant.

We then spent a long afternoon looking at exhibitions ranging from a room of skulls (complete with live exhibit of insects that clean flesh off bones) through a gallery showing the history of life, to a display of *Larson* cartoons. We also took in a very good planetarium show (as noteworthy for its comfortable seats as for its content); an earthquake exhibition complete with moving floor and 'build your own houses out of *Duplo* then knock them down' interactive; and a variety of aquariums. The latter were very diverse - with a penguin exhibit (where keepers attempted to do a public feeding session and the penguins went on hunger strike); reptiles; and a touch tank. We only left when we did because the museum was closing, we even ran out of time to do the obligatory gift shops - luckily (!) we had had the foresight to visit these

earlier.

When we left the museum we decided we just had not seen enough buses so far so we took another two in order to get back into the town centre, ending up at Japan town for dinner. Now, most cities in the US seem to have Chinatowns, but Japanese areas were something that we did not often encounter. San Francisco's Japanese population has a strong identity however, and has been the base of the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California since 1973. We spent an enjoyable evening looking round the district, although the rain forced us to limit our stroll to the undercover malls of shops and restaurants. We had a very nice and inexpensive meal in a small establishment, taking potluck to some extent with what we ordered - though helped in small measure from experiences in Waga Mama's in the UK.

One more bus (our sixth of the day) took us to Union Square to see the Christmas decorations, largely consisting of a mammoth tree and Macys's lit up like a giant present. En route from here to the next bus stop we did a little window-shopping, and spotted a very exclusive store where customers were drinking champagne, eating chocolates and being entertained by live piano music. We decided to 'have a bit of that' and went in. We emerged about 15 minutes later slightly tipsy and having established that, yes, we could not afford anything. A fact not overlooked by the snooty staff member to whom we handed our glasses on the way out. They were lucky we didn't have room in the van to keep the glasses!

A final bus saw us within an unsafe walk from the campsite. Happily we

survived this last leg of our day, in spite of the lack of adequate streetlights, and perhaps because of our ever increasing walking pace. However, when faced the next night with the decision of whether to walk this road or wait for the bus we did take the second option. During the day two people had confirmed that the area was extremely unsafe, especially on a Friday night so we agreed not to push our luck.

Our next day in the foggy city was also our last and we spent the day doing lots of walking, taking lots more buses, and feeling very tired. City living really is hard work! We looked round a number of 'Frisco's famous districts. Starting in china town, which was very pretty and colourful, and then walking on towards the piers by way of the Crookedest Street (a block of Lombard Street) and the cable car museum - a very noisy attraction, as it is where the engines that run two of the lines work. Interesting to see because the machinery is so immense, but not a place to linger.

Walking in San Fran is literally an uphill struggle, so when we reached our lunchtime destination we were more than ready for a sit-down. We dined in a posh-ish restaurant (for which we had a discount coupon – the only way we could afford posh) on one side of Ghirardelli square. Once fortified we did a walking tour of the square. Sadly the stops on the walk were not very interesting and we found ourselves moving slower and slower between them - and reading less and less of the plaques. We took in both of the famous chocolate shops after which the square is named, receiving free samples for the effort of going in. As the shops were busy we were able to visit each one more than once and get a chocolate each time. This was a plan flawed by the

fact that the freebies, mint chocolates for Christmas, were surprisingly un-moreish. The architecture of the square is supposed to be classic San Franciscan, however this did not resonate with me.

The place lacked steep hills and the houses were not the wooden structures I had come to associate with the city. Nevertheless it was a pleasant place to sit and watch the world go by while digesting your chocolates/feeling a bit sick.

Once rested we hiked up towards the Golden Gate Bridge and found a good vantage point from which to take photos of the cloud shrouded red structure. The hike back to the nearest bus stop was mercifully downhill. The last area of the city that we visited was Little Italy.

This area is demarcated by painted lampposts but as the evening was drawing in we did not have chance to properly look round the stores. We also did not feel ready for dinner so got take away pizza from a place recommended by the campsite The Stinking Rose. Unsurprisingly this place is famous for using lots of garlic, including on the menu '40 clove garlic stuffed chicken'. We ordered two small pizzas and then headed back to the campsite. On inspection we discovered that small meant miniscule and although the pizza was delicious we were very glad of the 6 garlic rolls included for free.

The next morning we moved on, just as the 49ers hit town, a fact heralded by a number of very large RVs turning up the day before, complete with flags, signs and other 49er paraphernalia. That we were leaving was probably a good thing as the 49s fans were likely to be noisy, and we (like most English people) were unlikely to understand their sport.



We were ready to move on anyway, having been a bit 'peopled out', and a little bankrupted. We were also fed up of being the roving tourist information bureau for the city - having provided assistance three times in two days. Why is it that people only ask directions when you are away from home?

## 6 - Rain or Shine...or fog, snow, cold

England is so famous for its bad weather that people we met often asked us about it. The inclement climate seemed to be one of the few things that Americans were confident enough in their knowledge to talk about. That and the Royal family of course.

This obsession with meteorology was evidenced by the campsite owner in San Francisco who asked us about the London fog – he had obviously read too much *Dickens* or *Sherlock Holmes*. Not that we were without stereotypes when it came to meeting people, expecting New Yorkers to tell us to 'forget about it' and people in Key West to be gay. Well, actually this second prejudice proved fairly accurate. In anticipation of weather-related queries we thought experience would be better than description so, in the wise words of *Crowded House*, 'everywhere we went, we always took the weather with us'.

We did not notice this phenomenon at first when the rain descended on our second day in New York, coming down with such ferocity that Central Park was soon flooded. According to the news large areas of the park were under several feet of water and several roads were closed. Fortunately we were able to visit the park on two occasions during the week without having to skirt submerged regions, or even puddles...unless the lake we walked round is not actually a permanent feature? It was not long however before we realized that we were bringing our own personal rain cloud with us, like some kind of real life cartoon.

The rain followed us up the Californian coastline to the Redwoods, and then back down to Yosemite. During that week it rained nearly every day, though often in the form of drizzle. In fact, in retrospect it almost seems as if there was a rainfall limit set for each week of our travels. In New York and San Francisco we experienced one-day bursts of really hard rain, but spent the rest of the time in these cities enjoying relatively dry weather.

Another characteristic of the David and Emma weather system was that we could outrun it. So, when we left San Francisco in conditions of light rain and drove south along the coast to Monterey we broke through the clouds and spent the next two days enjoying cold but dry weather.

Cold weather and a bit of rain were actually unsurprising given that we were travelling through the winter. But it did seem a little harsh at first because I thought of sunshine when thinking about California, and I blame the *Beach Boys* for that. We did get some lovely sunny periods during this first stage of our travels, not warm enough that we could do without thick jumpers, but very welcome none the less - especially after the rain had caught up with us for a few days.

When we moved on from Monterey we enjoyed one of the warmest spells of weather that we encountered outside of Florida. We spent a few hours in Carmel by the Sea, picturesque at the best of times but positively glowing in the lovely weather. Sadly we did not drive on far enough that day, and our personal rain cloud caught up with us the next day in the Big Sur area. We spent the day out walking in the state parks in spite of the cloudy, showery day; we just wore our waterproof jackets. In fact the weather actually

made the walks nicer because as in Yosemite we were often the only people mad enough to be outside, so we had the trails to ourselves. The woods and beaches were thus very quiet, allowing us to get close - sometimes almost too close - to nature.

We spent a couple of drizzly days in this area, and then moved inland on our way across the state to Death Valley. Away from the coast we found drier weather. However we travelled into higher and colder climes as well. The two nights that we spent on the journey east to Death Valley were so cold that we had to have the heater on several times during the evening and early morning - even when bundled up like hibernating bears. We also woke one morning to find an icicle running between our water hose and the ground. Despite this we still made it outside to have a campfire and melt marshmallows!

The cold was not the only evidence that yes, it was winter. There was snow too. We did not see any snow falling during these few days en route to Death Valley, but we definitely felt its impact.

Between the west coast of California and Death Valley National Park are the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We only needed to travel through a small part of this range, as the route across did not really require driving too far up into the mountains, however we decided in our wisdom to take a detour.

Every now and then Emma and I make bad decisions, real *Dime Bar* moments. Personally I blame Emma, ever the headstrong one while I cower in the background. For example in Disneyworld in Orlando on a previous holiday we (i.e. Emma) decided to walk back to our hotel from one of the theme parks because it did not look that far and she did not want to wait for a bus. It was

probably actually several miles away but what made her idea more stupid was the fact that the land between the hotels and theme parks is largely undeveloped swampland. They do not have street lamps along the road, and neither do they have pavements. They do have crocodiles. We walked for about 45 minutes in the darkness until a combination of running out of pavements and Emma feeling something slimy go in one of her flip-flops drove us back. Fortunate really because when we got back to where we had started from and got the bus we realized just how far it was to our hotel – about a 20 minute bus ride! Anyway, back to our moment of madness in the Californian mountains.

We had wanted to visit the Giant Sequoia National Park when we were further north, near Yosemite. We were keen to see the biggest trees, having seen the tallest in the Redwood National Park. However, we ran out of time before heading back to San Francisco, but now we were near-ish to the southern end of the sequoias and had a day to spare. Snow had closed some of the roads, so we thought that this time the weather, rather than time, would thwart our plans. I was content to bow to the elements and accept that we were going to have to leave the trees for another holiday, however Emma was more disappointed and looked for any opportunity, even a half chance, to see them. And she was in luck.

The campsite that we stayed at the night after leaving the west coast - the site of our campfire and icicle strewn hosepipe - listed the roads that were still open through the mountains, including the one we needed to travel - the Sherman Pass! (Dramatic sounding, eh?) So, we packed up camp and headed towards the start of this road.

We soon came to a sign attached to the gates which close the road to traffic which instructed 'road closed in winter'. However, the gates were open, so we figured that December obviously did not mean winter in this part of the country. We drove on up the mountain road, surrounded by stunning scenery - brilliant white snow covered peaks with contrasting dark green patches of trees. Above us a bright blue sky, dotted with clouds. A good day to be driving. Emma however was unable to fully appreciate these views, as the road demanded her total concentration.

Rising steeply it hugged the side of the mountain and was so narrow in places that it was a definite 'do not look down' road. It also switched backwards and forwards as it rose, so that if you did look down you saw where you had just been. We made very slow progress due to this, but knew we were getting somewhere because of the altitude markers telling us, at our highest, that we were at about 7,000 feet. Not surprisingly we saw very little traffic as we ascended, in fact we were amazed to see anyone. We drove past a four wheel drive vehicle coming down the mountain full of people, and when they gave us a friendly 'hello' we felt vindicated in our decision to take this route.

As we drove we chatted about the views and other more inane things (as is our wont), however as the journey went on we became quieter and more preoccupied. We also had to turn the heating up at ever decreasing intervals.

After about 40 minutes the conditions began to worsen fairly dramatically as the stretches of straight road in between the switchback bends got shorter, the bends got sharper and patches of packed snow and ice

appeared on the tarmac. We proceeded gingerly and by this stage in silence until, rounding a bend, we realized that the trek was over.

Across the width of the road was a giant pile of snow, about thirty foot high; it looked as if a snowplough had pushed all the snow from the rest of the road (or perhaps the rest of the mountain) into a heap and just left it. A sign cheerfully proclaimed 'Road closed, snow mobiles welcome'. Fortunately there was space to turn around and, after several minutes of cursing, Emma executed a perfect 30-point turn. The journey back down was not fun, as trying to drive a big van down a steep and narrow icy road is not one of the selling points of camping. Still, we avoided an accident, had a great 'war story' to recount, and were laughing about it by the evening.

After this adventure we headed on down to Death Valley, one of the driest and hottest places on earth. In fact it was here, in July 1913 that the highest temperature ever recorded in North America was, well, recorded. The temperature in question? A balmy 134 degrees Fahrenheit, 57 degrees centigrade. We knew it would not be warm when we were visiting, and with temperatures down to zero we were not disappointed. We did think it would be dry though. Foolish British tourists! On our first day in the valley clear blue skies were replaced by dark, brooding clouds, then the heavens opened. We were in a canyon on a hike when the rain came and ran out back to the van, not because we were afraid to get wet, but because we had seen and read warnings about flash floods - and we were afraid of that!

We later learned that the shower we had been caught in would have needed to be a lot more severe in order to pose a flood risk, and even under

severely rainy skies we would have had about an hour in which to get out of the canyon before drowning became a real possibility. Still, you never know.

We could not believe it had rained in Death Valley (one of the driest places on Earth don't forget) the one day we were there - though later this seemed an inevitable part of our weather pattern. We were very glad that the rain was short-lived that day, but the rangers in the park were disappointed because the valley needed rain and would produce stunning spring flowers if it rained more. Perhaps we should have offered to stay?

After this short outbreak of rain we enjoyed about a week of dry weather as we visited Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, and Joshua Tree National Park. However, we then made the mistake of heading back to the coast.

As we drove into Los Angeles we had a little drizzle, a foretaste of things to come. On our second day in LA the weather caught up with us with a vengeance and it poured with rain for the next day or so - Christmas by the way.

Leaving California after New Year's Eve meant leaving the most severe weather. In fact, this state definitely has it bad in terms of extremes of weather and other natural phenomenon. Before we visited the US terrible forest fires devastated California. While we there this region also suffered from fatal mudslides, due to torrential rain hitting the hills already saturated by fire fighters' efforts to stop the earlier blazes. On top of this there was a fairly bad earthquake while we were there. Though we did not feel the quake, we did receive a very panicked phone message from Emma's parents asking 'Are



you dead?’

Set against this background three things were clear. One we had nothing to whine about with our bit of rain. Two, Arnie has his work cut out for him – even with all his experience of battling aliens and robots (perhaps it was this aspect of his CV that got him the job?) And three, you can never escape the mother-in-law!

Our talent of being 'rain-dancers' continued outside of California. We spent the first week of January driving east towards Florida, spending alternate days doing road trips or visiting sights. A pattern soon developed of clear skies and increasingly warm weather while we were on the road, so good that we decided it was almost time for shorts and t-shirts, followed by cloudy cold weather whenever we stopped to look around places. A pattern surely familiar to anyone who has organized a picnic in a heat wave, experienced a summer bank holiday in Britain, or attended Wimbledon for that matter!

'Our weather' only really caught up with us when we stopped for a few days in Louisiana. Evidently driving through three states was not enough to shake our tail, although it did take a day after we arrived to make an appearance. It made up for its tardiness by subjecting us to heavy rainfall for a whole day, forcing us to cancel a swamp tour for fear of the boat sinking.

On this occasion we failed to drive out of the bad weather, but on the plus side the clouds seemed to empty themselves and we had dry weather for the next few days while we visited Baton Rouge and New Orleans. In fact, the dry weather continued for over a week as we drove across into Florida and then down the east coast. Perhaps this should not have been surprising, as it

is the 'sunshine state' after all.

One particularly nice day found us walking down a lovely white beach in Biloxi, Mississippi; we were definitely getting towards shorts weather. We ended up getting a little carried away by this 'balmy' spell and spent most of our time in Orlando wearing t-shirts and shorts. I was particularly determined to wear my summer clothes, even though the weather changed again and brought sunshine and showers. Embarrassingly one of the characters in Universal Studios pointed out that I was not suitably dressed on one occasion, a bit of a cheek, considering she was dressed as *Olive Oyl* - complete with plastic nose.

When we hit southern Florida the weather became noticeably warmer again, and in fact was so humid on one day that we could not move without sweating and started using the van's air conditioning system with increasing regularity. Inevitably the storm that this humid weather foretold came the next day and we again found ourselves hiking in a national park on deserted trails and cocooned in our waterproofs. And loving it.

Some people might have been bothered by the amount of wet weather we encountered, but on the whole we recognized that this was par for the course for winter travelling. Besides, we were heartened by the fact that we were going to spend our last week or so in the Keys - where it would be peak season and hot and sunny.

So, it rained the first two days after we left the Florida mainland. Not continuous, but frequently and severely enough to curtail some activities – and often leaving big enough breaks to fool us into venturing outside. We did

start to get a little irritated by this because it appeared to be 'set in' forever. Even though we had had some dry weather recently, it is always easier to remember bad experiences when you are being subjected to more of them, so it felt like it had rained for our whole holiday. Not that the rain stopped us from doing things.

Some activities we had to do anyway, such as hooking up the power and water when we set up camp. On one particularly wet occasion I went out just in my swimming trunks to do this. There seemed little point getting my clothes wet as it was raining so much, and I was also able to give our neighbours (primarily an elderly Spanish woman who watched me intensely) a laugh/thrill. Another activity that we decided not to put on hold for a few showers was going in swimming pools and spas. There really seemed no point in avoiding them because the rain would not make us any wetter, and we often needed to relax and get out of the van for a bit of fresh air. The bad weather also meant we had the pools to ourselves.

Another unexpected silver lining to the rain clouds occurred when we visited Windley Key Fossil Reef State Geological Site, a state park on one of the Keys. We intended to just have a quick look round, having discovered that entrance was just \$1.50 each, but one of the rangers on duty offered to do a live tour for just \$2.50. Emma and I were eager to sign up for this, knowing how much we had enjoyed other activities, and seeing as we were the only visitors we felt a bit sorry for the ranger.

However a minute or so into the tour a few drops of rain fell. Immediately the ranger beckoned us under cover and refunded our money,

and then proceeded to do the tour anyway as the rain stopped as quickly as it had begun. He was very insistent that we have our money back, and was at pains to point this out to another group of visitors who entered the park informing them: 'I'm giving a tour, but don't worry, I have given them their money back!' It was as if he expected them to report him for being unscrupulous.

Despite this evident streak of paranoia, our guide was very friendly and made the tour quite personal, chatting to us about where we were from, showing us photos of his family, and so forth. He also had a stutter, particularly evident with the word 'coral' - extremely unfortunate as Windley Key is a fossilized coral reef! As it turned out this was not as big an issue as we expected, seeing as the tour consisted almost entirely of tree recognition lessons - in particular how to spot poisonwood and understand the allergic reactions induced by not spotting it soon enough. Even when we were standing right next to a huge expanse of exposed fossils talk turned (bizarrely) to the role of women in politics. Perhaps he was deliberately avoiding the 'c' word? The tour was certainly more memorable and entertaining than if we had taken the self-guided trail.

After the tour we tried chatting further to the ranger and his male colleague about our travels. However we soon realized they were more interested in talking to each other, in a kind of patois borne either from low visitor numbers, or from love. So we left, quietly, after putting our refunds in the donation jar.

The last week of our travels was predominantly dry and sunny. We spent

most of this time lying by pools on the aptly named Sunshine Key, and in Key West. So dramatic was the improvement in conditions, and so strong was my paranoia that it would be short-lived, that I ended up getting sun burnt. At least we would not be going home pale and pasty; the lobster look is much better.

On our last day in the Keys our personal rain cloud, in the form of several short, but heavy showers, gave us a farewell. This seemed entirely appropriate and resulted in wry grins (and only a few curses).

While we had been travelling we had been receiving regular updates on the weather back home. We knew we would be going back to conditions considerably cooler than the 80 degrees in southern Florida. Fortunately our flight back was not direct and after the plane journey from Miami to New York we had a few hours in the noticeably chillier climate of the Big Apple in order to acclimatize in readiness for the British winter!

Disappointingly there was no snow when we got back to Birmingham - doesn't it always snow in the British winter? There wasn't even any fog either!

Well, at least the assumption that English people spend all their time talking about the weather is not true...

## **7 – Big and Beautiful**

As we left San Francisco on a cold, grey morning the weather did not dampen our spirits. We were exhilarated to be on the road again and the dramatic clouds seemed very fitting given the scenery we were journeying through.

Once more we were driving on Route 1, and, as on the way to the Redwoods, we had the sea close on one side of us and bare cliffs looming on the other. The only real difference was that these features were on the opposite sides to before as we were now travelling south. Throughout the 5 or 6 days spent along this part of the south west coast conditions were often very elemental. The sea was rarely still, with waves bombarding the coast and sometimes threatening to flood the road. Even when the sea was calmer it was still hypnotic. Changing in colour with variations in the ocean depth and whenever the sun broke through the clouds.

The mountains to our left were a constant reminder of how narrow the road was. Frequent signs warning of rock falls also stopped us from forgetting that even mountains are transient. There was often very little vegetation, certainly not close to the road. And what trees there were gave further proof that we were in a domain ruled by the weather, and literally bowed before it. The wind, rain and constantly shifting sky completed the mood. And as fog rolled off the sea or beams of sunshine split through the clouds it felt very good to be on the road - this is what travelling is about!

We saw very few people and when we did go past any evidence of man (apart from the road of course) I am sure that the reaction we had was out of

proportion to the sight. At one point we saw fields of pumpkins and had a very animated conversation about them, along the lines of:

Me: 'Did you see that?'

Emma: 'Yes.'

'That was pumpkins.'

'Yes.'

'And it is after Halloween.'

'Yes.'

'Do they celebrate Halloween here?'

'Yes, just ask Jamie Lee Curtis.'

'Pumpkins, just sat there in rows.'

'Yes.'

'Well I never'.

Ok, so it was more like an animated monologue than a conversation, but Emma was concentrating on the road and so polysyllabic responses were a little beyond her. In addition to this it was early morning, and Emma is not a morning person so I was actually fairly lucky to get words rather than grunts in response to my random babbling.

We also invented stories about people we saw if we had not seen anyone for a while. For example we saw a man crossing the road and then crossing back whilst carrying a surfboard. Doubtless he was probably just going back to get his trunks or something, but we imagined he was going to spend his whole day going back and forth having decided that traffic-surfing afforded a more extreme sporting experience than the regular kind of surfing. Exciting though these observations were, we never stopped for them.

Generally the only things we came off the road for were the incredible views - and of course for food, gas and restrooms.

The first town where we had a break was Santa Cruz - supposedly a very nice place, according to Mssrs Lonely and Planet: *Santa Cruz is just as beautiful as Monterey and its 'beach town' vibe is more authentic* (P. 968). We, however, were not very impressed as we drove into the town. First we spent about half an hour looking for the town centre and somewhere to park. Our mistake was probably that we were looking for specific streets and places mentioned in our travel book. These turned out to be impossible to find, so we started just looking for signs to the town centre. These were surprisingly rare.

We did find signs, but not for the town centre. They were mostly prohibiting certain activities such as: do not stop, no access, no skateboards, no breathing. Parking became more urgent because our stomachs were empty and our bladders were full. Thankfully we did not see a 'No Urinating' sign.

Eventually we found the main street and a parking space, but now we needed change for the meter - this was the first time we had had to pay to park and we were not prepared for it. It is not like we thought we were above paying to park, like the Queen or Michael Schumacher, we had just spent our time either in woods where parking meters are fairly rare, or on our campsites where (fortunately) you do not have to pay by the hour to park. Once parking was sorted we looked for somewhere to have brunch, and go to the toilet.

The restaurant we chose seemed to combine these two facilities too closely as the whole place smelt of wee. However we had to stop and the



food aromas helped to neutralize the other odours..... Or we got used to it - slightly worryingly. The food itself was nice and the only thing that spoilt our enjoyment of breakfast was the noise from the next table, where two girls were attempting to shock the whole restaurant by discussing sleeping with each other the night before.

The volume of their conversation, not the content (which was actually quite funny), was what bothered us. The problem, common in American restaurants, was that the tables were too close to each other – a problem compounded by another fact, Americans are generally very loud. After we finished eating we felt ready to give Santa Cruz a second try.

After another unscheduled tour of the town's back streets, we found The Boardwalk - supposed to be one of the 'places to go'. It turned out to be a bit like Blackpool, but in the low season and less classy. I'm sure that the weather and time of year go a long way to explaining our reaction to Santa Cruz, but even on a sunny day the place would still have been hard to navigate and a bit too tacky for us. And as we left town the sun came out...an omen perhaps?

From Santa Cruz we drove on to Monterey and a very small RV park about 15 minutes drive from the town centre. RV Park is actually a very grand and very misleading name for what was in fact three van size parking spaces behind the *Cyprus Tree Inn*. However, at least we had hookups and the washrooms were not communal but individual little bathrooms.

We were now at the end of our third week in the US and it was early

December, so we decided that the Christmas spirit should visit the van. This we accomplished with a string of lights running around the 'living room' and a small (eight inch) live tree. The tree was already decorated with tiny parcels, to which we added miniature candy canes, which we purloined in fistfuls from the motel reception desk. As if in punishment for our crime we woke up the next morning to find pools of blood around the tree.

Actually the sweets had melted in the heat from the Christmas lights and from this we learned a valuable lesson. The lesson was not 'do not steal', but rather 'leave wrappers on stolen candy canes if displaying them on your tree.'

Monterey is famous for its aquarium, so we planned to visit it the next day, our only one before we were due to move on. However, the coastal town is also a popular spot to go whale watching, a half day event. There is also an historic district, the cannery, and - according to the pile of leaflets we picked up in the motel - a hundred other things to do in the area. Obviously we could not do everything in one day.... or could we?

We got up very early (for a holiday) the next day and sleepily drove down to the marina (once we had mopped up the candy cane blood) having booked a whale-watching trip the evening before. When we had signed up for it the staff had offered to sell us motion sickness tablets. We decided not to buy them because Emma doesn't get seasick and I convinced myself I would be ok - even though I had been seasick as a child. The tablets were offered again the next morning and by this stage I was starting to worry that my stomach would let me down. So, as we sat on the dock eating huge sticky

cinnamon buns, I was having doubts. In the end my desire to not appear 'wimpy' won out and I declined the medicine. Such courage!

It was quite a big group who had braved the December cold and risen early on this Sunday morning to adventure out to sea. There were about twenty of us gathered round on the pier while the crew manoeuvred the boat into its berth. Our guide for the trip, a biologist whose well-weathered face suggested she had lived her life at sea (either that or she was 100 years old), began by giving us an orientation session. This included a short description of all the types of whales and those ones we might be lucky enough to see. Most of the session however consisted of rules about boat behaviour (essentially hold on to things when you are on deck), and advice about the procedure to follow if you needed to be sick. Basically, do it at the rear of the boat to avoid hitting yourself or others with shrapnel. Nice.

Once we were fully briefed we were allowed to board the boat and then we spent the next three to four hours driving out across Monterey bay and into the open sea, and then back again.

Pretty quickly we saw (and more to the point heard) dozens of Californian sea lions, a good omen for the success of the trip? No, there are always loads playing and lounging in the harbour. However, as we left the harbour we soon ran into more wildlife. Dolphins - about 70 rizzos and 15 white-sided pacifics - swam in groups around our boat for quite a while. And no, we did not know any other words for 'dolphin' than 'dolphin' before the trip either. They were beautiful to watch, playing in our wake and daring us to attempt to photograph them - not at all easy. Though not as hard as whales it would turn out. Our driver kept turning the boat so we could all have chance to

see the dolphins, but then someone shouted 'thar she blows!' (seriously) and the chase was on.

Three whales, evidenced only by their 'blow' were swimming in the distance. Quickly, but cautiously, we drove towards this group. Catching up with them was incredibly difficult however as whales spend most of their time below the surface of the water and also blend in very well with the waves. We kept losing them and had to change direction repeatedly as they were spotted again. We also had to keep a safe difference from these endangered creatures. Eventually we got close enough to see them, and then had to keep moving as they did - making it harder for the driver to give us all equal views. In fact the boat was too crowded to allow everyone to get a good view, fortunately our elbows were bonier than most people's and this meant we made room for ourselves fairly effectively.

The subjects were a family of three humpback whales. Although photography proved a real lottery we were able to observe them doing various 'moves' - especially the young calf who was practicing his breaching skills (jumping clear of the water...or at least attempting to!).

After a long time we moved away and headed off in search of grey whales that had been spotted by another boat. We did not find them and spent more time enjoying the sea view and fresh air than we spent watching wildlife. We were very lucky with the weather at least. It was sunny and quite warm at times and the sea was not too choppy. In fact the motion of the boat was more soothing than nauseating - fortunately. As we drove back to the marina we did see one more creature, a sea otter swimming on his back clutching food on his tummy - and being stalked by three sea gulls.

From the boat we rushed to the aquarium, with still half a day to look round. Unfortunately we did not have half a day of energy left due to the early start, so we had to amble round rather than doing the usual 'we will see everything' museum march – the curse of the museum worker and the bane of his wife! The aquarium was also very busy which hindered optimal visit speed. Apparently residents get to visit for free on Sundays - disgusting, tourists should come first!

The place is vast, and includes some very innovative interpretation – such as cameras that visitors can move around to see creatures up close with, and a 'learn to talk like a penguin' exhibit. Our favourite display was the sea otters, we sat watching them (and failing to get photographs of them) for ages, and they were so sweet and playful. I also really enjoyed the fairly disgusting spitting fish, which make burrows by moving gravel around in their mouths.... my pleasure in seeing this was probably a boy thing.

We stayed in the aquarium until it closed, at 6pm. too early for dinner but too late to go back to the campsite as we were eating in town. Instead we had a rest in the van and changed for dinner. This brought home the joys of taking your house everywhere with you! And led to the thought that maybe we should all be snails? That would certainly help to reduce salt consumption...

We went to dinner via a drive through some of the cannery district. As in Santa Cruz we suffered for a lack of clear roads signs and directions as we headed for dinner - but this time we were following a local recommendation rather than our guidebook. Eventually we found it, the Monterey Fish House, a small restaurant but well worth the search. The food was excellent, beginning

with a (fortunately) shared starter of calamari that turned out to be big enough to pass for a main plate for a large man or a small family, and was so fresh that if we had found the place quicker than we did the sign saying 'gone fishing' would have still been on the door. The only dampener on the evening was the noise levels from fellow patrons who were again seated too close for comfort – I swear in England it would be called lap dancing - and who had the loud voices and opinionated conversations of drunken people out at a business dinner. A small price to pay for good food.

We set off quite early the next morning, but before we got on the road we went Christmas shopping for each other. We had set a fairly tight budget for the holiday and also wanted to buy each other useful and/or disposable gifts, to avoid filling up the van - and then our suitcases - with junk. So we went into K-mart. K-mart sells everything, from clothes to kitchen and home goods, from videos to food. It is a bit like ASDA, but not as nice and often too crowded to dare enter, and without customers patting their back pockets all the time. The fruits of this shopping trip turned out to be a t-shirt bought by Emma and a bat and ball game where the ball is fluffy and the bats have Velcro hooks bought by me...not really understanding the term 'useful'. Still it did turn out to be disposable, when one of the bats broke the first time that we used it.

From Monterey we drove down the coast to Carmel by the Sea. This town, where Clint Eastwood was once mayor, is lovely and very picturesque - an impression enhanced by the blue sky and warm weather when we visited. In order to keep itself 'cute' the town has banned mailboxes – a fine solution to

junk mail, and all mail for that matter. Actually all residents have to have post office boxes. We therefore soon stumbled across the post office, the biggest and busiest building, and asked for a map of the town. Once again we were helped by an ex-patriot... we Brits get everywhere. She recommended a little café, Friar Tuck's, for lunch, and gave us a huge map labelled with every shop.

And there are a lot of shops. These include *Saks* and various exclusive boutiques, which we decided not to go into for fear of being charged for looking at the goods.

After a healthy lunch of salad - in buns with meat patties, cheese and bacon - we found a library for a sneaky free hour on the Internet and then went to the beach for a bit. We could not stay long unfortunately because it was late afternoon and we still had about 20 slow coast road miles to go to our final destination for the day - Big Sur State Park.

The Big Sur area of the Californian coast is a collection of several different state parks and beaches. It provides beautiful views of the ocean and lots of places to hike, either along the coast itself or slightly inland among coastal redwoods. What I cannot tell you is why it is called Big Sur, though I would like to believe it was originally 'Big Surf', but somewhere through the years the 'f' has dropped off.

We were going to spend two nights in the area, so that we could have a whole day walking. We had the pick of several different campsites, nowhere was busy at that time of year, and headed towards the state one because a friend in the UK had recommended it to us. However, when we pulled up at

the park and saw how deserted the site was - no staff or campers - we decided we were not brave enough to stay there, especially as it did not have hookups either.

Instead we went to a private campground next to a river, and reached across a very rickety bridge. This we crossed with immense caution, even though our RV was probably lighter than most US cars. There was only one other couple staying so we were able to choose from lots of different plots, opting for a concrete based one (as it had been raining a lot and the ground was one huge muddy puddle) next to the river. That evening we were overcome by such homesickness that we played with a map of London and little plastic houses all evening...otherwise known as *Monopoly*.

We spent the next day lazily walking. First by the sea in the Andrew Molera State Park, through fields where we encountered various wildlife, but very few people. We saw deer and ground squirrels so close that we could almost touch them, not that you would want to, we well remembered from Yosemite the stories of killer deer... In the afternoon we went for a rainy walk in the Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, to see some waterfalls in among the Redwoods. There was a really nice viewing platform where you could sit to watch the falls, which were at present quite empty, however the weather precluded us from stopping long. From here we drove down a very narrow, windy, and steep road to Pfeiffer beach.

Pfeiffer Beach is a good spot to see the sunset, but unfortunately at the time of year that we were visiting sunset was shortly after sunrise, so instead we went on a dusk walk on the beach. The sea pours through huge holes in



the rocks that protect the beach from the open sea, making stunning views as the light fades. We headed back to the van as the rain started again, and before the sea stranded us for the night.

That evening we ate at one of the few restaurants on this stretch of the coast, the *Redwood Grill*. This turned out to be more pub than restaurant and felt like a real 'spit and sawdust' place - just without the sawdust. And, if I am honest, without the spit – at least as far as we could tell in the smoky low-lit interior. What it did have was 'entertainment' provided by a jukebox and (simultaneously) a man playing piano. The live music ranged from *the Beatles* to 'In The Jungle', very eclectic, as was the food.

I had a bun full of grease with a little bit of gristle and Emma had a 'pulled pork' sandwich - basically pre-chewed meat off ribs. The man who took our order was also the owner and the cook, and hairy in a *George Lucas* style. Perhaps it *was Lucas*? Doing more research for sound effects or settings? While we waited for our meals we amused ourselves by reading the local newspaper. It was full of very funny adverts, either selling dental cosmetic surgery, advertising people offering to 'unclutter' your life, or requesting wigs to be donated.

The next day we carried on down the coast, aiming to visit *Hearst Castle* in the afternoon. Unfortunately we got sidetracked by a huge colony of elephant seals.... As you do!

We had read in *Lonely Planet* that they came to shore for weeks on end and that we would know when we were in the right place because there would be a lay by packed with people in the middle of nowhere. Sure enough

we spotted the cars, and then their owners - who appeared to be staring at boulders on the narrow beach. And then we smelt the boulders, and then they began to make loud farting noises. We spent much longer there than we had expected. Just staring at the seals hauling their massive bodies around and lying on top of each other. Some of them were fighting each other, and many bore the scars of earlier encounters – nature at its ugliest and most brutal.... according to our resident naturalist, Emma.

We were surprised to find a volunteer guide standing by the animals, and we chatted to her for ages about them. Everywhere we went in the USA we met retired people volunteering, in museums, parks, and so on, a great way to spend your twilight years - much better than keeping cats or knitting!

When we finally tore ourselves away and headed to the castle it was mid afternoon. We soon found out that the tours of the historic and lavish rooms (\$18 each) were sold out for the day. After seeing pictures of the rooms included in the tour we decided not to change our schedule to come back the next day. The 'castle' is based on a Mediterranean village; something that Emma (who is half Italian) and I have seen plenty of on travels nearer to home.

The next day we turned inland, heading towards Death Valley, on the other side of California. We soon left the sea and the rain behind us. The first half of the day was spent driving through a very empty landscape, filled with ranch land and little else. Ahead of us were mountains and behind us, in the back of the van, was a very full chemical toilet. We had not been able to dump at the last couple of camps due to a combination of bad weather and laziness.

The toilet made its presence felt with its attractive odour and the sound of its contents slopping around dangerously. What made matters worse was that our bladders were as full as the loo. So we drove on in stony silence for some time, with still nothing but fields and cows around us. Either the pressure in our bladders began to affect our minds, or the view was very inspiring because Emma suddenly slipped into poetic trance, noting for the journal that 'the black ribbon of the road rippled along the barren plains towards the forbidding mountains'. The emptiness was briefly interrupted when we noticed two coyotes crouching over a dead animal. Fears began to creep in that we would die of bladder explosion (can that happen?) and provide the next meal for the scavengers.

As time passed, we started to drive up into the mountains and suddenly we saw a building - would it have a restroom? Irony of ironies, it was a waste treatment site! On the other side of the mountains however we found a little cafeteria in a place called McKittrick. People in a similar state to us must have been stopping there to 'spend a penny' for years as the entire bar area inside was covered in hundreds of thousands of one-cent pieces. These were glued to every available surface, walls, floors, and ceilings, even the legs of the pool table. A labour of love...or of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder!

From here we drove back into the open plains, for which America is famous. Either side of the roads electricity pylons and telegraph poles marched into the distance - with the promise of civilization ahead. After some more small towns, including Buttonwillow where huge piles of cotton lined the road, we found the promised civilization. McDonald's, petrol stations and Denny's, the

signs of mankind.

We stopped briefly to refuel the van, and ourselves, and then carried on to Bakersfield. This was the last big town on the route we were taking that day, so we came off the highway to search for a bank and a supermarket. In the second of these we got chatting to our server. After speaking to us in Spanish and then discovering that we were from England not New Zealand (as she first suspected when we turned out to not be Spanish), she asked how long we were visiting the USA for. '13 weeks' we responded, feeling a little sheepish but also very excited about having so much time on holiday. Her reaction was one of pure shock. We thought at first that she must be jealous, then she blurted out: '13 weeks in Bakersfield?' 'As if' we replied '13 minutes is long enough here'. Actually we did not say this, but the thought did cross our minds.

The last stretch of our journey that day was up through more mountains, part of the Sierra Nevadas to Kernville. Again we were in rock fall country and on a very narrow road besides the rock-strewn river Kern. We got through safely but did see the aftermath of an accident - someone had apparently driven over the edge, but fortunately the drop was not far.

When we reached the *River Nook* campsite we realized that being further from the coast and at a higher altitude brought two changes to the weather. First, it was drier. But second, it was *much* colder. First thing we did was empty our toilet, always fun in the semi-dark. Next we cooked dinner - well, heated up Chinese food in the microwave - and then attempted to light a fire.

We had wanted to have a campfire and toast marshmallows for the last few nights, but the weather had prohibited this activity. But this time the night was clear and cloud free and the campers next to us - who looked like the criminals in the film *The River Wild* - had made a fire, so conditions seemed right.

We bought a bundle of logs and got some small twigs. Then we spent the next hour trying to get the fire alight - and keep it going. In the end we succeeded through a mixture of patience, lots of fanning (until our arms ached), and ripping unwanted pages from our road map and burning Canada, Alaska, etc. Unlike Prometheus we refused to steal fire from next door, even when our fellow campers went indoors to escape the cold. We ate outside and toasted marshmallows before retreating to the van when the cold and the sound of coyotes baying at the moon got the better of us.

As an indication of how cold it was, the water hose was joined to the ground by an icicle the next morning. More graphically, Emma's butt did not thaw out until three hours after we went back inside...giving rise to fears that she might be suffering from Raynaud's disease...which commonly afflicts other extremities!

We set aside a day in this area in the hope that we would be able to visit the Sequoia National Park. However, as noted previously the snow thwarted this. Prior to this misadventure we had visited a small town called Johnsondale - population 1.5 according to the signs! The landscape surrounding the town was shrouded in snow and very pretty. So, we stopped in the town centre to eat our lunch. But before we could enter the town we had to get the go ahead

from the ancient security guard on duty, via a walkie talkie (and then in person when the technology failed). It was like a ghost town with hardly anyone around, but plenty of cats, so we stayed in the van to eat.

Johnsondale is obviously very busy during peak season, there is a store, ranch, dining and dance halls, but no paved roads and deserted and creepy in winter. A weird place to grow up, more of a holiday resort than a town.

We left the Kernville area late in the afternoon and headed to the other side of the mountains so we would be close enough to drive to Death Valley the next day. We passed through Onyx (where a sign proclaimed 'World famous sausage since 1851') and then were back in ranch country. We got onto the interstate and had glorious views of the sunset with desert in the foreground and mountains in the distance. That night we stayed in Lone Pine, a small town stretching along the interstate, in a campsite called *Boulder Creek*.

This turned out to be one of the nicest we stayed in. Facilities were good (although we declined the hot tub in the sub-zero conditions), staff were helpful and friendly, there was a cosy lounge to sit in in the morning, free (if slow) TV Internet, and coffee and homemade muffins – lovely, the campsite of our dreams. It was just a pity that we had to move on, though in truth we would have soon got bored, as the town was so small that it was well deserving of its name.

Following a recommendation we spent the next morning driving in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas, on 'Movie Flats' road. Here such classics as *Bonanza* and *The Lone Ranger* had been filmed due to the incredible

backdrop and huge boulders in the foreground. In honour of these programmes we made our own movie – more Bizarre than Bonanza, more Lunatic Ranger than...well, you get the idea. Spielberg is safe for now. However playing the movie back during the following weeks gave us a lot of laughs.

After a quick lunch in town, while we watched a festival featuring Hell's Angels in Santa hats and the emergency services, we drove on towards the Death Valley National Park. The last thing anyone said to us before we set out on the ruler straight road was 'beware of flash floods!' Encouraging.

## **8 - Harvey, the knowledge**

We adapted to the RV quite quickly, as one might adapt to a new house or girlfriend once used to their foibles and eccentricities. Sadly we could not alter the van in order to accommodate our needs, as we were renting it, so all adaptations were one-sided - unlike in a new home or relationship. Emma was able to enforce the 'toilet seat down' rule however, leaving it up while driving was just not an option.

Learning to drive such a different vehicle was the first, and most essential adaptation that had to be made. Fortunately, well selfishly, Emma was the only one of us that could drive at the time, as I craftily passed my test the week after we got home. First there was the whole 'driving on the right' issue, not a problem as Emma has driven before in Europe, but only in a right hand drive car. The only difficulty that she had on this score was with keeping in the middle of her lane, due to her altered perspective in the left hand drive van and an American tendency to have very narrow lanes. There were many occasions over the first few days when I held my tongue rather than crying out as we appeared to get too close to the right hand side of our lane, or cars next to us, or cliffs.

Second, Harvey had several mechanical differences from our English car. Most noticeably it was an automatic - again not something totally new to Emma - however the gears were column shift rather than stick shift. The speed at which she adapted to this strongly suggests a previous existence as a truck or JCB driver. Harder to get used to was the location of the park brake



- a pedal rather than a stick. Perhaps this location was the reason why we sometimes forgot to engage it - fortunately this never happened on a steep slope. We sometimes neglected to disengage it as well, mainly because it was possible to reverse without taking it off. On the occasions that this happened the only result was that we thought the van was broken once we started to drive forward. Fortunately it never was, though at times we definitely rode our luck.

There were the two times already mentioned when we hit stationary objects. Then there were hairy driving moments - generally on icy roads - and notably when we were the English people who drove up a mountain and found.... a wall of snow. Finally we also had two dodgy car park experiences in Universal Studios, Orlando, Florida. On our first day in the park we returned to the van to discover the remote unlocking device on the keys had flat batteries. No real problem, we just had to open the doors by the primitive method of turning the key! However, when we opened the door the courtesy light did not come on, and then the engine would not start. We quickly discovered that we had left the headlights on and had not received the (usually irritating) 'beep beep' warning of this because we had exited through the side door rather than front doors. Following a panicked call to the rental agency we were advised to seek a car park security member as they often have jump leads. We did and they did, and we were on our way within about 10 minutes – quicker than the AA.

The very next day we remembered to turn the headlights off, but did not close the driver's door properly. We returned to find it unlocked, and the

courtesy light illuminated. Luckily this light was not enough to drain the batteries but probably was enough to put burglars off from approaching.

Obviously all these 'adventures' were not exclusively due to the vehicle being unfamiliar to us - most resulted from mental lapses by Emma and I. The time when our lack of knowledge of the vehicle was most striking was when we had to have the oil changed.

When we had picked up the van Zak had told us we would need to have this done due to the distance we were planning to drive. We dutifully found a garage when we had travelled the appropriate distance to have the work done, we even managed to get the bonnet open, and then we started to encounter difficulties. The mechanic's question 'what sort of oil do you need?' sounds simple, but he may have well have said 'what grade spigot do you take in your gizmo sprengle?' Zak had not told us, and the manual we had been supplied with had a paucity of details concerning the van engine itself - telling us we were driving a 2003 Euro Cruiser, and then moving on to things like 'how to open the microwave door'. In the end we took expert advice and just put mid-grade oil in.

When it came to driving the biggest adaptation required was to the size of the van. Our car in the UK is a little one, a *Toyota Yaris*. However, Emma modified her driving well and once she was used to the van was able to get it to manoeuvre more like a small car - or a formula one car, complete with tight u-turns! Getting used to driving such a different vehicle was obviously the most essential adaptation we made, but we also had to alter our living

patterns to fit in with Harvey.

The most noticeable difference between living in the van and living in a house was the space. When we first saw what a 19-foot vehicle looked like in reality we realized it was much smaller than we had envisioned - especially as the bumpers and engine take up about a third of the length of the vehicle. Space did not end up being an issue with regards to having room for our entire luggage, as there were loads of cupboards, it was more a question of finding enough room for us. Height wise, the ceiling in the main thoroughfare from bed to cockpit was above both our heads, enabling us to move around comfortably. However, if certain cupboard doors were open - and we were not paying attention - we did risk mild concussion.

The lowered ceiling above the driver and passenger seats proved a more damaging hazard in this regard however. Coming forward from the rear of the van to sit down we faced a large shelf stretching the width of the vehicle, like a parcel shelf, and just the right height to collide with one's forehead if you forgot to duck. This happened many a time, right up to our last day with the van. Pigeons would have learned faster!

The worst incident was when Emma ran into it and directly head butted it, compacting the bones in her neck and promptly falling down, briefly losing consciousness. When she had recovered she reported feeling her vertebrae compact with a noise like someone cracking their knuckles. Either the 'comfort' pack provided with the van should have crash helmets added to it, or the shelf needs to be wrapped in bubble-wrap. This was a technique applied to a table by my parents to prevent one of my nieces giving herself a head

injury when colliding with said table. It did not work.

I had to be extra careful when moving round the van while we were in transit, and had to rely on Emma's commentary about bends, accelerating and braking. This allowed me to brace myself, and only resulted in a few Elvis slides on my knees from one end of the van to the other - and one occasion when I nearly fell in Emma's lap.

Less dangerous, but more of a regular irritation, was the lack of length to the bed. As mentioned it was only as long as the width of the van, Emma could lie down straight with an inch or two to spare, while I could fit only if my head and toes were pressed against the sides of the van. This resulted in a kind of curled or kinked sleeping position, to avoid discomfort and feelings of claustrophobia. We tried lying width ways with our feet dangling off the bed but this meant fitting all four of our feet in the space between the two rows of cupboards - barely wide enough for the cupboards to open, so we just curled up and dealt with it.

A proper bathroom was about the only thing that we missed which we did not have in the van. We thought we would miss TV, and at first evenings did seem a bit too quiet and we nearly bought a small radio, but we soon adjusted and have found that we have a reduced tolerance for TV since coming home. But a private bathroom, yes, we were definitely ready to get back to that.

Most campsite restrooms were clean and well equipped but most were also communal - and we missed brushing our teeth in the nude (which we actually do more than I realized). At least we had the chemical toilet in the van - though seeing as we had to empty it ourselves I would not say we were

completely enamoured with it. This did not stop us from using it of course, and despite Zak telling us that it was only really for emergencies we each used it at least three times a day – anything to avoid going outside late at night or early in the mornings. Zak had also told us that it would need to be emptied after every six uses and of course we kept to this advice, well, give or take 50 or so...

Another, rather obvious, way that Harvey was different from a normal house was that he moved, and therefore we learned not to do certain things that you can easily do in a house. And no, we are not talking nighttime activities here, though the van did rock when we walked round inside.... Seriously though, you could not leave any water in the sink - unless you wanted to wash the floor, cupboards, bed, in fact anything else in the splash zone. Second, you had to make sure all cupboards, and particularly the fridge, were properly closed otherwise they swung open when cornering. Third, you could not leave loose articles on top of the work surfaces. Unless secured, they would fall on the floor and - if travelling downhill or braking sharply - slide forwards to the cockpit. Certain things made a regular habit of 'coming to see us' while we drove along, shoes, mobile phone and camera chargers, empty bottles - very friendly! Remember, we were alone a lot...

Part of our morning routine was therefore making sure everything was in its place - at least the breakables! This was also essential in order to keep the place tidy, as there was no room for mess. Putting our clothes away each night was a habit that we actually adopted quite quickly - and dropped just as quickly back in the UK.

When it came to setting up camp we had a team routine with a very traditional division of labour. I went outside to connect the van to the water and electricity supplies, Emma stayed inside to close the curtains, set the microwave clock (which sadly had no memory), and turn the fridge from gas to electricity. The curtains were badly fitted, leaving gaps down the middle and therefore calling for a modification worthy of *MacGyver*. Hand towels were pinned in place with 'chip clips' (pegs for keeping giant bags of crisps closed). The curtain covering the windscreen was at least large enough for this task - but a real hassle to put up (it had temperamental press studs) leading to us leaving it up while driving on one occasion - not far, and at night.... so that's ok isn't it?

The routine continued once I came inside, as I tended to prepare the bathroom, me being the boy and it being a little 'icky'. All it actually involved was moving a mop and bucket out and putting the toilet central in the cupboard, but even so... In the morning we simply reversed these tasks.

The most eccentric things in our 'tin can' were the most seemingly mundane items. The fridge was: not made of metal (a material generally lacking in the van, not identified until we started a magnet collection); too small to fit most bottles upright in the door; not cold enough to keep things frozen - at least not when running on gas (which was the case when we were driving or on sites with no hookups). The microwave was another eccentricity, having variable brightness of display and of cooking power - depending on the voltage we hooked up to. This marvel of the 20th century was the most useful item in the van however - we always heated our coffee in it, having been supplied with a

stove top coffeepot rather than an electric kettle (they don't have these in the US), and washing up water was quicker to heat in there rather than using the boiler.

Finally, the cupboard doors were booby-trapped. One type had handles that bruised your knuckles when you opened them, the other type had a locking mechanism that required a '*Fonzy* tap' to open if anything was left hanging over the door to dry.

All these quirks did not really bother us, they - and the ways that we worked around them - just bonded us to the vehicle and are some of our strongest memories of travelling. In fact we were so close to Harvey that we did not want to leave him when we reached the end of the road, even though we had the prospect of a real bathroom to look forward to. He had been like a friend during our adventures, smiling when we returned to him (well, turning on his courtesy light when we pressed the key fob...). Tears were certainly shed as we dropped him back with the rental agent.

Then we had the shock of our lives, driving the hire car we had booked to get to the airport. It was a small vehicle anyway, but after driving the van 'small' was not an adequate word to describe how tiny it seemed – 'Matchbox' was more fitting. We felt like we were travelling a metre below the road surface, and sitting far too close together, after the size and elevation of the van's cockpit. In fact, Emma kept hitting me and telling me to 'move over'.

If we had had room left in our suitcase I think we would have tried to sneak Harvey home, foibles and all.

## **9 - Death in the valley, life in the desert.**

We spent the next week in two places that could not have been more different - although they are within a couple of hours drive of each other. One is a desolate place where civilization does not seem to have much impact - the other is Death Valley.

The day that we left the Sierra Nevadas, having failed to find fame as film producers in Movie Flats, we arrived in Death Valley National Park. We stayed there for a couple of days, and then we moved on to Las Vegas where we spent the rest of the week.

From natural to man-made, populated to deserted, noisy to quiet, our travels often took us from the heart of the American countryside to the centre of urban sprawls, sometimes within the same day. Waking up in the middle of Death Valley and going to bed in the city that exists in non-stop daytime (actually non-stop night time is probably more appropriate) was certainly the most extreme example of this phenomenon.

When we left the national park after our two days there we also quite quickly crossed over into a different state, Nevada. Straight away we were made aware that we were 'not in Kansas any more'.

We stopped for petrol at the first place we came to, 'Pahrump; Heart of the new old west'. The petrol station looked normal from the outside, but when Emma went through the plain door marked 'restrooms' she found herself in a dark and smoke filled bar. People were gambling and signs advertised 'Taco Tuesday - 10oz beer and two tacos for \$1'. It was as if she had gone through



to *Mr. Benn's* changing room having chosen the 'al Capone' outfit. In the petrol station shop was a row of slot machines, most in use on that sunny Monday morning! Welcome to Nevada, gambling is legal. The town itself gave further evidence that in fact everything is legal somewhere in the desert state. Billboards everywhere prepared us for Vegas, though some of the things they advertised are not allowed (though of course they still exist) in the gambling capital itself. For example: 'Madam Butterfly's massage parlour. Baths and massages and pssst.... there's more!'. Death Valley soon felt like a distant, alien land, as we pushed on to the neon city via increasingly busy roads.

Fortunately we feel equally at home in the wild as in the towns, although we grew tired of visiting places like San Francisco or Los Angeles whereas we never left a national park feeling that we had had enough. In fact if we ever revisit this part of the US we will definitely try to fit in more time in Yosemite, the Grand Canyon and Death Valley. As for Vegas, well, the novelty had worn off by the time we were leaving and returning will probably wait until we have kids – and until they are old enough to visit without having to be locked in the hotel room or be permanently blindfolded.

Arriving in Death Valley and then Las Vegas was one way in which the experience of visiting these two very different places was the same. Both were very daunting and surreal, though the characteristics that caused this emotional reaction were different for each place. For Death Valley the words that sprung to mind as we stopped to look down into the national park were: massive, barren, empty, beautiful, elemental. It was a humbling experience as we looked ahead at the road with tiny cars in the distance. The scale was so

immense it seemed like Britain could have fitted in the empty basin stretching out in front of us. In fact the actual valley is about 100 miles long and 5 to 15 miles wide, but the National Park covers 4687 square miles and is the largest in the continental USA. For Vegas, as we drove through the outskirts of the city towards our hotel the words were: crowded, built up, loud, ugly. This last adjective came to mind because we were arriving during the day when you can see too much and the neon lights look tackier.

In both places we also felt somewhat vulnerable, though the perceived threats were completely different. Within a few minutes of entering Death Valley National Park we saw signs warning of flash floods, tanks of water beside the road for topping up radiators, and signs instructing us that 'Driving Off Roads Is Prohibited' - really, what a surprise. Most of these measures are in force to cope with the ferocious heat and dryness of the summer, but even so we could feel that the valley was hostile. Beautiful, yes, but not to be taken lightly! In the summer people can die in a matter of hours if they fail to take enough water on their hikes. A point graphically made in the newsletter distributed to all visitors. And do not forget our own flash flood experience when it started to rain while we were in a canyon.

In Vegas the vulnerability that we felt had a more mundane cause, simply the fact we were in a busy city, often out walking at night. Having said that, we never felt scared as we had in New York's Meat Packing District. I was just at a constant level of alert for fear of pickpockets.

Comparing our visit to the former playground of Elvis with that to the playground of vultures and rangers in more detail reveals some unsurprising

differences, but also some that we certainly did not expect.

First, accommodation. No prizes for guessing which place provided more in the way of facilities and luxury, (Las Vegas...obviously... unless 'monastic starkness' is what you are into). In fact the only similarity between Vegas and Death Valley on this score was the price, or at least what the price represented: a bargain.

Most of the hotels on the Las Vegas strip are very fancy looking on the outside, decked out to resemble New York, Paris, Rome, or a tropical island, but they are not all the same high standard inside. We decided to stay in the Luxor - an Egyptian style hotel with the main building being a black pyramid. For just \$57 (£35) a night we had a large well appointed en suite room and included extras such as use of the (very nice) hotel spa and (not so great) hotel museum. We also managed to wring a free meal out of the staff when we complained about the poor level of housekeeping we had received. In actual fact 'poor level' merely amounted to a cocktail stick being left on the floor prior to our arrival and not cleaned up, and a dubious stain on our sheets, not really a big deal but certainly worth a free meal. The highlight of our stay, however, was our last night when - for a small charge - we upgraded to a Jacuzzi suite on the 28th (out of 30) floor of the pyramid. This room had two TVs, a lounge area, a nice bathroom, and a four person jacuzzi in the bedroom! We made the most of this by having three jacuzzi baths in less than 24 hours. Never mind that we ended up wrinklier than a basset-hound puppy, it was worth it! The sad thing about upgrading was that we received a much higher level of service - even getting our sheets turned down and chocolates on the pillows. In fact, the service that we encountered was generally a bit

poor - certainly in our own hotel. It often felt like we were treated like the small fry we were – not that we cared about this much, so long as we got freebies!

Accommodation in Death Valley was also cheap - at \$15 dollars a night one of the lowest cost campsites we stayed in. However, where 'luxury' was the word in Nevada, 'primitive' described the Furnace Creek site we stayed in. We had no hookups, there were no showers, in fact there was no hot water in the washrooms, but at least the toilets were flushing ones - not the pits in the ground that we encountered in other national parks. We were also fortunate that our heater in the van was fuelled by propane and so it worked without us being hooked up. At least there were stores nearby to distract us from our facility-free campsite. Well, there was one store (a gift shop/grocery store), plus a couple of eateries - oh, and a borax museum!

The stark contrast between Vegas and Death Valley in terms of accommodation was repeated when it came to food, what was available and how much it cost. In Death Valley we had very little to choose from. Near our camp were a pub style place, a more expensive restaurant, and a diner/café. We opted for the last of these, the 49ers Café, as it was the cheapest. Even so, it was still noticeably dearer than similar establishments outside of the national park, but we were a captive audience – even unable to cook for ourselves in the van due to the lack of hookups. In fact we thought we might literally become captives, the staff were so creepy.

Both nights we were met at the door by the same young girl, though she showed no sign that she had seen us before when we took us to a table on the second night. The first time we ate there she said 'enjoy your meal' in a

very serial killer voice, and then left us with an equally disturbed waiter. He was generally surly, but downright rude when we finished our main course and asked to see the dessert menu. He bought it and then left us for far too long before taking our order. Then, when we just asked for hot chocolate, he said 'is that all?' as if giving us longer with the menu would mean we ordered more. During the meal a Death Valley 'youth' came in for some take out. He sat at the counter jailin' and drinking Red Bull, and exuding big ugly attitude. It was almost laughable. To top the experience off, the food was not even that great!

Walking back to the van beneath a sky crowded with stars and with silence all around soon put us back in a better mood. We even sat out for a while feeling at one with nature - until some animal starting scrambling through nearby undergrowth, at which point we dived inside the van!

In Vegas food was not scarce, in terms of prices and availability we encountered the opposite of Death Valley. All the hotels offered a range of eateries from posh restaurant to hot dog type places. In between they had 'all you care to eat buffets', which we tended to favour, having two meals instead of three most days. The cheapest of these was about \$10 a head (just over £6 at the time we were travelling), and included hot and cold starters and main dishes, puddings and non-alcoholic drinks. In Caesar's Palace - one of the higher end hotels - the buffet cost more but included crabs' legs and Chinese dishes, and had much better service.

The fact that places to rest your head and fill your stomach are more abundant, luxurious and better value for money in Vegas than in Death Valley

is not really surprising, neither is it rocket science to understand why this is the case. Put simply if someone is well fed, well rested and surrounded by cheap opulence they are more likely to want to stay in that place and (hopefully) visit the casinos. And in addition they will also have more of their money left to spend in the casinos. We were very happy with this arrangement as we lacked the chequebook necessary for a serious flutter, but did not lack the stomach capacity necessary for the restaurants.

What *may* surprise you is that in terms of exercise we walked further in Vegas than in Death Valley, covering 11 miles just in one day in gamblers paradise. Part of this was because we had less time to visit Death Valley and so went on several drives in order to see more of the massive national park instead of hiking all day. Also, Vegas is not very RV friendly and the best way to see the strip was by walking – and there was a lot to see and do.

Where gambling was concerned we did not just lack the funds, but also the inclination. Before we arrived in Vegas we set a budget of \$20 for the casinos. This we saved for our departure day - just in case we got bitten by the bug and became addicts. We did visit most of the hotel casinos during our stay, not to decide where to waste our money but because they all have themes, for example Paris or the circus. These themes are reflected in the architecture, the food in some of their restaurants, and the costumes worn by the waitresses circling the games tables. It developed into something of a game - actually more of a compulsion for me - to try to be first to spot the hotel staff. All of the outfits followed the same trend - tops low, hems high. The figures of the staff were similarly similar.... as I'm sure you can imagine.

This was the case everywhere we went, except Bally's Hotel. Here the recruitment team had decided to deviate from type, as the waitresses were all old, ugly and/or overweight - and as a result who has heard of Bally's?

We actually ended up gambling in our own hotel's casino, partly because loyalty seemed appropriate but mainly for the practical reason that we needed to pack and leave afterwards. First thing we did was put a bit of change in the slot machines. These turned out to be quite rewarding for me and I almost always finished with more than I started. We also played a little roulette, at which you have to bet a minimum of 5 dollars. After one turn Emma decided the luck was not with her and so left me to fritter our savings. Personally I think she was in danger of going on a gambling spree and so backed out before betting all we had. Though I was being luckier I did not know when to stop. Playing roulette I bet on red, and won, then on red again, and won...then on red again, bound to lose - and I did. In the end we got bored and just cashed in our chips and slot winnings – we had intended to play until we had used it all. Overall we lost \$8 - such rebels!

So why did we (and most of the other visitors) go to Las Vegas if not to pay off/create debts? Well, partly because it is there, it is on most people's itinerary when they visit the Californian area - and partly because it is a bargain. This was so much the case that we nicknamed it 'Free-va Las Vegas' – original, eh? We saw lots of free shows, got free trips to museums, spent half a day in the Luxor's very posh spa, and got loads of free souvenirs and drinks. Highlights among these were the *Pirates of T I* show - repeated twice each night in front of the Treasure Island (TI) hotel, the 'Carnivale' at the Venetian hotel, and the fountains outside the Bellagio hotel.

Many of the hotels do some sort of free spectacle, for example circus acts, one-man shows, even an erupting volcano in the case of the Mirage Hotel, but Treasure Island really pushes the boat out - literally. The 'Pirates' show involves two large ships fighting each other. One crewed by pirates who end up going overboard when their boat sinks and the other full of scantily clad women. There is music and dancing and pyrotechnics. It stops just short of being a burlesque routine only because it is outside so kids could be in the audience. The show lasts about 30 minutes and was so good we watched it twice. The only other show we watched more than once was outside the Bellagio. Here the huge lake in front of the hotel is the scene of a 3-minute musical event every 15 minutes during the evening. A song begins and the fountains 'dance' in time to the music - dramatic and well worth pausing for, especially moving when Britten's *Hallelujah* chorus was playing. It was a little less moving when it was *I'm proud to be an American citizen* - a song we heard so often whilst stateside that we learned the words, step one on the route to a Green Card.

The Venetian hotel was a very good source of 'added extras'. A 'Carnivale' was taking place while we were in town and a number of free shows were available, including an ice skating display and 'sexy elves' offering photo opportunities (and cheap thrills). In addition every visitor to the hotel received a 'Passeporto' of vouchers, giving various discounts in the shops and restaurants. On our first day in Vegas we scoured these booklets and picked out all the coupons offering free rather than just discounted things. We then trawled the hotel for our treats. We got a free alcoholic drink each in a very nice bar with live music, Vegas pencils, silk scarves, and some



chocolates - not bad for an afternoon's (non) work. So impressed were we that we repeated the trick the next day.

Some of the other freebies left us feeling lucky to have not paid, but unlucky to have wasted time on them. Top of this list were the hotel museums. First we went to the Vegas hall of fame museum in the Tropicana. This was definitely one to walk through rather than linger in - unless you are interested in closely packed and piled up memorabilia (mostly gambling chips). It was like a hybrid supermarket/junk shop/second hand bookshop. But it was free, and to be honest people do not go to Vegas for the museums. We also visited the Tomb of Tutankhamun in the Luxor. The first part of this exhibition, archive video of the discovery of the tomb, was interesting. Unfortunately the rest of the displays are recreations of parts of the tomb, which are interpreted via a very ponderous audio tour, delivered through ancient walkmans.

We could have got a lot more for free - or certainly at reduced rates.... had we been in the market for venereal diseases that is. On every street corner we encountered groups of men giving out leaflets. Their stature suggested they would have been better suited to careers in boxing or work as bouncers rather than being in sales, but then the leaflets they were giving out were not exactly offering 'two for one at Pizza Hut' or '25% off at Sainsbury's'. What they were distributing were flyers, often just business card size, and advertising escorts - illegal in this part of Nevada, hence the furtive street sales campaign. We innocently accepted the first card we were offered but quickly adopted a 'walk by without making eye contact' approach. In order to get people's attention the 'sales reps' somehow flicked the cards together to

make a very loud noise. By the end of the week we were distinctly fed up with this constant hassle so began saying things like 'no prostitutes today thanks' or 'no, we are full up for porn'. We even got out our own business cards and proffered these - the Neanderthal porn dispensers were not amused!

Sadly (!) not everything in Vegas is so freely available and we did pay for a few of our entertainments. For example we went on a gondola in the Venetian hotel, albeit a motorized one. Our 'driver' sung beautifully for us and was actually Italian, it was a bit like *It's a small world* in Disney, but bigger... and with fewer nationalities represented. Yes, the ride was expensive, but still cheaper - and less smelly - than doing the real thing. We also paid for a classic variety act show called 'Viva Las Vegas', though we did get a discount and complimentary drink coupon included...it would not be Vegas (or indeed anywhere in the US) without coupons! The show was cheesy but fun, feeling like the movie-version of Vegas entertainment. Where we really splashed out was on the Cirque Du Soleil performance at the Bellagio hotel. O is a combination of breathtaking circus acts executed on, in, and above water. This was our third Cirque show in a year and we are clearly addicted - no other explanation for spending that much money on something so ephemeral.... well worth it though!

Spending money to be entertained was the exception rather than the rule during this contrasting week spent between Death Valley and Vegas. But price, or rather lack of it, was the only characteristic these activities shared. No scantily clad rangers doing risqué dance routines in Death Valley, much to Emma's disappointment.

The first evening in Death Valley we spent quite a lot of time reading our guidebook and the information we had been given at the park entrance. Seeing as we only had one full day before we had to move on we wanted to see as many of the valley's attractions as we could. As we planned our day we noticed that a ranger-led programme of events was available and so we decided to check out the evening lecture - about geology. Our decision was inspired not by any laudable reason such as education but by the fact that we were staying on a campsite without hookups and were worried about draining our batteries by having the lights on all evening. We also thought it would be cosy and fun to go along to the talk, perhaps there would be a campfire and singing!

Well, the lecture was fun.... but not cosy. It took place in a huge auditorium, which they keep cool in the summer, when the rangers are too busy saving stranded and melting tourists to use it, but they do not heat it in winter. So we all sat huddled in our coats, but at least there was a good turn out and we all sat at the front and close together to conserve warmth! The ranger leading the event was very friendly and managed to keep the audience interested in what was essentially a slide show with pictures your dad might force you to watch. During the talk we found out that rain was due - not overly surprising given our track record - and that some things we wanted to see were inaccessible at this time of year. Based on this lecture we went to several other ranger programmes, sadly inconsistent in terms of quality. For example the next night we braved the frigid lecture theatre again; we had little else to do. The talk was about different walks in the park and it was fun to be able to spot things we had seen that day, however a lot of the previous night's

material was covered again and the ranger was less engaging. We did learn that George Lucas had shot some of the *Star Wars* films in the valley. After the Redwoods and Alcatraz links we were not surprised by this, just proves how little Americans travel. In fact, according to what statistics you use, the percentage of Americans who *do* have passports is between just 7% and 25%.

Although we only had one day to spend in Death Valley we certainly packed a lot in, starting before sunrise and only finishing when it was pitch-black and carrying on hiking would have been pointless - and possibly fatal.

It was zero degrees when we crawled out of bed at six-something a.m., and we quickly dressed in our entire wardrobes (also known as our Michelin Man outfits) before heading up to Zabriskie Point to watch the sunrise. Luckily the sky was clear and we *did* see the sun come up or as I recorded it at the time 'nature silently painted the sky'. Yes, the colours were lovely and it was exciting waiting for the light to spill over the mountains, but it was also a bit slow and left us asking 'yes, and?' Very few people joined us on our early morning vigil, the only other couple that stayed as long as us were English...what do they say about mad dogs and Englishmen? We also saw the obligatory Japanese group, with 50 cameras between 4 people, and some runners – clearly the maddest people there.

After this we spent the rest of the day doing various drives and short hikes around the valley. Including the alien landscape of Badwater Basin - a massive salt flat, which at 282 feet below sea level is the lowest point in the continental United States. A sign marking sea level, half way up the nearest

cliff face, illustrated this point. We walked out for about a mile on to the basin floor and spent ages marvelling at the structures formed by the salt crystals. We had the place to ourselves, as most visitors were not venturing so far out. This enabled me to conduct scientific studies to ascertain if the white stuff present on the ground was indeed salt. It was, and my tongue took a while to recover!

Other hikes took us up canyons to see natural rock bridges, and out to a massive non-volcanic crater, Ubehebe. By driving around we were able to see a lot more, including Artist's Palette - an area of rock face stained different colours by various natural chemical reactions. The scenery varied quite a lot from place to place, but by the end of the day it did feel a bit 'samey'. Nevertheless, more time to spend going on longer hikes would have been very welcome. For example, one can go from the valley floor to a nearby mountain if you have time (and energy) for a two-day expedition.

The saddest sight we saw was Mushroom Rock, a natural formation shaped, unsurprisingly, like a mushroom. We had heard about it at the ranger talk and the initial photograph we were shown looked very impressive. Unfortunately the rock has fallen victim to tourism and, during the last century, a group of scouts broke it by sitting on it. They were not the first group to clamber up and sit on the rock, generations before them had paused there too, and this regular use was, I suppose, part of the reason it finally broke. As often happens the real losers in this tale were not the tourists, but the local Native Americans for whom Mushroom Rock was a spiritual space. As with people hiring hammers to chip off souvenirs at Stonehenge this story belongs to an earlier, less aware, time.

In the national park the only other drain on our bank balance than food was petrol, but at least this commodity came with entertainment included. There are only about two places to buy fuel in Death Valley, resulting in inflated prices. Unfortunately we had to re-fuel while we were visiting, either that or risk becoming stranded in the middle of the desert. The free map we had of the valley indicated where fuel could be purchased and the symbol - a single old-fashioned pump - bore a striking resemblance to the reality. We had to ring a bell for the attendant, as she was also the shop assistant in the nearby attraction – Scotty's Castle. When she came over she told us that young 'mo fos' sometimes ring the bell and run off - charming! She did give us more petrol than she charged us for at least, having admitted to us she was 'blind' and could not read the dial.... I'm sure that it could not have hit their profits much though!

So, what were our overall impressions of these two different places? Well, Death Valley is big, beautiful and peaceful. Somewhere where we generally felt comfortable and relaxed. Vegas is noisy, crowded, visually stimulating and very tiring to visit - like Disney but with more porn, gambling and alcohol! It is a cool place to visit, but if we had had less time there I do not think we would have minded. Though saying that it was very nice having a proper bed and bathroom after three straight weeks in the van!

And where next? Well, back to basics and the Grand Canyon - leaving Las Vegas twinkling behind us.

## **10 - Food part one: is that really what we ordered?**

Which is worse? Having to leave a restaurant before you have even tasted anything; having to send back an order; or having to eat something you would really rather not? Well, as we were travelling for 13 weeks and ate out about two thirds of the time, it is probably not too surprising that some of our experiences were, to put it politely, unique! Better finish your dinner before you read on.

Sunday brunch is an institution in America, or so we thought. So on our first Sunday stateside, our last day in New York, we decided to find somewhere to join the locals in a late breakfast. We had noticed that the restaurant next to our hotel did brunch, but the place did not look that great, so we asked our bellhop for a recommendation. He did not know many places, a poor show for someone in his career, but did mention the Four Seasons. He said they did a champagne brunch for about \$20, just what we wanted. We were very pleased when he also told us that the Four Seasons was only a few blocks away, having spent the last five days in the city walking about 30 miles or so.

We set out feeling very cheery, it was a sunny day, the walk would sharpen our appetites, and we had had a great time in the Big Apple. 30 minutes later after several walks round various blocks we were feeling slightly less cheerful, and we still had not found the hotel. We had found signs for a Four Seasons Café, but it was closed and did not seem posh enough anyway. Just as we were about to give up we crossed the road to check out a fairly unassuming looking skyscraper that did not have a sign outside. As we got

closer we realized there was a tiny sign, and of course it was the right place. It was also only about five minutes from our hotel.

As we walked in we felt very disgruntled and also very out of place, as the hotel was blatantly very expensive and far more posh than we were. We were directed up to the restaurant and a very nice maître d' had someone check our coats and then found us a table. When she sat us she explained that the menu for brunch was a 'taster' style. We thought nothing of this at first and were simply relieved to have found somewhere to eat. Studying the menu we saw that it was a set price for two courses, each of three tasters of different dishes. Not quite what we had in mind, but ok. But then we noticed two more things. First, there were very few dishes that we liked the sound of - they were mainly posh (sorry haut) cuisine. For example, sliver of raw fish on cornflake with a runny egg coulis. Second, a tiny number was printed next to and slightly below the list of dishes, looking more like a page number. The number was 45, the price in dollars for six mouthfuls of food! Beneath the food list was an additional option, three tastes of different champagnes - 23 dollars. So brunch would be 116 dollars between us, and our daily budget for food was 80 dollars. Hmmm.

We had to make a decision quick: leave and be embarrassed, or stay and be hungry for two days. I sidled up to the lady who had served us and explained our hotel staff had misinformed us, and could we leave please. She was very diplomatic and almost apologetic, probably why she had mentioned the style of menu in the first place. Now all we had to do was get our coats from the cloakroom.

I think that the person who had taken them had only just put them on



the hangers, and the coats were still warm! As we virtually sprinted down the hotel steps I felt remarkably un-embarrassed because some things are just not worth sitting still and paying for. We went straight to Shelly's, a restaurant we had spotted on our walk earlier and had a nice cooked breakfast with a cocktail, not the huge 'eat all you want' buffet that we had imagined, but not breaking the bank either.

Hideous though this episode was, at least our server was well informed enough to know that the menu was a special format. Perhaps this is not worthy of mention, knowing the ins and outs of the food where you work is a basic characteristic among restaurant staff after all. Well, actually not necessarily. In a small eatery in Lafayette we had the following conversation with a waitress.

Emma: 'I see that the crab cakes come with taso sauce, can you tell me what that is please?'

Waitress: 'well, it is a sauce that the chef puts on the crab cakes.'

Pure genius, why didn't we think of that? The reason Emma asked is because she cannot eat spicy food, in spite of growing up in the Midlands. However spicy food is a difficult thing to avoid in the Cajun country around Lafayette.

The waitress, on hearing this, brought some sauce out for Emma to try.

Luckily it was not spicy, so crab cakes were ordered. Unluckily, the cakes themselves were very spicy! Well, at least there was a baked potato with the meal, just with butter according to our waitress - but actually with bacon, sour cream, chives...and chilli. Yum! The only non-spicy thing on her plate was a bread roll – it was just a pity this was deep fried (honestly) and thus more like

a doughnut and disgusting. On the receipt as we left I noticed the following implausible statement 'award winning employees' Who? And won what? And what for?

Another problem that we encountered in American restaurants was not with the servers' knowledge of their menus, but with their knowledge of our language. When faced with such barriers to understanding we resorted to the technique employed by British tourists the world over, we spoke more slowly and louder. There was also a great deal of miming. If this did not seem to work then we just sat back and waited to see what would arrive - often with fairly humorous results.

The first time that we were faced with our own linguistic ignorance was in Chinatown in New York. We chose the New Green Bo based on the plaudits it had received and cellotaped to its windows. Normally we relied on our guidebook when choosing from the plethora of eateries available - especially in the cities, but on this occasion the restaurant that we were searching for had moved and we just noticed the New Green Bo as we walked past. The place was very small, sparsely decorated and very popular - a good sign – and it had a 'greasy spoon' feel to it. Once we secured a table we turned our attention to the extensive menu. We soon spotted dishes similar to those we buy from take away places in England and decided to order about the same amount as we usually would - a dish each, rice, a starter and a portion of crispy duck as a middle course. Our waitress arrived and spoke very little English (practically none), so it was a bit of a 'point at the menu' order, but OK, not the first time we had done that. However, as we

ordered the waitress' eyes kept widening, and we knew we were doing something wrong. We responded to her facial expression by trying to indicate our ignorance as to what was an appropriate amount to order, but in this we failed!

Soon the food began to arrive. The starter, dumplings, was about twice the size of a similar dish in the UK. The duck was about the size we expected, but not cooked the same way as we are used to, chopped rather than shredded, and with broken bits of bone still attached, so we did not eat much of it - no worry though, we certainly did not starve. Each main dish, and the chicken fried rice, was big enough to be a full meal for both of us. Fortunately there is a real 'doggy bag' culture in the US - probably because their portions are so big - so we asked for our leftovers, virtually two whole dishes to be packed up.

A few minutes later we left feeling full, satisfied (by the quality and cheapness of the food) and with me incredibly excited. Excited because the doggy bags were the little square boxes with metal handles that I had long coveted when I had seen the *Friends* gang have them. I was slightly concerned that these take-out boxes might be a myth, having discovered that the other American food treat that I had been looking forward to experiencing, the Soda Fountain, was not actually a big stream (or series of streams) of soft drink shooting up into the air and waiting for me to put my cup under. Emma laughed at me for days when I admitted to this misconception!

A few weeks later we received a language lesson in a fast food restaurant. You might expect all dishes in these types of eateries to be easy to order, but not so in Taco Bell. I spent about five minutes trying to order a

quesadilla, ('quez-a-dill-a') five times longer than the time needed to eat one, while the server looked confused, and then amused. Finally she leaned forward and said the word correctly, slowly and in a loud voice: 'kess-a-di-ya' She then waited for me to repeat. I am now fluent in the Mexican fast food language. We never ate in Taco Bell again.

At least in Chinatown we had been able to get our food by pointing and in Taco Bell by perseverance, in spite of our linguistic shortcomings – but we were not so fortunate in a small restaurant in the Florida Keys.

Manny and Isa's Restaurant on Islamorada is a Cuban place renowned for its Key Lime Pie. When we visited we had no idea what we would have as a main course, not being au fait with Cuban cuisine, but at least we knew what we wanted for dessert.

As it turned out the menu was generic and choosing was not the problem, ordering was. Our first indication of this came when I had to ask for water about ten times, eventually using sign language – do not ask! This encounter was obviously too much for our waitress because another staff member then came and served us. We did eventually get the water though. Emma and I decided that my Oxfordshire accent had been the problem and so she did the rest of the ordering with her Wolverhampton accent - soon discovering that accents were not the only barrier to communication. I was having a bowl of soup with a side of garlic bread, a request rapidly understood by our diminutive Cuban waitress. Emma's order went something like this:

Emma: 'Can I have a cup of soup?'

Response: 'Coca-cola?'

'No, cup of soup' (slowly and loudly)

'OK'.

'And a BLT'.

Waitress nodded and departed.

Quite soon the soup arrived, a bowl and a cup as ordered. My garlic bread was next. This cost about two pounds, and I was expecting two small slices of baguette - as you would get in most places in the UK - but I actually got a whole basket filled with about a loaf of bread. This seemed too much and we wondered if they had brought us two portions by mistake, so Emma tucked in as well. A few minutes later and Emma's BLT had still not arrived, OK we thought, no sandwich but enough garlic bread for two - fine. But then the waitress came back to our table with a plate. As she approached I could see that whatever was on the plate was too flat to be a sandwich, it was also dark coloured. I thought she was bringing the sandwich in stages, in a bizarre move, bacon first. But what she put down on the table was definitely not a plate of bacon; it appeared to be a plate of squashed and fried slugs. We both looked at the plate, then the waitress, then the plate again. Sensing our confusion, our server pointed at the plate and said (in a very thick accent): 'Plantains'.

Emma shook her head and said: 'BLT'.

At this the woman nodded vigorously, pointed at the plate again and said:

'Plantains'.

More slowly this time Emma said: 'B-L-T', adding: 'I ordered a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich' when the poor woman still looked bemused.

'Oh' she said: 'BLT. OK.'

She then made to walk away, leaving the slugs and apparently seeing the sandwich as a new order. Quickly Emma tried to clarify things: 'I ordered the sandwich before'.

'OK' said the waitress: 'Sorry'.

However, she obviously still intended to leave the plantains. I pointed out that we did not want them, having never ordered them, and the waitress took them away. At this point I think she realized what had happened and she spent the rest of the meal chuckling to herself and apologizing. We spent the rest of the meal thinking about how she could possibly have got confused. Recalling her accent we realized that when she said plantains it actually sounded like 'b-lan-tains' - quite similar to 'BLT'. Even so, who would order a plate of fried plantains, small bananas as far as I know, with soup? At least the food was good, especially the pie. We saw several people taking away whole pies - maybe this is the trick, do not eat there, just 'hit and run'. Emma did finally get the BLT by the way.

Linguistic obstacles did not only arise in the food domain, though obviously this was the only time when they had the potential to be life-threatening! Quite often I received blank looks because of using UK English instead of the US version, for example saying 'bill' instead of 'cheque' in restaurants. Emma adapted more easily to American-isms, even telling someone where we 'made our toilet' in the van, rather than saying 'there is the loo' - why she told someone this is another story, too long to recount here. Sometimes we had UK English quoted at us by the Americans, most memorably a waiter told Emma she had a 'where's the bog?' look when she approached him - charming!

The funniest time we caused confusion with our 'British English' was when we told a national park ranger that we would not be cold because we had jumpers in the van. The ranger burst out laughing, a slightly inappropriate reaction we felt. She went on to explain that a jumper means a pinafore that schoolchildren wear, and she was imagining me in one. Kinky!

Even when we did not have communication problems with restaurant staff things did not always go smoothly. For example in an IHOP (International House of Pancakes) I ordered the 'eat all you want popcorn shrimp' meal deal. After two basketsful I was stuffed and so when the waitress returned Emma ordered a waffle to share and I kept quiet. The waffle arrived and Emma started on her half, and then *more* shrimp arrived. I looked in horror at the massive portion and began to speak, but then my stomach got the better of me and as the server started to say 'didn't you want that?' I quickly said 'no, no, that's fine' and tucked in. And then managed my half of the waffle. Growing up with seven brothers and two sisters I still struggle to turn away food.

Even when we did get what we ordered things were not always that great. Picture the scene. It is late morning, we are in a theme park on a sunny day and we go to a small diner for an egg and bacon sandwich. The food comes in fast food style boxes; we open them and pause in shock. The egg is green, not a fleck of mould, but completely green. Our next move? We smothered it in ketchup and ate it. Well, I will be honest it was the Green Eggs and Ham' cafe in Dr. Seuss-land, Universal Studios!

Sometimes, however, the unappetizing nature of the food we ordered was not just cosmetic. There was the time we tried the innovative KFC buffet in Biloxi. It contained all the usual suspects, wings, thighs, drumsticks, but also a selection of smaller deep fried treats. These turned out to be gizzards, livers and kidneys - and also some tube shaped pieces.... allegedly courgette! Being me I tried it anyway, I will try anything once. There was also the time when we ordered 'dessert pizza' from a delivery service. Our thinking was, 'that's unusual, let's try that'. Our thinking should have been, 'never seen dessert pizza before. Bound to be weird, let's not order that'. We got seduced by the novelty of the dish, wondering 'what could it be?' What it was was custard, on toast (well, soggy dough!) Not good, but again 'eyes open' and all our own fault. Sometimes however we did not get what we expected, even if it was what we ordered.

In New York every street corner has a man selling coffee and pretzels, doughnuts and other such treats, often with deals such as coffee and a doughnut for \$1. Every corner also has Starbucks as well, with similar offerings but very different prices. We could see these mobile vendors from our hotel window, but most days we elected to have the complimentary breakfast of bagels and coffee with our fellow guests. One morning however we gave into the temptation to buy breakfast on the hoof, having discovered that that day's bagels tasted like (and probably were) last week's.

When we asked the guy manning the coffee cart for the dollar deal he gestured to a variety of snacks we could choose from to have with our coffee. They all looked a bit strange but the most appetizing one resembled a twist doughnut - like a Yum Yum. We selected this but soon discovered it was



either not a doughnut, or it was not cooked. Whichever was the case, it was not nice. And we had rejected free stale bagels for this?

On this occasion we took consolation from the fact that we had not wasted much money - and it was only our breakfast. A few days later when we rolled into a San Franciscan restaurant jet lagged and hungry there was nothing to console us.

We had flown from the east coast to the west, a long flight made worse by crossing three time zones, and the only food we had eaten was on the plane – so ‘food’ is a loose term. Nevertheless tiredness overruled hunger for quite a while and we sat watching TV until early evening. Eventually we roused ourselves enough to look at the various menus in our room. We decided we wanted ribs and that we would go out rather than ordering in as it would be cheaper.

Five minutes walk and we arrived at the Lyons restaurant, a dingy looking place with generic leatherette booths and interesting looking patrons. Our waitress was fairly rude, combining brusqueness and inefficiency effortlessly. At one point she actually growled at us. Needless to say she got our order wrong - or so we thought. We decided to share a starter dish and a main course of a full rack of ribs. To make things easier and avoid explaining that we would split both courses Emma just ordered the mozzarella stick starter, quite a common eating pattern in the US, and I ordered the ribs. My main course came with salad, which we also split. Then the mozzarella and the meat arrived at the same time. Instantly we could see something was wrong.

The ribs were a huge piece of very fatty steak. We quickly got the

waitress' attention and said that I had ordered ribs. She pointed at the quivering pile of flesh on my plate and said: 'Yes. Prime rib'.

'No I wanted rack of ribs' I replied.

'You ordered this' the server insisted – and this was probably the moment she chose to growl. At this point we demanded to see the menu, intending to set the record straight by pointing out what I had chosen. The waitress grumpily got this and I found the dish and said: 'Look. Full.... pound of prime rib. Oh...'. So keen was I to have ribs that I had hallucinated them onto the menu. When actually it only offered this US classic, the very strange 'prime rib'. We were now very apologetic and embarrassed. At least we would not starve; we had a pound of meat to eat. Except that the meat was so fatty that we had to leave a lot of it. What we did eat was incredibly tender though, probably because the meat is boiled for days and then fried. At least this is how we think it is cooked, though somehow it is still pink when served. Later I felt decidedly sick, like my stomach was coated in grease. As we left we grabbed some mints from by the register in order to take the taste away. These turned out to be cinnamon flavoured and foul, not mint at all. Not a good night!

In order to end on a happy, and savoury note, we did often get the food we wanted. And on one occasion we got exactly what we had wanted, and ordered, over a year before. This was in Captain Jack's in Downtown Disney, Orlando, Florida. On our previous visit to Disneyworld we found the restaurant to be friendly and the food - though not spectacular - good, and reasonably priced. Returning to places where you had good experiences can be risky, a bad meal can spoil the evening and the memories, but on this occasion we

were lucky. The menu, including prices, seemed identical and the food quality was still high, over a year after our last visit. 'But where's the fun in having the same meal?' you might ask. In this case people smashing glasses near to us and our waitress being 'highly strung' provided the fun. Entertainment always whets the appetite! Plus we got undercharged, which is always good! Especially on a small budget.

## **11 - Big hole in the ground**

We left Vegas on the 19th December and arrived back on the pacific coast, in Los Angeles, just four days later on the 23rd. Oh, and in between we travelled nearly 800 miles, crossed three state borders, changed time zone twice and visited two more national parks. Over ambitious? Surely not!

Actually, yes it was a bit too much and we both got bad colds over the next week or so, evidence that even being on holiday takes its toll if you do not have days off.

Driving away from Las Vegas we did not suffer from heavy hearts. We certainly were not going to miss all the noise and light, cool though it had been to experience it. I was already feeling under the weather and looking forward to the tranquillity of our next destination - the Grand Canyon. More alarmingly we had been suffering from increasingly frequent and powerful electric shocks since entering the gamblers den, presumably caused by all the hotel carpets and neon lights. We had to ground ourselves before touching each other and the shocks continued for several days after we moved on. Even if you do not drink, smoke, or gamble Vegas is obviously bad for your health. Yes, we were definitely ready to move on – though we did miss the comfy bed and personal jacuzzi.

Las Vegas to Grand Canyon did not seem like too far to travel in one day; organized tours frequently go from one attraction to the other. However, the

route we took was about 280 miles and meant driving all day because the roads were bad. The tourist trips from Las Vegas are able to take a more direct route - they go by plane!

We made the journey with very few stops, mainly because we knew we had a lot of ground to cover, but also because we were travelling through a whole lot of nothing. Plains stretched out around us for most of the day and we always seemed to be driving towards mountains - a feature of many of our drives. Beautiful in its starkness, but with such straight and quiet roads we seldom had to stop for a chance to admire the view. So we only stopped for the essentials, petrol, restrooms, oh, and the police.

Not long after leaving Vegas I looked ahead on the map and realized we were going to be driving across the Hoover Dam. This proved to be the viewing highlight of our day, involving driving through mountains and seeing the massive feat of engineering that is the dam itself. The prospect of seeing this did not overly excite us, but we were pleased-by-proxy at the thought we would get so close to it. Emma's father is an engineer and would probably have gone out of his way to see Hoover's biggest legacy. In fact during a plane trip over the Grand Canyon when Emma and her parents visited when she was little he was more excited by the dam than by the canyon. We therefore vowed to take lots of photos as we drove towards and over the dam.

As it turned out the experience was more interesting than we expected. First, it is an impressive sight. Second, in the middle of crossing the dam we moved into a different state, Arizona, and also a different time zone - Mountain Time. Unfortunately this meant losing an hour, not good seeing as we still had hundreds of miles to drive and it was already mid afternoon. The

third thing that made it more fun was having to stop for a police check before crossing the dam.

Looking down the road we could see that only some vehicles were being stopped, and of course that included us (or to be less paranoid they stopped all vehicles bigger than cars). When it was our turn a very polite young policeman, complete with ranger hat and big gun, asked permission to come aboard. He looked through all the big cupboards and then let us carry on. Afterwards we were not completely sure if he was checking for illegal immigrants or explosives to destroy the dam - maybe both? At least it broke the journey up a bit.

I increasingly pined for the hotel room in Vegas - or indeed any hotel room – as the day wore on. My cold descended over me as we ascended into higher and colder climes. Late in the day we were forced to stock up on cold remedies at a petrol station. Buying medicine in a foreign country is always more difficult than at home because names and packages are so different. While in New York we had to buy painkillers, ending up scouring the ingredients list and taking expert advice. For my cold we eventually tracked down alternatives to *Lemsip direct* - at least I think that is what it was. The price was certainly high enough to reassure us that it was medicine. Any hope that we would reach our campsite during office hours evaporated when we lost an hour on the Hoover Dam. In fact, as the afternoon turned to evening we began to wonder if we would be there for when the office opened the next day. Progress seemed very slow, even though the clear roads enabled us to maintain a steady speed. I think the illusion that we were getting

nowhere fast was due to the monotony of the scenery. The last hour or so of the journey was spent in darkness and on very deserted roads, both in terms of other travellers and indeed any evidence of civilization. But then, just as we were beginning to think we would have to change plans and sleep in the van by the roadside, we reached Tusayan, the nearest town to the Grand Canyon National Park.

The town is not big, just a few hotels and stores stretched out on either side of the road, and when we drove up at about eight o'clock in the evening it seemed dead. With snow on the ground and less than a week until Christmas this did not surprise us much, but at least our campsite was listed as open all year. We drove straight to the site and instantly realized that the office was shut for the night. Never mind, we had done night check-in before, however the whole site seemed to have an air of 'closed' about it. I jumped out into the snow and went to investigate the office; quickly confirming it was closed. For the season.

But hold on, *Woodall's* (our camping bible) said it was open, and for this to be a lie would be sacrilege. I returned to the van and got the campsite's telephone number. My hope was that there would be an answer phone message saying the camp was still open, albeit with reduced services, as indicated by the camping directory. I trudged back through the snow to use the payphone, but the message was clear (because I could hear it through the office wall without needing the telephone receiver in my hand) – 'come back in spring'. *Woodall's* was fallible, our faith was broken and there was a great deal of blaspheming going on.

Next stop the national park itself, as the state camp was definitely

supposed to be fully operational - according to the recently debunked religion of Woodall's-ism. Driving into the park we passed a surprising amount of traffic, and we got quickly disorientated. A combination of lack of detailed map, lack of road signs, and a lack of inclination then meant we soon turned around and headed back to town. The prospect of staying in a government, and therefore probably primitive, campsite was not appealing - assuming we could find it and it was open and it had spaces. As soon as we had driven away from the closed camp in Tusayan we had mooted the idea of booking into a hotel - at least for one night - and this sounded like a very good choice to my cold-addled mind.

Besides, whilst driving in the park we were acutely aware that the road was close to the Canyon, and we could sense the void away to our right. No, driving in the pitch black in this place did not seem sensible.

Ten minutes later we had enquired in about six hotels about availability and asked for 'best offers' (surprisingly cheaper than the rates first quoted). We settled on a Holiday Inn Express with prices that were just within our nightly budget - though admittedly about three times what we had actually been spending each night. Emma loaded me up with an overnight bag to take to our room, so I could get inside straight away, and then she drove off in search of food. Or at least tried to drive off.

The hotel car park was very crowded and we had spent about ten minutes manoeuvring into a space, with about a hair's breadth between Harvey and the nearest cars. Emma now faced reversing out of said space. And did I mention the car park was sheathed in ice? Earlier, on leaving the closed campsite, we had proceeded very gingerly over ice-bound back roads.



We successfully avoided skidding, but later in the hotel car park we were not so lucky. The back wheels got stuck on a patch of ice and Harvey was going nowhere - except possibly into the side of a parked car. Just before I went into the lobby for help, grit or even just some cat litter, the rear wheels suddenly shifted and the van got free. The spinning wheels had eventually melted the ice. Almost hairier than the Sherman Pass.

15 minutes later Emma returned from her moderately successful hunt for food with sandwiches, crisps, and hot chocolate. A petrol station had proved to be the only open place, we felt like we were living in a war - embattled and scrounging for food and lodging. Am I being a bit melodramatic? Yes, maybe. But I was sick! The hotel room and bed were extremely welcome; it was like being back in Vegas (except with no jacuzzi, one less TV, and no free porn....)

The next morning my cold was worse and I was delirious. Every time we turned on the TV all I could see were elves and goblins, trudging mindlessly from one place to another for hours at a time... Actually it was *Lord Of The Rings* - on every channel. They were doing a special for the whole weekend, coinciding with the release of the third film. By the end of the day we had managed to see the whole of the first film, just in pieces and out of order. We also fitted in two other films and some serious napping, in a bid to beat the cold that Emma was now suffering with as well.

So, here we were, a few miles from one of the greatest wonders of the natural world, and doing what? Watching American daytime TV. We really were sick. We were determined to see the Canyon however, who would not

be having driven for a day and spending \$80 a night on a room? In the mid afternoon we wrapped up warm and drove to the nearest visitor centre. Thinking we were headed to the information centre and planning to pick up some maps, get advice, etc., we walked through a thin stand of trees, following the crowd. Unfortunately we went the wrong way, and all we found was a 'big hole in the ground'. This is how a recent Burger King advert chose to describe the Canyon.... and it is so true.

The land drops away very steeply, and very far, and the 'hole' stretches away for miles. The only thing wrong with the fast food commercial? The actor should say BIGGGGGGGG - not just big. The weather was cold, almost cold enough to snow, but the sky was clear and lit up the canyon beautifully. The sunlight also made the rocks seem soft, which I'm sure they are not, and I imagine that in other conditions the colourful 'hole' would appear more rugged and foreboding. As it was, we were considering taking a stroll part of the way down to the canyon floor, as friends of ours had earlier in the year. With this in mind we headed - the right way - to the visitor centre.

Outside the building we found huge panels describing various aspects of the park - including the trails available. These trails are graded according to how hard the hikes are - and use 'number of sandwiches required' as a key. We quickly discovered that the easiest walk was declared 'hard' (four sandwiches) and most were 'hard/strenuous' - needing a whole loaf of sandwiches, probably doorstep ones, and not poncy panninis. The information also said that we would need crampons at this time of year. In the other national parks that we had visited we had usually tackled easy or moderate trails...we really had no hope here.

It is not possible to hike all the way to the bottom and back in one day, and seeing as I'd struggled with the five-minute walk from the car park we decided we were probably best coming back on another trip. For now we found out about some drives and points of interest around the canyon rim, and planned to try these the next day. We were not in the mood to do anything else until then. Yes the Grand Canyon is incredible, but having done a month of seven-day weeks we just wanted a rest. We headed back to our hotel, just in time to watch *Lord of the Rings*.

'If you're well enough to eat breakfast, then you're well enough to go to school'. This must be one of those parental sayings right up there with 'you'll get a cold if you go out with wet hair'. Presumably then if you are not well enough to eat breakfast you should not go out, to school or anywhere. We still went out the next morning however, in spite of not being able to face the hotel breakfast of cinnamon buns and dubious muffins. This was our last day at the Grand Canyon and we were determined to see more of it before hurtling back to California. We did dry our hair before we went out though.

Again the weather was very cold, and this time there were clouds breaking up the blue sky. Rather than spoiling the view they actually made it more interesting, providing some dramatic shadows that helped give the canyon more depth for photographing. We did not go straight to the rim however but first took in a ranger talk about how the canyon was formed.

The most impressive thing about this particular lecture was the presenter's huge and bushy beard - not a glowing compliment really. The talk itself was very difficult to follow, using language that I - a former geology

student – could not always grasp. The visitor centre contains a large 'cut away' model showing the rock types making up the canyon walls, a fairly clear visual aid. Sadly the ranger did not use this much, except when giving a far too detailed list of the laying down of the rock types. Partly this was due to the large audience precluding everyone getting a clear look at the exhibit, mainly though it was underused because the elderly presenter had another prop which he favoured - his arms. These skinny limbs he used to indicate the passing of time. Not by saying 'look how old and wrinkly my body is', but by saying 'my shoulder is two ga-zillion years ago, my wrist is this morning'. Or something like that.

We did leave the visitor centre with an increased knowledge and appreciation for the Canyon, and determined to see more of it before lunchtime, or knuckle-time as our ranger friend might have put it. To drive around the rim is 215 miles and some of it is closed off during the winter. Even so, the bits you can drive to would have taken us at least the day to see, so we chose a shorter route suggested by the park service - which still took the rest of the morning to cover.

Every few 100 metres there is a lay-by and viewing area from which to take in the incredible sight. At first we stopped and both got out to take a look. Soon however, we realized that if we ever wanted to get to the end we would have to skip some of the views, we also got a bit bored as the view does not change that much if you only go a bit further down the road. At times when we stopped I would scout the view and then tell Emma if it was worth her getting out.

Again we felt that we would have got more out of the experience had

we been well. Hiking into the canyon even a little way would have enhanced the views, and our memories of the trip, to a great degree. Looking into the Canyon we saw a surprising number of brave souls hiking despite the weather, which threatened snow several times during the day and actually delivered a few flakes at one point. Looking like ants, walkers were visible on various levels of the switchback trails, some were even marching across the canyon floor - presumably having spent the night camped out there. We did several short walks during the day, but only from various car parks to the edge of the Canyon. One time when we did descend part way down to a viewing platform we soon learned that we were not fit enough for a serious hike here, colds or not. We were able to enjoy the spectacular views though, and although at times it felt a bit 'samey' the shock of how the canyon opens out in front of you when you push through the narrow screen of trees never left us. It's like a giant yawn in the earth's crust. Perhaps the strangest thing about this arresting sight was how the ground round the edge of the 'hole' was snow covered, but the Canyon itself was mostly barren and desert-like. A strange juxtaposition.

We also took in a few man-made features during the day. First, Hermit's Rest - where you can see the remains of a prospector's mine, visit a typical 'tourist-trash' shop, and experience some of the scariest loos in the US...not as small a category as one might think. Next we stopped in the Grand Canyon resort town, which is called Grand Canyon Village – a name obviously the result of a multi-million pound marketing exercise. This is where many tourists stay and the nearest train station is based. It felt like a Swiss ski resort, with wooden buildings and snow flurries. Here we had a

mediocre lunch for a fairly exorbitant price and bought souvenirs from a less trashy National Park shop.

We finished our day in the 'Desert View' area of the canyon edge. On the way we stopped at the tiny Tusayan museum and took a rapid self guided tour through some fields. Actually the tour was round the remains of an 1185 pueblo village, not much to see and a little uninspiring. At Desert View itself there is a 'historic' watchtower - dating back to...brace yourself...1933. Sadly (or not) we arrived too late to go inside for a tour.

Driving back towards our hotel we were treated to a glorious sunset, necessitating several more stops in order to 'ooh and ahh' the canyon, and the taking of another 100 or so photographs. By dusk - between four and five pm, we were knackered and so headed for early dinner at a restaurant near our hotel.

The place was already busy and we were soon glad that we had arrived early as we received slow and inattentive service (and by inattentive I mean 'rubbish'). The food was ok, certainly not great - including as it did a stroganoff served with rice on a bed of pasta. Nevertheless we decided to order pudding, but then changed our minds when the server did not come for our order and we realized we would probably be ordering breakfast by the time he returned. Instead we headed back to our room, feeling a little less sick and intending to go for a short swim. As it turned out this was not our lucky night because the pool was closed. The reason? It was due to the presence of (in the receptionist's own words) 'child poop!' This took out the one leisure activity available to us, forcing a return to the room and a flick through the TV

channels or 'Hobbit-vision', as it should have been called.

We rose the next day with the prospect of another mammoth drive ahead of us. We were due in LA in a day's time and wanted to spend some time in Joshua Tree National Park before arriving in 'smog central'. With this in mind I aimed for a campsite east and slightly south of the national park. During the day however we changed our minds, decided to travel further and headed for 29 Palms golf and RV resort. Were we enticed by the thought of playing a round? No, but we had seen that the camp had a pool and spa - both heated - according to *Woodall's* at least....

The long drive was filled with more wide, open spaces, not much to see, so we soon broke it up with a food stop. We quickly filled up with Denny's breakfast - a fast growing institution on long-drive days. As well as good food this Little Chef type chain always provided entertaining staff experiences. On this occasion we confused our waitress when Emma asked for extra bacon instead of pancakes, the only part of the request she seemed able to deal with was 'no pancakes'. Perhaps this was because she was dealing - successfully - with a neighbouring table's request for no oil to be used during the cooking.

This food stop, and a subsequent search for somewhere to have the oil changed, were the only breaks we took en route to 29 Palms – a journey of around 350 miles. Otherwise the only diversions from the very empty scenery were huge trains with 100+ coaches, two trees adorned with trainers in a creepy style, and strange graffiti composed of small stones arranged beside the road. The act of driving did not even provide exciting diversions from the view, as the roads were straight and flat most of the time. To pass the time we chatted and actually found out more - too much more - about each other. You

know, secrets: who you have kissed, lies you have told, criminal records you have accrued - everyday things.

By the time we reached the campsite we were a little hysterical due to the drive and fear that we were getting too familiar with each other and might have to split up. At least we had the prospect of the hot spa to look forward to and a quiet night in. These plans were almost derailed when the 'snowbirds' (retired people who spend half the year in their RVs avoiding colder climes where they actually live) that made up 98% of the campsite population came round singing carols and inviting us to join them for 'chilli in the recreation room'. Fortunately we were able to be non-committal and knew we would not be missed as they made it clear we were not their type of campers...owing to our active pulse and combined age of about half of one of theirs. Instead we had microwave tea in the van and then tried the pool, too chlorine-filled and too reminiscent of *Cocoon*, especially given the elderly clientele around. Following this we went in the spa. This turned out to be bigger than our one in Vegas, more like a swimming pool, and a little too hot, but fairly relaxing/scalding.

The next day we headed into Joshua Tree National Park. The park is smaller and less well known than Death Valley or the Grand Canyon, however it was also on the route we planned to take to LA and since we had already bought a pass to all the National Parks we decided to drive through. In addition to these practical reasons the write up in our guidebook sounded interesting. As well as the trees themselves - which are short and spiky - the park was said to contain surreal, dali-esque rock formations. This sounded like a description



rich in artistic license; but it proved to be incredibly accurate.

We spent an hour or so driving and walking in the park, visiting sights like skull rock - where I had my photo taken standing in a huge nostril. We were very impressed. The park is mainly a large rocky plain, out of which stick sporadic outcrops of rocks, which are easy to climb, and are indeed surreal - melting into each other. And then there are the trees. Hundreds of them stretch away towards the horizon, like a mad orchard. Combined with the rocks the park is very *Flintstones* and well worth a visit. Sadly we did not have much time for hiking, as we wanted to avoid driving into LA during rush hour. Of course with experience we realized that Los Angeles on the day before Christmas Eve is always rush hour.

From Joshua Tree we drove through increasingly inclement weather to the outskirts of the city. We were both very preoccupied with our thoughts - of driving, for Emma having read that LA is a nightmare to travel into, and of navigating, for me having seen the map! Our scenery tried to divert us with comedic signs announcing 'Kickapoo trail' and 'Giraffic Park - a living desert' (zoo); sadly we could not be distracted and pushed on to the city of angels. As we neared our destination - Anaheim - the clouds kept rolling in and it began to rain, suiting our brooding moods. The roads were packed - except when we could go in 'car pool' lanes for vehicles with two or more occupants. American cars, big as they are, generally only seem to fit one passenger, so we had the lane to ourselves much of the time. In a bid to lighten the mood we played our Christmas compilation tape and soon found Chris Rea 'driving home for Christmas' - how appropriate. Sadly it also included David Essex, The Jackson Five, and panpipes!

Finally, and with no wrong turns or screeching brakes (a Christmas miracle!), we reached our destination, the Ramada Maingate Hotel, Anaheim. And our Christmas date with Mickey and Minnie.

## **12 - planes, trains and buses**

If self-knowledge is to be found high on a Tibetan mountain or deep in a South American rainforest then where are we to learn about others? Simple, catch the Number 20 to the local shops.

This theory is not going to sit well with anthropologists who envisage their international all expenses paid field trip being replaced by a bus pass, but it is true. The only way to really get to know a society is through their public transport system. For example, come to London, take the Northern Line at rush hour and you will find out a lot about British people - more than you may wish to know.

Although not anthropologists Emma and I did choose to shun private transport on various occasions during our 13 weeks in the states and it did bring us closer to American culture. In particular, we got a close up view of the arse-end of this society - once quite literally.

Picture the scene if you dare. San Francisco, rainy day, crowded bus. Emma and I were on our way to the Californian Academy of Science. This involved a serious fix of public transport, as we needed to get 3 buses. On the last of these we were sitting quite happily, keeping quiet and avoiding eye contact with our fellow passengers, as you do if you want to steer clear of provoking homicidal rants from anyone, including the driver. Suddenly a young man (or 'youth') got on and struck up conversation with another young lad and obvious friend. They were having an increasingly animated discussion, though completely friendly. It was impossible not to eve's drop and

the conversation went something like this.

'Hey dude' (In a Bill of *Bill and Ted* voice)

'Hey dog' (In a Ted of *Bill and Ted* voice)

'I've just been talking to my counsellor about Alice (evidently a girlfriend) and her name's Alice as well'

'No way'

'Way'

'Did you go to the Twins' party?'

'Yes'

'They gave me a white widow' (we guessed this was some kind of drug.)

'Cool. You going in to college?'

'Yeah dude. They suspended me for something I did not do, so I'm going to clear it up'

'Bad. I was out with dog-dude last night and had a bottle of Daniels, but he stole it off me'

'Did you buy it in the first place?'

'No, lifted it'

'Rad, never buy anything'

'No way dude. Anyway, see you later dude dog'

'Later dog dude dog'

At this point the one guy, who had spent the whole conversation pushing oversized headphones from around his neck to his ears and back again, stood up to leave. When we had first seen him we had had him down as a studious, preppy type. He had clean clothes - shirt and jeans - and well groomed hair. When he spoke however we realized he was a real surfer-

dude, and when he stood up we got more than a glimpse of the sub-culture he belonged to. His jeans were the extra baggy ones normally worn by pregnant women but recently favoured by drug-filled youths, perhaps to make strip searches easier? Anyway, his crotch was round his knees already but as the bus jolted to a stop he let go of his Walkman and the headphones pulled out of the socket. The Walkman then vanished inside his cavernous jeans, soon reappearing at his feet. The 'dude' stooped to retrieve it and as he did his jeans slipped off his hips and down past the bottom of his boxer shorts. 'Jailin' at its best - or worse. We shared stifled laughter with our fellow travellers before returning to studiously staring at our own feet.

However, the image of this guy with his trousers round his ankles stayed with us the rest of the day - quite disturbingly. In fact, that evening we tried an experiment to see if I could balance my trousers on my hips, sadly the only way it worked was to have the flies slightly undone. The youth today must have very tiny, but very pointy hips. Oh, and jeans with more material than most parachutes. Dude!

At the start of this anecdote I used the phrase we 'chose to shun private transport' in favour of buses and trains. To some extent this was true and we did use it on occasion simply for the sheer danger involved, and the chance of getting a good story. At other times however we did not have a choice. For example in New York this was the case because had we not taken the subway trains we would have either seen a lot less or had to curtail our travels on account of wearing our legs down to stumps. As it was we nearly wore through our shoes during our week in the Big Apple. Other factors that caused us to take public transport were: expensive car parks, nightmare road

systems, and the genuine medical need to drink alcohol.

Not only do buses and trains supply enough data to satisfy any sociologist's curiosity about the human condition, they also provide nowhere to hide. For some reason merely sitting in these communal carriages seems to strip a person of their privacy. Anyone who has not been chatted to on a bus is either lying, has never set foot on one, or is a conductor – who would speak to them?

Certain people also get stripped of their inhibitions once they board public transport; these are the starers, the gabblers, etc. They will start a conversation by any means. For example, a young black lady in Key West chatted briskly to the woman sitting next to her about the vibrant colour scheme of the seats:

'Oh, look at that purple. I wish I had seats that colour. They are just lovely'

She accompanied her rave with a rhythmic stroke of said seats. Buses in particular also seem to attract people who are quite happy talking to themselves, not surprising as they offer cheap transport and a warm place to sit.

Before I went to the US my scariest transport encounter was not when I was sat opposite a man who resembled a human pin cushion due to the number of piercings that he had, though I thought it would be, but was when an old man 'adopted' me. I was 18 and heading home from university when I was spoken to by a man better suited to ads for *Worther's Originals*. He beckoned me to sit by him and, having no reason not to, I did. We spent the journey from York to Birmingham in an awkward stilted chat about university

and he 'bought me' with a coke. I felt incredibly relieved when he got off the train with (a) no power cut having plunged us into darkness and (b) me staying on the train. As he left he ruffled my hair then waved from the platform. Everyone else saw and smirked, just to make sure my humiliation was complete. Compared to what we endured nearly ten years later in Texas however, slightly creepy old man on the train to Birmingham was a cakewalk.

San Antonio is a fairly compact town in west Texas and before we got there fellow travellers had recommended that we get the bus in to town rather than driving. So we stopped at a KOA site which proclaimed 'nearby bus stop' as one of its features. When we checked in we were given directions and a timetable, noting that the last direct bus back was not very late - but late enough for the 'hot cocoa couple' from the UK. We found the bus stop easily the next morning and had an uneventful trip in - save for the obligatory old man talking to himself in the corner. When it came to the evening we spent a fraught few minutes trying to work out exactly which bus we needed and where it would leave from.

Armed only with a cartoon map of the town centre and vague advice from the campsite this was less easy than it should have been. Our fears were compounded by the fact that we had to wait at a dark bus stop in what seemed to be an unusually quiet neighbourhood considering it was only about ten pm. Nevertheless we did catch the correct bus and were able to breath a sigh of relief.

That is until we fell foul of the local crazy. In his 40s and wearing a red shell suit he looked unassuming. Actually he looked ridiculous, a middle aged white man trying to 'be' black and 17. Plus, Emma swore that she had owned

the same shell suit as a young girl, growing up in the ghettos of Wolverhampton. The local crazy was listening to music through headphones, which for many people is a way of avoiding unwanted conversation. Unfortunately he also kept randomly talking to people.

We attempted the tactic of studiously ignoring him, but within minutes his attention settled on us because we made the mistake of sitting directly opposite him. First he moved to punch us. Well actually he extended his fist toward us, an action that frightened Emma but that I (ever more in tune with the youth of today) recognised as the urban-gangland version of shaking hands. I therefore 'touched knuckles' with the local crazy, and Emma sensibly followed suit. Next the man proffered his headphones to us, saying 'that's what we're listening to' (who was 'we', his voices?). We duly listened and made general sounds of approval. Then he gestured to the man sitting next to him and remarked that he was his 'homeboy'. We nodded, at the same time silently praying that we would escape with our lives, and wallet. After a brief pause the man asked Emma if she was something, but we could not understand what he was asking - we could not follow much of what he said - so she just gave a non-committal head bob. Emma later told me she thought he had either asked if she was 'loco', a whore or a homeboy. Apparently all things that she was happy to nod to.

The classic comment that he made was addressed directly to me however when he said: 'Always respect. Anyone messes with you, I'll be there'.

He then called me 'dog' and left the bus. We were so relieved that he had remained amicable through the whole encounter and shared a smile with his



alleged 'homeboy'. It was sad that we had assumed he would be violent, but not surprising given the news (and fiction) stories we are exposed to from America.

Neither this incident, nor the youth in San Francisco, really opened our eyes or taught us anything new about society however. Much more enlightening was the bus trip we took in New Orleans. We were the only white passengers on a bus full of African American people, and both remarked that we had never felt like a minority group before. Not surprising? Actually it is seeing as Emma grew up in Wolverhampton and we lived in Luton for four years - two of the most culturally diverse places in the UK. By the way, there was one other white person on the bus - the driver.

In spite of the risks of being hassled I would take buses more often; except for the fear they induce in me regarding when to get off. Unless you know a route or you are travelling to a distinct destination - such as a Bus depot - it is hard to know when to request a stop. I have often got off too early due to this, figuring that this is better than ending up going miles past your destination. Somehow we managed to avoid this during our travels, we just spent lots of journeys with one of us with our nose in a map and the other with their head squashed against the window shouting out street names. No wonder people thought we were loco! San Francisco was the most complicated place to navigate bus-wise. Maybe with more regular use we would get better at taking buses. Or perhaps we would just become those crazies who we shy away from now and who randomly shout things: 'Oak Street', 'Temple Drive', 'My stop', and so on. Trains are much easier.

Stepping on to the subway trains in New York felt so much like the tube in London that we felt instantly at home. And therefore I instantly placed a hand reassuringly over our wallet. In fact this was a pose that I struck so often that I expect the Americans either thought I was immensely patriotic, when our money was in a jacket pocket, or suffering from a weak bladder, when the wallet was in a discreet money pouch round my waist, or just a pervert when the money was in the pocket of my jeans. All that was different from London's Underground system was the stylised map of the routes. We found the locals incredibly helpful. We were virtually mobbed with offers of help as soon as we got our map out and debates quickly ensued about the best way for us to get to our next destination. This was a real shock because we had resigned ourselves to facing rude people and being mugged within a day. We were also quite shocked that Keanu Reeves did not populate the train tunnels, it just felt so *Matrix*.

On the trains (and on some buses) we received assistance very rapidly because of our obvious tourist status. This did however; cause us problems at times too. For example in California when we got the YARTS (Yosemite area regional transport system) into the park we were the only passengers. The driver therefore spent the entire journey talking to us, or rather at us - one of those people who feigns interest in you and then just bulldozes their life story onto you.

The one occasion when we decided not to wait for the bus and walk home instead, soon convinced us that its better to face crazies on a public vehicle where at least the driver will (probably) be sane than risk meeting them in the street. This happened in San Francisco where we practically ran

through a very quiet, very dark neighbourhood. Our fears that we risked being mugged or worse were quickly confirmed when everyone that we spoke to the next day agreed that it was an area to avoid.

In terms of other forms of public transport we took taxis only about three times, rode on four planes and tried various tourist toy-trains. We would have gone in taxis more had we been richer, although they are really more risky than riding on a bus or train as there is no-one else there to witness/protect you from dodgy drivers. The very first taxi we took, from Newark airport to our hotel, was the only real time we got fleeced during our travels. Or at least fleeced so badly that we noticed it. We ended up paying more than we had budgeted for both this journey and the return trip we would need to make at the end of the week. We spent the rest of the day convinced that we would therefore go heavily over budget by the end of 13 weeks and were fairly depressed by this prospect - not surprisingly. But then we discovered the Super Shuttle (!), referred to in an information leaflet with prices quoted at less than half what we had paid for the first taxi. We were quickly convinced.

As it turned out our 'shuttle' was actually a minibus, stuffed full of passengers - hence the lower prices - and driven with such snail-like pace and so many stops that we began to think that the two hours we had left for getting to the airport would be cutting it fine. There was nothing either super or shuttle-like about the journey, though the driver did seem convinced he could get us into orbit if he approached every bump in the road with the correct speed and reckless abandon. The driving was so jerky and erratic in fact that one US passenger dryly remarked that it was a 'contact sport'. As it happened

we did reach the airport in time and, more miraculously, in one piece.

Our airplane journeys passed without much incident except for Emma's too near neighbour between Miami and New York who was a large, sleepy Scot with halitosis. Most of our air related excitement came when we tried to board or leave planes, something I have talked about already, and which still gives me flashbacks.

And then there was the toy-transport. This was called things like 'sightseeing trains' (in St Augustine) or the 'trolley tour' (Key West). Whatever the name the vehicle was the same - a golf cart sized vehicle pulling several trailers with bench seats and awning roofs - glamorous! In spite of the fact these only travel at about five miles an hour they are a good way to see and hear about the places you are visiting. You therefore get a very different client base than on 'grown up' trains or buses.

No locals here because either they have heard it before, or they actually have to move faster than snails. I cannot see a businessman sitting patiently at five to nine on a Monday morning briefcase and umbrella in hand with the 'train' snaking in circles round the city monument/celebrity. Unless said businessman was British of course. No homeless/jobless people randomly starting conversations on these trains either as the tours are too expensive and are no warmer or more comfortable than park benches.

The only crazies you get are the drivers, and it is not surprising if they are slightly unstable having listened to/said the same spiel a million times. Spiel that included such great presentation techniques as having impressions of Kermit the frog or Humphrey Bogart giving the safety instructions - keep

your webbed feet inside the vehicle and do not get off until we stop or you might croak etc. This commentary was in Key West, a place where everything and everyone are welcomed except good taste.

Yes, toy-trains definitely have a different feel to the other 'real' public transport we used. If we had encountered the 'youth' from San Francisco on one of these they would have had no room between the benches to drop their pants... which would have been a travesty.

### **13 - A Mickey Mouse Christmas**

Christmas for Emma and I is very much a family affair. I am the youngest of ten children and have incredibly fond memories of being shoe horned into our living room with my brothers and sisters while all passed gifts around. After this we would wait the obligatory six to ten hours for the turkey to be cooked.

Of course coming from a big family does have its problems as well. Learning to budget for gifts at an early age is essential and if you can get next year's presents in this year's sales then all the better. Not being so financially astute when I was ten I have vivid memories of going to the local newsagents the day before Christmas Eve and buying a chocolate bar for each of my relatives and then pain-stakingly wrapping them all. This was a tradition that continued until I was 13, when I stopped wrapping them.

Emma's family is the complete opposite of mine as she is an only child. Due to this her family is very close and Christmas is a big deal with lots of routine and traditions. These include: stockings, which to this day are opened in her parents bed and now include one for me; piles of presents; piles of turkey and its associated foodstuffs; and piles.... from sitting around watching cheesy Christmas TV.

With all this in mind it is perhaps surprising that we decided to spend Christmas travelling. However, the timing of our adventures were dictated by work, and to have been at home for Christmas would have meant either travelling for two rather than three months, or having a few days 'off' to come home for the festivities. Neither of these options was practical. We therefore decided that if we were to be out of the country during this holiday period we

should stay somewhere completely different, completely unreal, and hopefully fun. The idea behind this was that it might distract us from the fact we were not at home and the place we should go sprang instantly to mind – Disneyland, California. You cannot get more surreal than there...other than the Joshua Tree National Park.

As it turned out we had many other experiences during our travels that were surreal, 'dog' on the bus in San Antonio for example, nevertheless Disneyland at least represented a place of fun. Having driven through rainy rush hour traffic to Anaheim on the day before Christmas Eve we were badly in need of some holiday spirit by the time we checked into our hotel. Surprisingly, we actually got some.

The member of staff on reception took one look at our reservation, pre-booked over the Internet, and immediately frowned. Emma and I shared a concerned glance, wondering what could be wrong. Perhaps the booking had not registered properly, and if so, would they have any rooms available? And if there weren't any rooms, would they let us park in the car park and live in the van for the week? All these fears, and more, were communicated to each other in a single glance.

The fears were groundless. It turned out that the receptionist had decided we had paid too much for our room. He then rushed round the counter to pick us up from where we had fainted and then upgraded us from a standard to a queen-sized room. He even offered to upgrade us to a 'king' if one became available but we decided that for the hassle involved in moving rooms during our stay it would not be worth it. In a second lucky turn of events

we discovered that we had budgeted too much money for our stay in the hotel - having taken the price in dollars as the cost in pounds – and this allowed us to stay a couple of extra nights in LA. We both knew it would be hard to return to campsites after sleeping in a proper bed for so long - especially because we had already had the extra nights of luxury in the Grand Canyon - but quite honestly we did not care.

We ended up with six whole days in Los Angeles. For five of these we had a pass to go into Disneyland, ample time to see everything and do all the rides - or so we thought.

Our estimation of the amount of time needed for the theme park was based on a visit to Disneyworld in Florida a year earlier. Mickey's holiday home down there in the sunshine state consists of four separate amusement parks, plus a couple of water parks, and each of the main parks had taken us two days to see. Disneyland is much smaller - due to the cost of land in LA - and only has two parks, the Magic Kingdom and California Adventures. With the time available to us we could spend two days in each park and kick back a bit on the fifth day of our tickets. However, the best laid plans of (Mickey) mice and men as they say, with one flaw - other people.

During our time in Disneyland the parks were packed, especially on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and the subsequent weekend. Perhaps this should have been obvious to us, given that Christmas is the biggest holiday of the year, but we based our expectations on our own normal yuletide activities - staying at home with family. We thought the parks would be like ghost towns, though we did realize that the alternative - huge crowds - was a



possibility. We now know that it is somewhat of a tradition to go out on Christmas day in America, even eating out - not very common in the UK at all. For Americans, the Thanksgiving holiday appears to be more like a UK Christmas, at least in terms of staying in and cooking a huge feast. Whereas Christmas Day is for going out.

Christmas Eve was our first full day in LA and we spent the morning getting very stressed as we looked for somewhere to send an email and some photographs of our adventures so far. We were feeling the distance from home a lot, especially Emma who was spending her first Christmas away from her parents. Touching base, at least electronically, seemed the easiest way to bridge this distance, particularly because her parents were away from home as well, spending the holidays with relatives abroad. We were able to email in our hotel, but not send photographs, so we trekked for an hour to a 'nearby' Kinko's (a store where you can go and use computers and have work printed, photocopied, etc.) that had this facility. We then spent the next hour battling with technology until we were able to make the pictures small enough to send – oh, the joys of digital cameras - and paying through the nose to do so.

The important thing was that we succeeded and we were in the holiday mood once we went into Disneyland. We spent our first day in the California Adventures side of the park, deciding that for Christmas day itself we would like to be in the Magic Kingdom. As we entered the sky was blue and it was actually quite warm, classic Californian weather, and there was Santa Claus - complete with Hawaiian shirt and shades.

Emma ran over to have her picture taken with him, shouldering small

children out of the way as she went, but for some reason he would not let her sit on his lap. Of course Emma only asked as a joke but Santa's confused and serious reaction revealed a national lack of ability to recognize sarcasm.

California Adventures is a relatively new addition to Disney's playground and is less coherently linked to a theme, unlike MGM Studios or Animal Kingdom in Florida - fortunately this does not stop it being a lot of fun. It includes elements of the movies-led MGM from Florida, a few more adult-orientated rides (in terms of speed and height restrictions, not in terms of sexual content) and some rides themed on California itself. One of these, called *California Dreams* or something, was a film showing the history of the state and narrated by Whoopie Goldberg as the persona of *California*. The show was inevitably cheesy but also left us feeling quite uncomfortable as it glossed over or made light of the harsh reality of parts of the state's history. The other California ride was called *Soarin' over California* and combined a simulator style ride with an IMAX film and special effects such as fake wind and the smell of oranges and was actually very well done. More rides like this and less of the 'look how great we are' variety would have been very welcome.

On our first day in this park we managed to try nearly all the rides, mainly leaving the water rides as the weather took a turn for the worse during the afternoon. Rain forced us to adopt a policy of running between rides and, eventually buying bright blue 'Mickey' ponchos. We decided to stick around for the evening parade in spite of the downpour - sadly the parade did not return the favour and was cancelled, setting the scene for the next day.

Although we had a moan about the cancellation we did admit there was a degree of sense to the decision - the parade is of huge electric light strewn floats, perhaps not good to combine with heavy rain!

We did get the chance to watch the parade two nights later, with the dubious pleasure of spending an hour and a half 'saving' our seats in order to do so, and it was worth it. The Electric Light Parade is a 1970s movie-fest, featuring floats made up to look like older Disney films such as *Peter Pan* and *Dumbo*. The scale, and voltage, involved is truly impressive. It was on Boxing Day that we got round to seeing the parade, and it got us back in the holiday mood after a Christmas day that was literally a bit of a wash out.

Back to the night before Christmas however, and we spent the rest of the evening wrapping presents and then visiting the local church for midnight mass. The people we joined at St Boniface's, Anaheim, were friendly and the priest made all guests feel welcome, so when we went to bed we could almost convince ourselves that we were having Christmas at home.

Waking up on Christmas day we soon discovered that the weather had improved, cloudy, but no rain. We also quickly realized that it was not going to be like 'normal' Christmas this year. We spent about half an hour opening stockings and presents, an activity normal stretched out over several days as we tour the country visiting relatives to exchange gifts. The way we dealt with things being different was to pretend it was not really Christmas and just treat it like a day out in the park - a technique that worked quite well.

In fact the atmosphere as we queued up and went into a fairly busy

Magic Kingdom was heavy on holiday spirit, and I even wore a Santa hat all day. Certain rides had been 'Christmas-ified' for the season. *Its A Small World* had been decorated and the sound track altered to include infinite repetitions of Jingle Bells very cool, until we got stuck in there for ten extra mind-melting minutes. *The Haunted Mansion* had been invaded by the characters from *Nightmare Before Christmas* and had a huge queue, made bearable by the piped 'alternative' carols playing as we shuffled forwards - oh, and by the man trying to debunk the Disney magic by trying fake doors and lifting up the turf while we waited for the ride.

The crowds prevented us from going on many rides, but we did not mind because there was so much else to see, and we knew it was not our only day in the park.

But then it started to rain, sporadic showers at first, then constant rain from mid afternoon until early evening. We coped by putting on our ponchos - we even ate an afternoon snack of giant turkey drumsticks by tucking right inside these waterproof jackets - but it was still quite dispiriting. The final straw for us was when we waited in the rain for the 3.30pm parade, and then it got cancelled. Actually that is not quite what happened.

An announcement was made that due to the adverse weather conditions the parade would be replaced by Mickey's Rainy Day Cavalcade. 'OK' we thought, 'better than nothing' and preferable to seeing Mickey and Co. soaked to the skin and looking like a bunch of drowned rats, or rather mice. But then the cavalcade began.

First, Mickey and Minnie in a car. Then, Santa and Mrs Christmas in a

car. Then, about 6 other characters in a bus. Then.... well, nothing. That was it, three vehicles. Perhaps not better than nothing after all. After witnessing this stunning spectacle it was essential that we leave the Magic Kingdom or risk being asked to leave for destroying the Christmas spirit by turning the air blue.

We went back to the hotel for a couple of hours to wring out our clothes, have a rest, and take a shower - evidently we were not wet enough already.

By the time we went back to Disneyland for dinner the rain had stopped and you could even see patches of sky between the clouds - a Christmas miracle. We had a mediocre buffet dinner, not a patch on turkey and trimmings, and then dashed back to the park for the evening festivities - fireworks and the live action extravaganza Fantasia.

Main Street, the main thoroughfare in Mickey's realm and the best spot to view the fireworks, was beautifully lit and we joined the crowds waiting for the pyrotechnic display. Then it started to snow, fake of course, but really nice as it lazily drifted down. The snow did not last long but was a nice 'warm up act' for the main event.

A few minutes later and we were pushing through the sudden crush of people leaving the park and cursing that stupid mouse and his squeaky voice. Both evening events had been cancelled, due to the earlier weather.... now long departed. We were left questioning why such a big organization could not cope better with the weather, and pondered if Network Rail was perhaps involved somewhere. We attempted to cheer ourselves up by playing arcade

games in the ESPN zone in Downtown Disney, having got free credits with our park pass. We discovered a horseracing game involving riding a rocking horse that was so vibratory that it did cheer us up.... almost too much!

We later found out that there has not been rain in LA at Christmas for 20 years - we were honoured! However, it did help us to feel like we were at home, and by now we were so used to our personal rain cloud that we would have missed it. Honest. Boxing Day arrived with beautiful sunshine - of course. I felt very sorry for people who had only had yesterday in the parks, at least we still had three days left and we intended to use them to the full.

Emma and I are seasoned theme park visitors and we attack them with a level of preparation worthy of a military campaign in order to see and do everything - except the rides where height restrictions thwart us. With this in mind we returned to California Adventures and quickly did the few rides we had skipped before. We also soaked up the holiday atmosphere, which was intensified by the proximity of Rose Bowl - an important American Football event involving a local team and taking place on New Year's Day. In celebration of this all visitors were invited to have temporary tattoos with the team emblems on. We accepted this invitation - we never turn down a freebie - and Emma drew lots of stares by having her tattoo on her cheek. All the US tourists wanted to talk about was the game, but we knew nothing about it. Except that was when they wanted to talk about Diana, Charles and Camilla - a subject we knew, and cared, even less about.

In order to make up for having missed parades, fireworks, etc. on the previous two days we embarked on the following crazy timetable on Boxing

Day afternoon:

3.30 - Magic Kingdom for the main parade

6.00 - California Adventures for Electric Light Parade

8.30 - Magic Kingdom for fireworks

10.30 - Magic Kingdom for Fantasia

All the scheduled shows actually took place, and they were all good. Well worth the four hours (or more) spent saving our seats for them to avoid missing out on good views. During the wait for Fantasia we met some holidaymakers that we were actually jealous of, rare seeing as most people we met were only travelling from somewhere nearby or only for a week or fortnight. However, these people were fellow Brits doing a similar tour to us but over six months instead of three. In fact we are still receiving emails from them chronicling their travels and think that they are probably on the run from the law - lucky bastards.

When we returned to the Magic Kingdom the next day, our fourth in the parks, we considered ourselves to be well and truly hardened to the crowds seeing as we had spent the previous day visiting each of the two parks two or three times. We were not however prepared for the sheer volume visiting Mickey's land on this, the first Saturday after Christmas, and we nearly fled in fear before we even got through the gates. We soon regretted the decision not to turn tail and spent a very uncomfortable morning in queues. The highlight was an 'all you can eat' character breakfast at which we each polished off two Mickey's and shared a Minnie. No, that is not quite right but the amount we ate was probably equivalent in weight to those oversized mice and tided us

over until dinner. Having queued for food and then for just one ride we were ready to leave the park. Any holiday spirit felt within our fellow visitors and ourselves had long been lost due to the constant crush we were all being subjected to.

Before we left we picked up 'fast passes' for two of the more popular rides. These tickets allow visitors to return to a ride at a designated time to avoid a big queue. Normally the return time is about an hour later but on this occasion the passes we got around 11am were to allow a return at about 9pm - a sign of how busy the place was.

In complete contrast the place where we sought refuge was virtually empty - the cinema. Again we counted our good fortune that we could leave the park knowing we could go back in the next day, unlike the poor parents who had bought their children on a trip of a lifetime and had to go home the next day. We spent the afternoon watching *The Return of the King* - having gotten the taste for it during our hotel stay in the Grand Canyon.

We ventured back into the Magic Kingdom in the early evening and found it no less crowded. Fine, we thought, we will just do the rides we have fast passes for, and then go home. Easier said than done. We literally had to traverse the park walking in step with the hoards of other tourists, only to find one of the rides we had come back for was indefinitely out of order. Our other pass was not valid for an hour so we filled our time by queuing for and then riding the Mickey Mouse tiny little railroad ride. This featured views of the backs of many of the rides, plus decrepit dioramas of the Grand Canyon and the Jurassic period.... bizarre.

We retreated back to the hotel and vowed to steer clear of Disney for a



day - later discovering that the next day had been even busier, and they had even had to refuse entry to some guests. Instead we decided to see more of the real - or more accurately unreal – LA, by taking a bus tour.

The focus was on Hollywood, and the tour lasted for half a day - mainly taking this long because the journey to get to the sights in question took about an hour. Our driver/guide announced that this was his first tour. 'Oh, yes, ha ha ha' we all thought, nice way to break the ice. But actually, on reflection, I would not have put money on this being a joke.

Although knowledgeable the driver did not seem completely comfortable with his 'patter' and his presentation style left something to be desired. That 'something' being style.

Our guide often took so long trying to get his words out that whatever he was telling us about had already disappeared into the distance. In addition he pointed out things of interest –'look at that cool hotel' – but neglected to tell us which side of the bus we should be looking out of in order to see them! Or he would say 'check it out' - but not what, or where. Finally his thick Spanish accent made comprehension very difficult for us, though it did lead to some very entertaining misunderstandings. Classics included:

'Wheelchair Street' (Wiltshire);

'Orients' (audience) as in 'in that stadium there is capacity for 20,000 orients';

'Pawn brokers' (punk rockers) as in 'pawn brokers have taken over this district'.

Then there were things he just got wrong such as 'Beverly Hills hill billies' or 'Sandra Bullocks'. Still we did learn a lot, when we could hear him over the in-

vehicle sound system...the screaming infant ever-present on tours, in shows, everywhere.

The tour included a couple of stops, one at a strange local market selling such delights as bottle bags made out of animal legs, complete with hooves. There seemed to be little relevance in stopping here and we wondered if the guide's relatives owned the stalls. The second stop seemed to have more relevance to the tour as it was near to Mann's Chinese Theatre, which features the handprints of various stars and was very cool. This stop also allowed us to see some of the stars on the street and get a good view of the Hollywood sign. Unfortunately we only had 30 minutes to take in these sights before piling back on the bus. Personally I could have done without the animal-unfriendly accessories to have more time at the real tourist attractions.

In between we also got to look at - or at least in the vague direction of - the *Pretty Woman* hotel, the drainage ditch Arnie drove through in *Terminator 2*, and the nightclub owned by Johnny Depp.

Moving on from the second stop on the tour we drove up into the Beverly Hills/Bel Air districts to see some stars' homes. Now there are several things wrong with this last sentence. First, the only thing we saw were the gates of the rich and famous, with the occasional glimpse of an actual house a rare cause for excitement. Second, the use of the word 'stars' was often ill advised.

What we in fact saw were things like 'the place where Danny de Vito *used* to live' or 'that's Nick Cage's *old* house' or 'once upon a time someone famous saw a picture of this house in an estate agents window but could not afford it...' you get the drift. Other than this the houses were the homes of

people we had never heard of, or who were now dead.

The most interesting tale was about a now deserted house with a large pool where the Olympic star and *Tarzan* actor Johnny Weissmuller had lived and swam. The house had later belonged to the *Mamas and the Papas* until they had been sent packing for causing trouble, and a fire, at the property.

Following this dubious tour of the hottest property in LA we returned to Anaheim, via a short lunch stop and after five and a half hours on the bus. Worth the money for the comedy driver, but not a tour to be recommended.

Our last day in LA saw us return to a much less busy and much more chilled Disneyland. The weather was glorious again and we ambled round the park, finishing off the bits we had not seen and watching the parade again. Disney is one of the few places where people will happily sit on the pavement for hours in order to witness ten minutes of people walking past in costume. On this occasion we filled our two-hour wait with playing *Lord of the Rings* Top Trumps and adopting precocious children. The parade was great though.

Six days in LA was plenty of time and we had few regrets when we moved on the day before New Year's Eve. In contrast to Christmas we do not tend to make a big thing out of the passing of the year, either tagging along to parents' parties or just staying in with a Chinese takeaway. We were planning to just do the latter during our American adventure, the former would have been logistically challenging, and intended to stay in the van in the San Diego area. However, we planned this in England before we had actually spent any time in the van, and certainly before we had had an extended and mostly

uninterrupted fortnight in hotels from Vegas to Los Angeles.

In the end we found a cheap hotel in San Diego, an hour's drive from LA, and booked in for two nights. We decided that sitting on our bed in Harvey with Chinese take out boxes would just be too sad and 'white trash'.

As it turned out we recreated this scene with the addition of a TV in our room. The place we stayed in was basic, but clean and its advertising proudly proclaimed the rooms had been 'remodelled'. What was not clear was when this had been done, though the décor suggested the 1960s. The location was good at least as we were able to walk into town and we spent the evening looking at the Gas Lamp Quarter - the historic part of the town - and visiting a small old fashioned cinema. We watched the hilarious festive film *Elf* and this got us out of a funk that had descended during the last few days.

Partly due to being away for Christmas, this blue mood was also caused by the fact we had arrived at the halfway point of our time in the States. More than this the second half of our adventures were less planned and so having 'done' New York, San Fran; LA; Las Vegas; Death Valley; Redwoods; Yosemite and the Grand Canyon it felt like we were much further on than half way. In order to cheer ourselves further we also indulged in an expensive and calorific sundae from a Ghirardelli café - well we had walked for an hour into town and had to walk back as well....

We spent New Year's Eve in San Diego's world famous zoo, which was featuring a few month old giant panda when we were visiting – Mei Sheng, one of the few giant pandas that have been born in captivity in the USA. The weather was sunny and hot, and a holiday spirit was again in evidence. The

zoo is massive and we could not see it all close up but, via a bus, a sky gondola, and moving walkways, we covered everywhere at least in passing.

It all felt very Whipsnade. The enclosures seem much more natural and 'occupant friendly' than in many other zoos, which was good to see, and we caught a live show as well where the animals made it clear that they were not being forced to perform - a message reinforced by the refusal to appear by some 'divas'.

The highlight of the day was seeing the baby panda. He was only on public view for a few hours a day and we had to queue and then walk past the enclosure silently to see him and his mum. Silence was vital otherwise the mother hid her baby to protect him. We got about 40 photographs as we walked past - distilled to about four with a silent 'thank you' to our digital camera sponsors (Emma's parents). The baby was very entertaining, rolling around and looking cute and fluffy with unaffected aplomb. His mother kept batting him away because she was eating and was not to be disturbed. Every time she knocked him back there were quiet gasps from the crowd as he landed close to the edge of a six-foot dry moat round his enclosure - fortunately no accidents occurred.

After the zoo we spent the evening in with a huge Chinese meal, beer, and *Dick Clark's Rockin' Eve* - a famous TV show to bring in the New Year. It was actually a bit rubbish, like most US television, but we did get to see the 'ball drop' in Times Square – equivalent to Big Ben striking midnight. During the evening Emma developed a stinking cold, and we were asleep by about 12.05am.

This gave us just enough time to drink a mini bottle of champagne that Emma's parents had sent out with us, sing Auld Lang Syne and record a short movie of our celebration for the folks back home. Sadly a viewing of this just after we made it revealed it to be a video nasty. We were jumping around in the film and all I had on was a short pyjama top, so we decided it was not suitable for public consumption and deleted it.

So now we had been on the road for a month and a half and travelled into 2004, but where next? Next we went back to basics, returning to Harvey and campsites and a mad dash from one side of the continent to the other. Serious 'road trip' time.

## 14 - Road Trip

For many people these two words probably conjure up an image of a battered, dusty open topped Chevy cruising along a very long, very straight, very empty road (possibly Route 66) in the middle of nowhere. In the car are a couple of people - often, but not exclusively, a man and a woman - and on their trip they encounter thieves/kidnappers/murderers (delete as appropriate). This scenario has been played out in any number of films including *Thelma and Louise*, *Breakdown*, *Jeepers Creepers*, and the salubrious *Road Kill*. But is this the reality? Well, we sincerely hoped not, because before we left the UK we had seen the movie *Wrong Turn* about a group of teenagers on a road trip in the US who end up in a battle to the death with a bunch of in-bred rednecks. A seriously scary film.

Other than Hollywood our only source of information to prepare for driving in the US was a book imaginatively entitled *Drive USA*. This provided useful insights about the American Highway Code as well as suggested routes to take. Generally reassuring, the book was the reason for our previously mentioned fears about driving in LA, although when it came to it the city of angels was not such a devil to navigate. In spite of what the map looked like!

Of course we had both been on long car journeys before and never had to deal with anyone too psychotic, so perhaps our fears were misplaced. The main problems we had been subjected to on previous trips were boredom and tiredness.

Most of my travelling experiences had been as a child when we used to go on family holidays to Wales or Cornwall from Oxfordshire. We would get up at some hideously early hour - probably actually a civilized time but it felt like the middle of the night to me, and my dad would pack the car while mum made a hundred sandwiches to sustain us through the day. We would then get on the road and although we probably only covered a couple of hundred miles it would literally take all day. Partly this was due to the length of time needed to coordinate toilet and food breaks for everyone - normally six of us. However, most of the reason why we would be driving all day was the fact that we always began holidays on a Saturday in August to make sure that the roads were nicely crowded with fellow holiday-makers and - worst of all - caravans.

My first serious long distance drive was in France when Emma and I went camping for three weeks to celebrate finishing our undergraduate degrees at university. The first day of this mini-adventure we drove for about 12 hours, except for a gap in the middle for the Euro Star. The long drive was unintentional but resulted from poor navigation and the fact that the first campsite we came to was full. Even this experience did not prepare us fully for a road trip USA-style, which turned out to be a blend of the movie version and our previous European encounter. The three-week holiday did harden us to the idea of living together however, 21 nights in a small tent will do that to you quite easily.

The main difference in America from the epic all day drive in France was the emptiness through which we were travelling and therefore the distance we



were able to cover. So in America there were times we could drive all day on an interstate and not pass through a single settlement, whereas in Europe we had come through a town or village at least every half hour or so. Obviously, there are parts of America where this is also the case, but there are huge areas where it's just you, the road and a vast but beautiful emptiness.

Some days we drove for four to five hundred miles, crossing a whole state (or even more) in the process, and this is where cruise control really came in handy. This facility allows you to set a speed at which you want to travel and then the vehicle keeps itself travelling at that velocity. This means the driver can avoid foot cramp and, if the road is straight enough, have a snooze. And the roads often were very straight, requiring minimal steering and encouraging multiple naps. The one drawback with this plan (apart from crashing) was that if the gradient shifted and we started to travel uphill Emma would be jolted awake. This was not due to Harvey saying 'Oh look, a change in road conditions, better wake the driver as they have been so bored with the scenery and would not want to miss this' (in a *KIT* from *Knightrider* style). It was because the vehicle would start to slow down due to the slope but then rapidly change down a gear or two and slam on the accelerator in a bid to maintain the pre-set speed. It was the sudden change in engine noise, and the movement of the accelerator pedal that woke Emma up, almost every time.

It might seem odd that we would choose to cover such huge distances in one day seeing as we had three months in the US. However, two factors influenced our itinerary. One, we wanted to see as many places as possible so needed to keep moving quite frequently. Two, between San Diego and the

Deep South there was not a lot that took our fancy. Unless you are into cows or oil there is not much on that route to take anyone's fancy.

We got up quite early – though not as early as for departure day Family Thomas style - on those days when we had a lot of ground to cover and were usually on the road by 8.30-9am. Breakfast normally consisted of just coffee at that hour partly to save time but largely because our stomachs rejected anything else. We would then try to eat up a couple of hundred miles before our first stop around 11am. This would be a food break and the timing was normally dictated by when we saw a Denny's sign. This was our favourite eatery for brunch and was a treat that we generally saved for road trips.

Early on in our travels we discovered that we could get good value and decent food from this chain of diners, and it certainly beat McDonalds or Burger King. There was nearly always one in the groups of restaurants and petrol stations that sprung up beside the road every 50 or so miles, shimmering like a mirage in the distance. In fact, the only areas where we struggled to find them were the Deep South and parts of Florida. There we had to settle for Waffle House, which always seemed a bit grubbier and less nutritious, and where the presentation of food followed a bizarre system with every item of breakfast arriving on an individual plate. The waffles were lovely though.

Denny's offered novelty value, because we had never come across any restaurants in the UK that were similar, the closest equivalent being Little Chef. We are talking vinyl covered booths and metal and Formica tables here, sure you can find these in countless other diners in the US, but there was something about the Denny's atmosphere that drew us back time and again.

Perhaps it was the quality of the food or the extensive menu, or perhaps it was the random water feature/charity donation box/slot machine that seemed to be ever present?

Certainly after a few visits Denny's offered familiarity. We nearly always chose the same meal - the \$4.99 breakfast deals. For Emma the 'Meat Lovers' - sausage, egg, ham, bacon, and hash browns, and pancakes. For me, egg, biscuits, chicken fried steak and pancakes. Chicken fried steak probably deserves an explanation; I certainly did not know what it was at first. I knew upon cutting into it that it was not chicken, or at least I hoped not, and this was confirmed by the taste. I guessed at beef, but we had to wait until we had a waitress with the time and friendly attitude to ask what it was. It turned out that it was a thin piece of steak that had been pounded, coated and fried the way that chicken is. Obvious really! We also had re-fillable coffee, essential to get us through the day's drive. The only problem with the food was the obsession with serving the pancakes with a huge ball of butter on top, no matter how often we asked them not to. This was a problem because US butter is salted, and does not mix well with sweet pancakes and maple syrup, at least to our palates, so we just scooped it off. The American palate must enjoy the mix of sweet and salt, they also put maple syrup on their bacon.

Once we were sustained by Denny's we were normally full until teatime. The rest of the day was generally filled with solid driving, save for a few 'comfort' stops. As well as having straight roads to travel on, we often found ourselves driving through fairly featureless, or at least mono-feature filled landscapes, and boredom was definitely a possibility. Had we succumbed to this we may

have been lulled to sleep - as already mentioned the mechanics of driving were so simple that we could both have caught 40 winks (until we crashed).

With this in mind we distracted ourselves by any means possible. Harvey had a radio, an obvious source of distraction. Unfortunately US radio is a bit like US television. Hundreds of channels, with very little content. The fact we did not have a guide to the channels did not help, but from a scan of the available stations we really were not missing much (other than infomercials) when we elected to turn it off. Fortunately we had taken some music tapes with us, and nearly wore a hole through our favourites during our travels.

The 'find' in terms of best distracter were books on tape. We had three of these as Christmas presents and they really helped pass the time. One Stephen King unabridged novel (*The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*) was so gripping and addictive that we almost drove through the night in order to finish it. It is just a pity that these tapes are often prohibitively expensive. We also developed a number of home grown activities to keep the tedium at bay (don't worry, this was not as kinky as it sounds). These included 20 questions, the 'story game' (make up a story one word at a time taking it in turns to say the next word...not easy, or award-winning literature, but a useful technique for writing this novel), and learn US history by listening to your co-pilot reading *Lonely Planet*. Oh, and we also played the 'Tell me your secrets' game, until the results freaked us out too much. Some things are better left unsaid!

Other people also provided distractions whenever we were in danger of losing interest in our games. First, state troopers and other varieties of policemen.

We saw a lot of these officers, but fortunately avoided being stopped by them, other than for routine border checks. One such check took place on New Year's Day, even though we were not crossing a border at the time.

We were very confused when we saw the security post set up across the road, somewhere in Arizona. We were even more puzzled by the conversation we had with the young policeman who approached us.

'Just the two of you in there today?' He asked in a casual manner (imagine a Huckleberry Hound voice).

'Yes' we replied, in a 'please do not shoot us' manner.

'Nobody in the back?'

'No'

'No drugs?'

'No'

'Any aliens?'

'Er, no'

'Ok, on you go'

He never even looked in the van.

Later we realized it must have been to check for illegal immigrants entering the US from nearby Mexico.

The second external distraction was other traffic, generally unobtrusive, but once or twice a little too exciting with near crashes. The worst of these occurred when a truck up ahead shed some of its load and before we could say 'better avoid going over that or we'll have a blow-out', someone else hit it and one of their tires exploded rather spectacularly.

It was also quite exciting whenever we drove into new time zones.

Unfortunately every time that we changed time zone, from Western, to Mountain, to Eastern, we lost an hour, which was not good when we had to cover such large distances in a day.

One other thing helped to keep us entertained during our long drives; road signs. We passed such classics as the enigmatic 'Thing' advertised in Texas...did it prove how little there is to see in this vast state? As in 'look, look, I've found someTHING here at last!' Actually, it was the name of an attraction. Other adverts on billboards beside the road included 'Famous Dateshakes' (in a place improbably named Dateland); 'native pottery, rattlesnakes, wives'. Fast food establishments had such names as 'Blimpie' and 'What-a-Burger', and reassured us that claims about increased obesity in the USA are unfounded. The most unexpected advert was surely the one for 'vasectomy reversals'. 'Oh yes', you would think as you drove past the sign, 'that is what I need'.

As well as adverts we passed some unusual warning signs too. First the scary 'Prison facilities in this area. Please do not pick up hitchhikers', and then the very clever 'Littering is unLAWFUL.'

Of course, sometimes we did stop driving - not for hitchhikers though or for littering - and this too provided further distraction. I would say that these breaks were a breath of fresh air after being in the van, but seeing as our stops were often to visit restrooms, 'fresh air' was in short supply. Please feel free to visit any gentlemen's public toilet for verification of this statement.

During 13 weeks travelling we obviously had to answer the call of

nature 100s of times and the restrooms we encountered were often so bizarre that they have earned a chapter by themselves - as you will see/have already seen (depending on publishers folly when editing this manuscript). Suffice it to say that on long distance road trip days we normally only relieved ourselves when stopping to refuel...in a kind of Zen, everything must balance, what goes out must be put in somewhere else style. Not that the van ran on urine, which was a shame really because that would have both saved our budget and avoided the chemical toilet emptying traumas. On the occasions when our bladders filled before Harvey got empty we stopped at scary concrete restroom stations in the middle of nowhere which featured vending machines, local maps and all the charm of, well, public toilets. Generally though it was petrol station toilets that received our custom. These were no more charming than the others, but did provide an extra form of distraction in that they were normally reached via shops.

Petrol station shops seem to be undergoing something of a renaissance - our local one now features a coffee bar. Where better to meet for a drink, enjoy the view and soak up the atmosphere and petrol fumes? Certainly some of these stores in America were exotic in their different-ness. The one that will always spring to mind is the gamblers haven in Pahrump, Nevada. Many others contained eateries - often dubious in appearance - or coffee dispensers - often surprisingly good and fancy, including one that featured half a dozen pots of freshly brewed caffeinated, de-caf, flavoured, etc. And, shops being shops, these places also sold things.

Usually they were obvious articles, like oil, anti-freeze, music tapes, etc. But, in the outskirts of Houston for example, sometimes more unexpected

goods were on offer as well. This particular store displayed the biggest collection of crap ever seen outside a granny's living room. Including: necklaces in angel shaped Velour boxes; Magic Ink New Testament quiz and colouring books; key rings featuring three inch deformed ceramic dogs; broken fridge magnets; otter shaped neck pillows; pearlised horse shaped mantel clocks; dodgy looking elastic ball things; plus a collection of pills and sprays to help you get high and/or laid. Anything that was unrelated to driving was on sale.

Then there was the other reason for stopping at gas stations, actually re-fuelling. Often the whole process, including paying, could be conducted at the pump without having to speak to people or enter the shops. This was fortunate, because with so many exciting things to look at inside we would have never have left were this not the case. On occasion we had to seek advice in order to get the pump started - different companies and States sometimes had different designs and they were all different to UK pumps, and twice we encountered full service stations, where a staff member put the fuel in for us. Death Valley was the first time this happened - complete with references to 'mofos' - and the other time was in a little town called Sheffield. This was a serious 'one horse' place (much the same as its namesake in England, but minus the sprawling industrialisation) and we had left the interstate to find it as fuel was very low and there were no services to be seen. In fact there was not a lot of anything to be seen - we were in Texas after all.

The petrol was very expensive and the pump was so slow that in order to put the man who served us out of his misery we only got him to put in 25



dollars (less than half a tank). This also saved us from an extended version of the awkward conversation with him that had gone along the lines of:

Server 'Y'all Australian?'

Us 'No, we are British'

'Oh. Ha ha ha'

And then silence, as tumbleweeds blew past and he secretly filled our van with urine instead of petrol.

Asking for directions was one thing that we managed to avoid on all of our long-drive days, mainly because we stuck to the interstates and just drove straight for three days running. With a detailed map and good fortune even I, an appalling map-reader who gets lost driving to the local shops could get this (nearly) right. In fact, the only time we asked for help was when we got very lost in the suburbs of New Orleans. We chose a man outside a petrol station to assist us and soon learned that he was not local - typical. We also discovered his grandmother had just died, so helping us find our way was very far down his list of priorities. Finally, the man was carrying an open bottle of something very alcoholic in a brown paper bag as he got back in his car. Overall a really great choice for assistance!

In the end we just kept driving in the same direction until we saw a road-name or landmark we could identify on our map, always a good solution. This certainly worked in Texas - where the landmark we aimed for was 'Louisiana'.

## **15 – Don't spare the (crazy) horses**

San Diego to Louisiana, 1,684 miles, five different states, six days. This is what travelling is all about, on the road all the time. Except this was not what our travels had been all about. We had spent most of the last month and a bit just in one state, California, and spent the final month of our adventures similarly based in a single state - Florida.

We left California for the last time on New Year's Day. The supposedly sunny state of blue skies and white beaches had provided us with a very varied and often hostile climate. However, we had swiftly realized that California is a disaster hot spot and actually the rainy weather that had been present during a lot of our time there had been something of a walk in the park. What with forest fires, earthquakes, and mudslides we were lucky to escape without serious injury.

We saw signs of the fire damage as we drove east from San Diego on January 1st. It really is a wonder that Governor Schwarzenegger ever bothers stepping the area down from a state of emergency, he must feel like he is constantly living in an action movie.

On the first day of our cross continent journey we drove into Arizona - losing an hour in the process. We reached Tucson just in time to check in to the Crazy Horses RV Park, only covering a modest 406 miles out of the nearly 1,700 we hoped to cover in less than a week. The day had been pretty uneventful. We had encountered a surprising amount of traffic given that it

was a holiday, including a large number of dune buggies taking part in some kind of meet on the dunes near Winter Haven, California. The only people we saw to talk to were the half-hearted border patrol officer mentioned earlier and a KFC server when we got lunch. For the most part we just drove and appreciated the views.

The landscape was impressive, however given the size of the country it did become a little monotonous and the first whole day can be summarized as: very deserted surroundings; first very rocky and mountainous; then wide open plains, stretching away towards distant hills or mountains - a mixture of desert and farms. It was reminiscent of Holland in terms of its flatness - minus the windmills of course. The vegetation was increasingly restricted to cacti - the huge ones with 'arms' that you see in cowboy films. This was highly appropriate as we drove through the formerly Wild West, where some wildness must still exist as at the Mohawk rest-station we found vending machines that had to be kept behind bars. Although, given the additives and calories, Twinkies everywhere should probably be locked up.

On day two we hardly drove anywhere, just the 71 miles to Tombstone. In fact two of the six 'west to east' days were spent pottering round nearby towns, meaning that most of the distance, and states that we covered were traversed in just four days.

Tombstone was one of the very few places we wanted to take a detour to see between California and the Deep South, and it proved well worth stopping for. The story of this town has been immortalized in several films, most recently

*Tombstone* and *Wyatt Earp* - movies that were released very close together with subsequent negative effect on each other's ratings. For those readers who missed these films, either put off by the title of the former or by the sleep inducing length of the latter (it is a Kevin Costner film after all) here is a summary of this small town's main claim to fame. Tombstone, affectionately known as 'The town too tough to die', was established to support mining when gold was discovered in the vicinity in 1879. Wyatt Earp, a famous lawman, came to the town with his family in order to make his fortune and got embroiled in a feud with a local gang. This climaxed with the gunfight at the OK corral, involving Wyatt, his brothers and Doc Holiday versus the Clancy brothers and their gang. There, what took you so long Kevin? I have seen both movies and *Tombstone* is my favourite due to my general intolerance for three-hour films. This silver screen fame therefore meant that the town was a place we were keen to see.

'The whole town is a museum' - this is not our judgment but a strap line voiced by the locals themselves. Many settlements that owed their existence to the gold rush are now mere memories recorded in history books.

Tombstone has been able to survive by gearing itself to the tourist trade, so 'too savvy to die' rather than 'too tough'. Everyone who lives there seems to be in period dress, all the men have cowboy hats, guns and huge moustaches, and the women all have big frocks. Many of these people are 'in character' for re-enactments, but the rest obviously just like dressing up - though to be honest what they wear is probably also still the most suitable attire for the climate, as it was in Earp's day.

In the same way that Vegas was like Disney but with drink and sex, this

was Disney with guns, hairier faces...and worse acting. The tourist bit of town is very small, just one main road really, but offers a lot of entertainment options and good value for money. Us being us we wanted to see everything, so went straight to the tourist information office for advice. We also went to pick up a free gift, for which we had a coupon, but that turned out to be a postcard illustrated with four historic buildings – yep, definitely savvy.

We soon discovered that the main attraction was re-enactments of the infamous shoot out, performed by two different companies, but that the time of our visit would mean we could only see one. The decision of which to see was relatively easy - one show is performed in the OK Corral, is better publicized and includes entry to other attractions, the other is just a gunfight performed in a dusty side street. Publicity really works.

Once we had purchased our tickets for the gunfight - due to commence a couple of hours later - we took a stage coach ride round town, pulled by two huge horses with the cute, but unlikely, names of Butch and Buddy. Our driver provided a surprisingly eloquent narrative given his 'rough cowboy' appearance, which was full of fascinating detail about the town's past. We then visited the headquarters of the Tombstone newspaper, a fairly uninspiring museum but free with our tickets for the gunfight. Here we also picked up complimentary souvenir editions of the newspapers produced in Earp's era, full of detail and images of the day. And now sitting unread in a box somewhere.

We still had time to kill before the re-enactment, our expected highlight, so popped into the Birdcage Theatre, a saloon and poker den where 'ladies of the night' sat suspended from the ceiling in cages like oversized budgies

(though somehow we missed this feature.... perhaps they were on a break?)  
This building is supposed to be haunted, and the place did seem quite creepy. Even though neither of us had a paranormal experience we did leave fairly rapidly. The most disturbing event of the day was probably our visit to the public restrooms in town, last cleaned after the original gunfight for the sake of historical accuracy.

Finally it was time to witness the shootout at the OK Corral for ourselves, around 4pm, though high noon would have seemed more appropriate. The entire show lasted 35 minutes, of which only one was filled with shooting. The experience is best described as 'interesting', and had a distinctly 'primary school play' feel about it. This label largely applies to the calibre of acting that unfolded on the stage before us. We were not expecting Oscar-worthy performances of course but what we were subjected to fell so far short of this that we began to wonder if it was a first night (er, afternoon). Blatantly this was not the case and the cast had evidently performed together hundreds of times before, but nevertheless we felt like we were watching a group of prisoners taking their first drama lesson. Projection of voices was often non-existent, they turned their backs on the audience and a theoretically simple plot left us baffled.

The show was performed outside in part of the Corral with the audience on benches. The first part began with a rousing patriotic speech - as does everything in the USA these days. We were the only Brits in the audience, a slightly uncomfortable position but fortunately, due to Blair and Bush's 'Special Relationship', not necessitating a lynching. Next came a

lesson to us all through a short sketch entitled 'gun safety for the insane'. This involved a young girl from among the spectators being ridiculed in front of everyone about not picking other people's guns up. Of course kids, if that pistol is your own, then go for it. As a reward for being humiliating the girl received a shot up coke can autographed by the 'stars'...wow, the generosity of this town just never starts. Once 'Bronco Billy' (seriously) and his fellow actors were satisfied that the audience would refrain from stealing guns after the show, they moved on to the main event, divided into four acts.

First, a comedy skit that was drawn out in the manner of a Monty Python or Goon Show gag...but without the punch line. This was followed by three scenes about the Earps, ending with a smoke filled shootout and then an opportunity to have your photo taken with your favourite cowboy. Maybe Disney *does* own Tombstone? The problem, I think, was not a lack of experience but too much experience, as the cast certainly seemed to be going through the motions on autopilot for much of the show. Of course they do not need to be good because Tombstone is probably not a place that relies on repeat visitors, so as long as new people keep visiting and paying to see the gunfight because 'it's famous' then it does not matter how high the quality is. Cynical? Yes.

After the smoke cleared in the stage area we had the opportunity to explore the rest of the OK Corral where life-sized, if not life-like, figures illustrate where the protagonists stood during the famous battle. Fortunately again this was free if you paid to see the gunfight so we had no qualms about leaving after a cursory glance.

In an unexpected move Tombstone also contains the world's largest English rose tree, an attraction that appeared to offer a welcome change of pace, and subject. However, at \$3 a ticket and nearly closing time we chose to forgo this botanist's dream and watched another show about the town's history instead.

The Tombstone Historama, narrated by the late, great Vincent Price, is a multimedia extravaganza - and again free to gunfight spectators. It is billed as featuring 'laser-activated' models and is in effect a huge (possibly paper maché or *Blue Peter*) model, which rotates to show different stages in the town's history, interwoven with film clips. The effects were so bad as to be good, especially when characters died – only marginally more wooden than the actors we had seen outside - or when a flood (puddle) devastated the town.

Perhaps most entertaining was how the stories were at odds with others we had heard during the day, in this case very biased against the lawmen. So far our opinion of the town was that it was cheesier than a French fromagerie, but the attractions do keep the place alive and at least many of the buildings are authentic.

Finding a place to park for the night was our next concern as the shows and shops began to shut down for the night. Fortunately we were able to get a spot at the Wells Fargo RV Park, a mere bullet's throw from the OK Corral - and surprisingly reasonably priced. We were thus able to walk back into town for dinner at the Crazy Horse (co-incidence after last night's campsite?) saloon.

Here we encountered more real life cowboys, with more real life guns –



which we remembered not to touch! An elderly man with a keyboard, who was incredibly out of place given the atmosphere of the town, provided live music in the style of a hotel lobby. Once again our meal was 'ish', making us suspect that the RV park owner, who had enthusiastically recommended the restaurant, either had an interest in the eatery, or else hated tourists and would shoot us in the night.

After our main course the waitress enquired if there would be anything else. Not a remarkable question of course, and we instantly thought 'dessert'. However, as they had no pudding menu we wondered what she was she offering! We retired to another restaurant, the Longhorn, to try our luck.

20 minutes later and we had had a very nice Death by Chocolate Cake, and were regretting our first choice of dining destination. We had also seen two cops sitting eating doughnuts in the corner and chatting to locals, a very small-town America image. Also very essential among such a well-armed population I imagine.

Moving on in the morning we agreed that we had had a very enjoyable time in Tombstone, but that one day was definitely long enough. If we had extended our stay we would have probably been forced to own guns and grow facial hair/dress up as a prostitute (delete according to gender). Everything felt very 'hammed up', but with such straight faces that one could believe that the inhabitants of the entire town were suffering a group delusion and really thought they were living in the Wild West. Another reason to move on quickly, in case the delusion was contagious.

We followed Tombstone with another extended driving day, the highlight of which was that we crossed an entire state - New Mexico - with barely a pause. We knew we had left Arizona only because a sign indicated a state information centre was nearby. Other than this it was less noticeable than driving across a county boundary in the UK; I had expected a border crossing patrol at least.

Other than a lunch stop in a small town, the only sign of civilization that we passed near in New Mexico was a cattle farm near Las Cruces. What an evocative perfume to remind us of our cross-country dash. And then we were in Texas.

An improved road surface was the only indication of the change from state to state on this occasion. Perhaps this enterprise is aimed at encouraging car usage and therefore oil purchases by the Texans? Most of the day was again spent surrounded by desert-like scenery, interspersed with the occasional settlement. El Paso was the first major sign of civilization that we came to in Texas. The place had a look of a quarry about it and its own climate - a dust cloud. Strangely, we declined to stop for a look round.

Driving through this part of the country we were the closest we ever got to Mexico, and therefore encountered another border patrol searching for illegal immigrants. We were waved through, either due to our obvious honesty or because it was the end of the day. We did see a Mexican coyote struggle to get past the security however, furtively crawling in a ditch and eyeing passing vehicles for hitchhiking opportunities.

Our day ended one hour later than expected as we changed time zone just before our planned destination - Van Horn. We were so desperate to

check-in to a campsite before they all closed that we overshot the place we wanted. Turning round proved unhelpful as we somehow missed the turning again and finished up changing time zone a second time...and then of course a third time before settling in at the Eagle's Nest RV site. It was still quite a while before we could go to bed however. First, the campsite owners kept us gassing for ages - we noticed that people became increasingly verbose and friendly as we travelled east. Second we received extremely slow service at the local Pizza Hut, eventually managing just one slice each as time had dulled our appetites. Easy lunch for the next day at least.

Three days out from San Diego, and with Emma still suffering from her New Year cold, we were forced to follow a long day of driving with a replay that saw us eat up the tarmac between Van Horn, Texas, and San Antonio, still Texas. Forced is possibly a strong word to use in this context, however we did have little choice about driving on, partly because we wanted to stop for a day in San Antonio, and partly because there was just nothing else near Van Horn to occupy us for a day there.

The most striking thing about this day on the road was 'isn't Texas huge!' More mountains, like massive regular steps cut into the earth, and empty plains, were again our only visual companions for much of the day. So monotonous was the landscape that playing eye-spy was too easy and kept us going for less than five minutes.

'Eye-spy with my little eye something beginning with C'

'Clouds?'

'Yep'

"Eye-spy with my little eye something beginning with R"

'Road?'

'Yep'

'Eye-spy with my little eye something beginning with D'

'Desert?'

'Yep'

'Eye-spy with my little eye something beginning with M'

'Mountains?'

'No. Oh, actually did you say mountains?'

'Yep'

'Sorry, I fell asleep, yes, it was Mountains'

'Eye-spy with my little eye something beginning with.....oh, that's all there is.'

The only real diversion all day was when we stopped for petrol and the toilet - twice. Even lunch break, normally filled with 'where' and 'when' decisions was taken care of the night before at Pizza Hut.

The landscape got slightly more interesting as we neared the Texas/Louisiana border, green began to make a welcome reappearance among the vegetation, but the view was still big, and still empty.

We selected a KOA camp outside San Antonio, because we knew it would have good facilities, all the sites in the chain do, and because it boasted a nearby bus stop to town. We were even able to buy tea from a barbecue van on site, and had a free movie to watch.

While we waited for our meal we picked up hot tips from a couple

returning from Louisiana about what to do and where to eat in New Orleans, the next leg of our travels. They were perfectly friendly, but evidently had not visited the capital of Mardi Gras for its culture. They told us that they hoped we liked drinking.... leaving us to wonder if it was obligatory, and the places they recommended certainly suggested it was for them. The man also told me, in a somewhat creepy voice, that we should visit the cemetery and should 'take care'. Fortunately the arrival of our food provided a 'get out' from this increasingly awkward conversation, and we went and hid in the Clubhouse to eat and watch the film.

The film turned out to be *What A Girl Wants*, a cheesy chick-flick starring Colin Firth and set in a US version of London. The movie was passable, even featuring nostalgia inducing footage of my hometown Henley-on-Thames. More entertaining than the main presentation was a guy in the audience who laughed loudly like a braying donkey at inappropriate times, so he was laughing alone and thus seemed even louder. Reminiscent of the audience in New York when we watched *Love Actually*.

San Antonio made it on to our schedule because Emma had visited with her parents when she was a child and had fond memories of the river walk area. The town also features the Alamo, famous icon of American history and therefore hard to avoid visiting. We braved public transport once again in order to reach the town centre and came through several bus and trolley car trips virtually unscathed. Virtually.

The first job once we got into San Antonio was distinctly non-touristy. Whilst on a fortnight's vacation it is normally possible to avoid most mundane

tasks, however when you are travelling for 13 weeks you cannot avoid all trappings of everyday life. On this occasion the task was to find a tailor to patch Emma's increasingly obscene jeans, a job that we thought could easily be accomplished with leather chaps. We were in Texas after all so finding someone to do the work did not seem an overly ambitious goal.

First we enquired at the local visitor information centre. Here we received a very cagey response of 'oh, not sure...try the concierge at your hotel'. Why the secrecy? It was not as if Emma had asked for drugs or a prostitute...though she did gesture to her crotch so perhaps this is where the confusion came from? Next stop the market area of town, a seemingly fruitful source of crafts-people. Here we found dozens of stalls selling leather goods, but none who could patch the jeans. We also saw loads of stalls with hats for sale - bizarrely - with huge signs saying 'No photographs', even more bizarrely but obviously aimed at the Japanese tourist market. Our journey across town was not entirely wasted however as we found a place to email for free.

Following our failed shopping expedition we headed to the river walk area, where restaurants and shops line the water and you can take lazy boat rides. A truly scenic place...except in January when we were in town.

This is the time of year when the waterways are drained to be cleaned - we were there for the nearly empty smelly stage. An annual mud race takes place – probably to try to make up for the smelly messiness and probably fun, but we just missed that too. We did see a live crayfish fighting for breath in the shallow water left behind in a hollow in the riverbed however, something that we soon learnt was an edible delicacy in Louisiana.

We did also find a nice restaurant for dinner, The Republic of Texas,

which served 46oz margaritas. We declined this liquid lunch, but an elderly couple near us happily slurped one down.

We felt very dozy when we left the restaurant, post-big lunch stupor, but made our way to the Alamo. The building, which was a mission constructed early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Spanish to assist their colonial expansion, has a very beautiful façade, but seemed very out of place right in the middle of the town.

In December 1835, during the Texas War for Independence, it was occupied by Texan troops who had captured the city, but in February 1836 the Alamo was attacked by Mexican troops. The defenders resisted the attack for 13 days before falling to the larger Mexican force, who went on to execute most of the survivors, including Davy Crockett and James Bowie (of Bowie Knife fame). The experience of visiting was much less moving than I expected, given the slaughter that took place there, and after wandering round the buildings I was left with a slight 'so what?' feeling.

Partly there were too many information-heavy displays which hindered the atmosphere that the empty space may have evoked - and I always feel obliged to read every label. Partly there were too many visitors to allow time and space to reflect. Mainly though I think I was tired from all the travelling and still overdosed on history following Tombstone. There was an emotive movie recreating the events of 1836 and this did have an impact. However, my most distinct memory from the Alamo is of the 'gift museum' - a shop largely selling Bowie Knives. Quite sad really.

On leaving the Alamo we found ourselves with time to kill before dinner because our planned river trip was impossible. We ended up recreating a

typical Saturday at home, shopping and a movie - reassuringly comfortable. We even finished our San Antonio trip with dinner in McDonald's, a real taste of home!

Day six of our cross-country sprint, also day six of 2004, found us back on the road, covering our last leg to the Deep South. Again we only made a few stops, Denny's brunch plus restroom and petrol breaks as we headed from Texas to Louisiana. A book on tape and countless rounds of 20 questions kept us occupied and sane - ish. As we neared our destination the scenery also provided more distraction. Empty plains were replaced with lush greenery as we entered Bayou country.

We arrived in Lafayette, Louisiana, in the early evening and booked into a KOA site again. We were (fortunately?) just in time to watch an orientation video provided by the camp owners, and were locked away in a dark room with another couple. The video had a 'home movie' feel and managed to be both funny and disturbing at the same time. Funny in its amateurishness, disturbing in its content.

The majority of the film was about how to cook and eat crawfish - a local staple. It featured people cooking the oversized prawns alive and eating them, head first. Stylish, and flashbacks to the poor blighter we had seen in San Antonio! It also plugged the KOA - encouraging guests to book in - and the local basketball team, with 'its own special brand of playing'? Finally the video invited us to try alligator meat advertising its 'surprisingly not bad taste and good consistency'! Well, we were now sold on the area.

Bravely, and a little foolishly, we followed the movie with a trip out to



the local restaurant to try Cajun cuisine for ourselves. Fezzo's turned out to be a spice-fest, despite our best efforts to order bland food. At least the evening was entertaining as we observed nearly every other patron messily chow down on crayfish aesthetically served in huge clear Tupperware containers. Charming!

## 16 - Setting up Camp

Once we had settled on a campsite for the night we slipped into a routine that varied little from state to state, town to town. First, registering. On most nights we would turn up at our chosen camp between 4.00pm and 6.00pm. If we were early enough for the office to be open we would ask for a site, fill in the forms - including (running outside because you could not remember it, even after 12 weeks) vehicle registration number - and then get a map with massive (often fluorescent) arrows drawn on to direct us to our specific plot.

If we were there after the office closed, which was nearly every night in the first week or so of our travels, then we did 'Night registration' - as mentioned earlier. Very rarely did we get turned away because sites were full. The only time when we had a problem finding a place to stop for the night - and on that occasion we visited three campsites before we even found one where we could just park let alone have hookup - was, inevitably, our last night.

Once registered the next task was to navigate the campgrounds in search of our site number, which was generally site 101. This led us to comment, "Do you put all the British tourists into Room 101?" (Snigger, snigger). To which the intellectual serving us would respond "Oh, really?" Fortunately we did not have to rely on these people to direct us to our camping spot because most sites supplied us with very clear maps. More often than not these were printed on one side of a folded A3 piece of paper. The back of these booklets generally listed the site rules, and the inside was usually a map of the surrounding area with numerous advertisements for local

eateries - probably all run by members of the family owning the campsite. The one occasion that springs to mind when we did not get given a map was in Tucson, the night before we visited Tombstone. The campsite owner had given us a discount because we were paying cash, but he then refused to give us a map. The reason he gave was that the route to the plot was too straightforward to need a map, but we think he was just trying to save money. To be honest though, most of the maps looked the same and I already had a carrier bag full of them, so I don't think we suffered for the lack of it!

Most of the individual camping sites or plots were well labelled - usually with the site number spray painted on the grey electrical boxes that we hooked up to. Most sites were also well demarcated and, because we had a small rig, we usually had lots of room to spare - enabling us to put more distance between our van and our neighbours. The van had thin walls, and we wanted to give ourselves, and our fellow travellers, some privacy.

Perhaps half of the plots we camped on were grass, the others being bark and sometimes concrete blocks. Scenery wise, we generally had uninterrupted views of the other campers (so much for that privacy I mentioned). On occasion we were nestled in among trees - cosy unless your water hose had been stolen - and two or three times we were beside water. Three times the campsites were actually car parks - complete with spray painted bays and pay and display machines...well, not really, but it is a nice image. However, as long as we had hookups and at least a bit of distance from the nearest campers we did not mind where we were.

Having found our spot and manoeuvred into it we then followed a fairly specific 'setting up camp' routine. I would go outside with a flashlight, unless the site was so well lit or we actually arrived in daylight, and connect us up to the electricity and water supplies. That is unless we were on 'dry' overflow sites, and not stealing electricity from alternative sources. To be fair we only actually did this once when we were in the Florida Keys. We surreptitiously drove the van up to a lamppost and tapped in to its power supply by carefully unscrewing the maintenance cover and twisting some wires together in a MacGyver style. Ok, so we just plugged into the handy socket at ground level.

All went well for the next few minutes as we happily cooked our microwave tea. Then disaster struck because the fuse in the lamppost blew! I rushed outside to unplug us and Emma drove us sheepishly back to our parking spot. We did feel a little guilty, but at least the power did not go out across the whole campsite. We also felt that our petty larceny was completely justified. First, we had had a really bad day and needed hot dinner. Second, we had seen the neighbouring RV do it too. And we later saw them stealing power from a different source following our crime at least we were not that brazen. One good thing did come of this adventure hot 'hot pockets' for dinner.

Anyway, most days plugging in was much more straightforward. If we were going out later for dinner or were only staying one night we tended not to connect the water hose because it was more hassle (well OK, you had to attach a hose to *two* taps) than just plugging in for electricity.

Next we tended to visit the restroom. Restroom quality varied greatly from site to site and, as mentioned, was very important to us. Interestingly,

we became more tolerant and less selective about levels of washroom cleanliness as our travels went on – as; in fact, we became less concerned with our own presentation levels.

Almost all of the restrooms were combination toilets, sinks, and shower cubicles - fortunately still divided into women and men's. The showers usually had a separate small area for putting your clothes, divided from the shower by a curtain and from the rest of the washroom by at least a curtain, or by a locking door when we were lucky. Some restrooms were better than average, for example a site near Mobile, Florida, had individual washrooms with toilet, sink and shower. Others were decidedly below average - including one with a 'jailhouse' look in Baton Rouge.

Once we were checked in we did not have very much contact with site staff. Actually, until we travelled into parts of America where it was peak RV season we did not have a lot of interaction with staff even whilst checking in. Often they would keep conversation to the bare minimum necessary for taking our money.

The most extreme example of this was in the Deep South at the Cajun Campground. We walked into the office and before we spoke the staff member pushed a form at us and told us how much a night was. For all she knew we could have just stopped for directions, or for the restroom - although this was the 'jailhouse' camp so that was not likely.

Despite a general lack of talkativeness from staff, some real characters stand out from the three months. First, on our third campsite there was the stoned 'Dude' in Crescent City who knew nothing about our missing water

pipe (apart from the fact that he was selling it on in his store) - and cared less than that. Then in San Francisco the oriental staff running the camp who called us 'Mr. and Mrs. England' and kept asking about the London fog. An indication that staff became more talkative once we had been travelling for a month and a half was that we found ourselves spending five to ten minutes chatting when we checked in - as opposed to five to ten seconds.

Perhaps we got more relaxed and so appeared less threatening to staff? Also we spent the second half of our holiday in areas of the country where the peak season had begun - so staff were probably more practiced at talking...certainly they were more friendly, and at one campsite the person checking us in even told us all about a discount we could apply for that would be valid at many campsites and signed us up there and then. Pity no one had told us about it a month and a half earlier! We could have saved literally ten dollars - maybe more.

Our favourite staff member was in the Florida Keys. She leaned over conspiratorially and said "Are either of you over 21? Because you have to be in order to check in". She then said 'Emma' (26) had a 'baby face' and looked 19. To me she admitted I looked 23.... so why ask? Certainly she was Emma's number one staff member - and gave us an 'employee of the month' nomination form for our troubles. And then there was the staff member in the Florida Keys who offered to marry us...but that's another story (and one the mother-in-law does not want to know!)

To be honest, we did not have much contact with our fellow campers either. On most sites we did not have much in common with the rest of the 'RV set'.

For one thing, our rig was about the size of a matchbox toy in comparison to the behemoths we parked next to. Most were about one and a half to two times larger than Harvey, which gave him a serious inferiority complex. This forced us to shun our neighbours in an attempt to buoy his spirits. In fact, some of the other travellers had cars to tow behind their RVs, or to tow the 'fifth wheel' (caravan), that were as big as our van. On busy sites we would often walk around for hours looking for our van before peering into the dark crevices between two 32 footers and exclaiming: 'Oh, there it is!' Most of the campers also had garden furniture; fences, flowerpots, flags and other paraphernalia making us feel even more like poor cousins. Size is not everything of course, and we would surely have interacted more with the other campers, but for two further barriers.

The majority were seasoned campers, often travelling to the same sites each year and so with established networks of friends. Snowbirds are the extreme example of this group. In comparison we were inexperienced and also transient RV-ers, generally moving on after one night as opposed to one month. Related to this there was a serious age gap between us and most of our neighbours - in fact our combined age was less than many of them.

Most of the people we saw who even approached our age group were either camping in tents or had hired cars and were staying in motels. I do not consider myself particularly ageist; it was just one more thing not to have in common. The feeling was obviously mutual because one night we heard carol singing and opened our van door to find a group wandering between the RVs stopping to sing at each one. When they left our site we heard one comment carry to us on the wind: "Pity they're young".

Most nights all we did at the campsites was eat dinner in the van and then sleep. Occasionally - and increasingly as the journey went on - we did take advantage of the extra facilities sometimes available. These included laundry rooms with coin-operated machines, which we used as little as possible, due to our fear of cleanliness alluded to earlier. On the three occasions when we did admit defeat and do the washing it was a whole evening spent feeding quarters to the washers and dryers until all our clothes were bone dry. Although this was 'energy deficient' we had no alternative having nowhere to hang our clothes in the van - unless we wanted to block the windscreen - an extreme sport we declined to attempt. The other facility that we made a lot of use of was swimming pools - once the weather warmed up - and, when available, hot tubs.

Nearly all the campsites also had stores ranging in size from a fridge containing homemade cake to full on grocery and camp supply shops (normally in KOA Camps). At times these were a lifesaver when we found ourselves in the middle of nowhere with no dinner. Generally we avoided them however, because they applied the law of the captive audience and had very high prices.

In a bid to get more trade, or from a less cynical viewpoint, out of a desire to provide better customer service, some sites had Value Added Things. This 'VAT' can be divided into two groups - things that looked good but were actually money makers, and genuine bonuses for the camper. In the first group we encountered: On-site shuttle from campground to San Francisco city centre (in actual fact the manager's car driven by an old man



for \$10 each); Free coffee in Yosemite KOA - donations essential; Free night at a campsite. This last one was actually a godsend as we had spent the evening searching for a site and nearly cried with relief when the owner let us stay at no charge.... except we had to endure a timeshare hard sell the next day.

More beneficial VAT included: use of a natural - if smelly - hot springs in San Louis Obispo on the west California coast; Free breakfast and email near the Sierra Nevadas; a movie and opportunity to buy cheap barbecue food on site in San Antonio; (genuinely) free coffee and doughnuts in Homosassa and the introductory video explaining about how to kill crayfish in Lafayette.

The Avila Hot Springs campsite deserves more of a mention because I want to put across just how smelly it was. Certainly the odour has stayed with us – despite countless scrubbings with perfumed soap - and I just wish that this paragraph could have been written with ‘scratch and sniff’ ink. We could smell the springs, like rotten eggs and onions, before we even parked and you could see the steam rising up into the evening sky. However, nothing prepared us for quite how hot - or indeed smelly - the water would be.

We were also very surprised at how busy it was, with about ten people ranging in age from us up to, well, old. We managed to stay in for about 15 minutes but our bodies still felt (and indeed looked) like they were in the boiling water all evening. The heat was lovely but did send us a little crazy. We were not the only ones affected in this way, as three Chinese ladies who had been chanting in Emma's changing room then performed a carefully choreographed hopping dance beside the spa when they left.

However, the most memorable VAT moment on a campsite was our previously mentioned attempt to have a fire. Now this counts as a genuine bonus because it was a very cheap activity - just buying the wood at the store. Add on (hard) labour costs and it does become less of a bargain however – even though we had Emma's frostbitten butt to take home as a souvenir!

Moving on from a campsite generally involved just reversing the setting up procedure. One night when we were just going out for dinner this went a little pear-shaped however. We drove off our plot and round the campground to the exit but just as we were leaving we noticed a crowd of campers waving and shouting to us. As soon as they attracted our attention I realised what they wanted. It was not a 'good riddance to the British' unwelcoming committee; I had forgotten to unhook us before we drove off! I jumped out and found the electricity cable snaked out behind the van. Fortunately it had just pulled out of the camp socket and not damaged this or damaged itself. More fortunate than that was the fact that we had not been connected to the water supply - a screw on connection that would surely have damaged the site's pipeline or our water hose or the vehicle. Funnily enough we only forgot once!

One additional factor to consider when leaving campsites was whether or not to dump. Dumping was not as gross as it sounds. It merely meant that because our van did not have a flushing toilet or a permanent sewer hookup we had to empty the waste water (grey water) from our sink and the contents of our chemical toilet down into a sewage hole every so often. Okay, so it was as gross as it sounds.

We became quite practised and developed a routine for completing this task. This included a division of jobs according to the labour force available. In other words, I held the grey water pipe into the dump station and held the toilet upside down to empty it and Emma stood several feet away - hosing off the toilet and spraying bleach at it. Despite the presence of an audience every time we dumped and a nest of angry biting ants on one occasion, the 'Dump' was always completed without major hitches.

So that's the camping experience in a nutshell - from registration to checkout. Go on, try it! Just ask permission before you drive onto someone's field/lawn/patio because, despite appearances (and in fact our experiences in America), not every patch of semi-open ground is a campsite!

## 17 - Ragin' Cajuns

After six days spent mostly on the road and travelling nearly 2,000 miles we were ready for a bit of a break, and so was Harvey. Therefore Louisiana became our home for the next week, with a day in Lafayette, three days in and around New Orleans, and the time in between taken up by semi-scenic lazy day drives. Although we stayed within the same state during this time it was hardly restful. The Deep South was probably one of the liveliest places we visited, particularly New Orleans, and we got our fill of people, noise, booze and culture during this time. In fact the only thing we failed to get our fill of was food - something quite important to us, as I'm sure you've noticed.

Often the local cuisine was just a little too exotic for us - and by exotic I mean really spicy. Still, there was always McDonald's! Although actually the only time we ventured under the golden arches during this week was for a chocolate milkshake - and that tasted of banana.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the sunny skies that had accompanied us on our road trip days deserted us once we set up camp in Cajun country, restricting both our day trips and our ability to sleep. At night listening to the rain it was only a minor leap of the imagination to re-situate our bed to a war movie during the Chinese water torture scene.

Undeterred by the home horror movie supplied by our Lafayette campsite as an 'orientation' film we ventured into the city the next day. We took advantage of another complementary service, an audio tour, and this proved to be much more palatable than the video. The tape was narrated by an incredibly

serious, yet mercifully accent-light local (mercifully because we really struggled to understand some of the people we met in this region). The tape combined snippets of history with directions to various attractions, in theory a useful and interesting guide to the town.

Unfortunately on several occasions too many instructions were delivered in one go, immediately followed by rambling descriptions of the area's past or present culture – with lots of dates thrown in for good measure. This either meant we could not attend to the description because we were trying to remember the directions or, more likely we would be distracted by the interesting stories, forget where we were going and be forced to rewind the tape or drive on blindly. For example the commentary might go as follows: 'Now, turn left at the next junction; proceed for a mile; turn right at the third junction; left into Cajun place; take the 13th junction after this – not including dirt tracks except the one wide enough for three horses; proceed for 200 yards east and you'll have reached the town square. Lafayette was founded by two brothers 200 years ago in 1804 as an outpost in the swamp. The name derives from *laf* meaning 'under' and *fayette* meaning 'water'. The two brothers attempted to marry the same woman shortly after settling here in Louisiana and ended up murdering each other in 1808. The place where this conflict took place became known as Baton Rouge, because they clubbed each other to death with sticks. You should now have reached the town square'.

Obviously the monologue above is fictitious; the real instructions were much harder to follow. In spite of these difficulties the commentator predicted our location with witch-like accuracy on several occasions. Once he noted

'you will now have reached the main road' - and we had, although admittedly we reached the main road on numerous other occasions when we were not supposed to - and at the end of the tour the tape ended just as we drove back onto the campsite. Evidently the tapes are calibrated to take account of wrong turns and high-speed tourists. Probably Japanese technology.

And so we come to the content of the tour. The first stop on the tour was at the tourist information centre - which would have been our initial point of call whether we were following the tour or not. The centre was in a very picturesque location, in spite of being right beside the main road. A river flows around the wide veranda of the building and we spent a tranquil few minutes feeding the ducks and fish. And no, we were not so well prepared that we had bread with us in anticipation of a duck-feeding opportunity, we were actually given the food by the staff in the centre, who were so friendly and verbose that it is a wonder we saw any of the town itself.

Once we did tear ourselves away from the river, and the staff, who wanted to take us home, adopt us and keep us as swamp-pets because our accents were so 'cute', we drove a few minutes down the road to Vermillionville. In spite of its name this is not a bright red town, or even a place populated by vermin (although during our visit we did see a giant beaver sized rodent that freaked Emma out).

Vermillionville derives its name from the red colour of the river in the area (well, actually red-brown, hardly bright red but then with artistic licence...) and is in fact a 'Black Country Museum' type of place. For those of you that have not been to this famous West Midlands attraction it is a place to which important period buildings are relocated in order to preserve them, a

heritage 'elephants' graveyard' if you like.

In the case of this American version there are a number of shops and houses of different ages and styles, in addition to a church and school. As at the Black Country Museum the buildings are brought to life by staff in period dress demonstrating various crafts. For example, we saw one half of a cooking demo - fortunately the good half meaning we got to sample some freshly made French toast. It was during this presentation that we also found out that the animal we had seen outside was a nutria-rat, introduced to the area for its fur. Like mink the creature broke out of captivity and bred like crazy, driving out a number of native breeds, and then proved to have a poorly selling pelt. The demonstrator then added that people were attempting to market nutria-rat meat in Europe as a restaurant delicacy, under the name of water-rabbit (you have been warned). This news led to a chorus of 'Yuk' from those of us watching the demonstration. 'No, it will be OK,' the Cook protested, adding: 'anything is OK if it is deep-fried' (and demonstrating by her vast physique how vigorously she had tested this statement). We never tried the 'rat', at least not intentionally, but neither did these comments convert us to a fat free diet.

In fact our next act was to buy a 'pig's ear' from the shop next to the demonstration kitchen. We were assured that no pigs were harmed during the preparation of this dish, which was actually a deep-fried tortilla thing with sugar and pecans that sort of resembled a pig's ear. Nevertheless, and having already washed down a hefty Waffle House lunch with several pieces of French Toast, we decided to eat the 'ear' later.

The next demonstrator that we encountered was an African American woman weaving baskets. She was incredibly feisty, which we assumed was her 'character', one of the oppressed slaves of a darker time. However, she still regarded herself as undervalued and, as a fellow museum worker, I was able to sympathize with this. We felt a little guilty when we left without purchasing a basket, but knick-knacks did not feature heavily in our budget. After beating a hasty retreat from the weaver we visited the church, where we came across another actor, a fiddler.

As soon as we walked into the church he started playing, and we hurried forward to enjoy some folk music. Unfortunately, he only played about two bars before stopping to chat to us. Actually that is not strictly true. He launched into a monologue about his role in World War Two - hardly a chat. The problem with many of the staff was that there were not many visitors in the museum that day, only us and one other couple I think. This meant the staff was not inclined to fire up all cylinders to entertain, plus they had probably spent hours with no one to talk to so relished a chance of a conversation. It would have been nicer, and better value, if the site had been more populated, as there would have been more demonstrations to watch. However, at least this way we got most of the French toast to ourselves – once we had fought off the cook!

The audio tour then took us into downtown Lafayette - where we got lost several times - but did see the very modern and Disney-esque cathedral. Next to the church was a 450-year-old Live Oak; this does not mean a living oak as opposed to a dead tree – although this was what we assumed when we first



heard the name, leading to some confusion. In fact live oaks are an evergreen member of the oak family, so they appear to be 'live' all year round.

Technicalities aside, it was an impressive sight and a nice contrast to the modern cathedral.

The last stop on the tour was Acadian Village, a folk museum type place. We drove to it but decided not to visit for three reasons. First, it sounded too much like Vermillionville, and second it was late afternoon by then so any visit would have been very fleeting. Third, we found the tape's description of how 'handicapped' and 'retarded' people are given work there very distasteful. While we listened to the tape we ate our pig's ear, which turned out to be as disgusting as its name, though we both agreed that the tape's choice of words to describe the workers at the Acadian village was worse.

The next day we rose bright and early (well, ok just early) for another tour - this time a swamp tour that we had booked the day before. Unfortunately we woke to heavy rain that had an 'I'm here all day' look, also known as the 'mother-in-law' look. So we cancelled the tour and spent the day driving to Baton Rouge.

Baton Rouge is only 55 miles from Lafayette – a mere Sunday afternoon drive compared to the last week of travelling - but it took the whole day to get there, with just three short stops en route. First, and most importantly, for lunch. Second, at a tailors to get Emma's peep-show jeans patched. And finally, at a barbers to have my seven-week David Bellamy-alike beard tamed – facial growth that contained enough creatures to keep both

Bellamy and Attenbrough occupied for weeks. The main reason we were on the road all day was because we elected to avoid main roads in favour of the scenic routes. Like drivers throughout the world we soon discovered that scenic does not mean picturesque, but merely very hard to navigate.

We were deep in Bayou country, and there was certainly a lot of water around, but it was not as pretty as we had imagined. Much of our time was spent passing through industrialized areas or trailer parks. The most interesting aspect of our surroundings was local people's tendency to voice their opinions about religion and patriotism via signs and statues outside their houses. It all felt a little 'redneck'.

For most of the day we were attempting to follow the 'Lazy River' road, a route described by a leaflet as one that would take us past numerous plantation homes and other historic buildings. Unfortunately the map on the leaflet corresponded only very loosely to the actual geography of the area, and there were few road signs that referred to the 'River Road'. The river in question was the Mississippi, although during two days of driving by it we only glimpsed the river itself on a handful of occasions. This was not even always because we were not on the right road, but because driving by this huge river means driving next to towering man-made embankments. Picturesque? Hardly.... better than flooding though I suppose.

Once we finally found our way on to the River Road there was much rejoicing.... until we lost it again! The next time we got back to the right place we soon found one of the sights marked on the leaflet, the Nottoway Plantation. We had planned to visit this home - many of the plantations will happily take your money in return for a tour - however it was late by the time

we got there and the place was nearly closed. It was not proving to be a particularly productive day.

The next thing on the Lazy River was the chapel of Madonna. We did drive past this, and Emma even glimpsed it, however I was too busy reading the sign next to it that said something like 'smallest chapel in the US' so I missed it. There is something quite ironic and humorous about missing a small building because you are busy reading the sign that says how small it is. However, I did not laugh at the time. After this near sighting we abandoned the River Road that we had spent so long finding. It was raining, it was dark, and Baton Rouge was still some distance away.... now we just had to find a main road again.

We finally reached 'the red stick' (Baton Rouge translated, in case you do not know French.... should not have bothered should I?). We even found an RV park quite quickly - Cajun Country Campground. This was a very cheap, very empty site, with restrooms that had a 'jailhouse' feel. What scared me most was not that they felt like a prison block, but that we both identified them as having this character. How would we know? What other secrets have we been concealing from each other? And how much further would we have to drive through monotonous scenery before these secrets came out?

After setting up camp we made a very dubious decision, considering our day being lost in Louisiana. We elected to drive into Baton Rouge itself with no map and look for a diner recommended in *Lonely Planet*. Several hours later....

We returned to the campsite not only having found the restaurant, but also having found somewhere to send emails from, and a petrol station - and

with no wrong turns. What is most impressive is that the meal was really nice as well. So rain clouds do have silver linings. The diner was called Louie's café and was a 50s style place run by students. It was very cool and the waitress let us put our own cream and chocolate sauce on our choc chip pancake. She's the best mum ever! And probably half our age...

You know how some things never seem that bad when you look back on them? Like power cuts or getting mouldy bread in a restaurant? Often people even end up laughing about such experiences. Well, in spite of the previous day's map-reading nightmare we left Baton Rouge and headed straight back to the River Road.... once we could find it.

Having used the Lazy River leaflet for two days we were of the considered opinion that it was the mapmaker who was lazy. Roads were often not marked on the map and the 'sights' we were watching out for were seldom clearly signposted in real life. The result was that we spent large chunks of time lost and frustrated and missing out on many points of interest. Fortunately we had a few distractions to keep us interested while we were lost, without which we would probably have given up on the River Road and hunted down the leaflet designer instead.

The first method of distraction was a Tootsie Roll. For those who don't know, this is a caramel and chocolate sweet, which we had heard about from television programmes and been keen to try for ages. Although it sounds innocuous it was actually foul. The caramel bit was ok, but the chocolate had a grainy texture and a fusty taste - like a stale éclair without the cream. Live and learn I suppose. In fact neither of us particularly like American chocolate -

certainly not Hershey's - so might have been better off not trying the Tootsie Roll and just imagining they were really nice.

Our surroundings also provided a couple of distractions - perhaps part of the reason we kept getting lost? On one occasion we passed a man riding an exercise bike on the verge, waving to passing cars, definitely crazy, but at least we could get away from him easily.

A more creepy experience was driving down an unpaved road and suddenly realizing we were within the boundary of a correctional centre. The road was very pitted and waterlogged so we ended up driving down it at walking pace, passing some young offenders being 'corrected' who stared at us with a mixture of attitude and 'we don't see many horse-less carriages round here'.

The real purpose of the drive was not to ogle 'crims' however, but to visit some plantation houses. We planned to stop at lots for brief tours, however the costs involved led to a swift change of plan. The first house we stopped at, Hoummas House, featured large signs noting it had recently been bought. The new owner is having lots of work done and an hour's guided tour costs \$20 a head.... so we declined. A glance round the car park suggested we were not the only ones being turned away by the price, leaving us with the thought that half the price would bring at least twice the number of visitors. In fact, we paid to see two plantation homes later in the day, both charging \$10 a piece, and both doing a brisk trade. The economics really do not seem that hard to grasp.

Oak Alley was the first house that we toured, so named because two

rows of live oaks lead from the Mississippi River to the house and then restart on the other side of the property. It all looks very grand and the 40-minute tour was very much in keeping with this. Emma described it as 'all very hooped skirts and mint juleps'. Our guide was wearing the former as part of her period costume, and the latter could be purchased on the veranda (including a souvenir glass.... should think so too given the crippling price).

The rooms that we were shown in the house were beautifully appointed and the tour was interesting, if a little hard to follow at times due to the heavy southern accent of our guide.

Laura, the other plantation we visited, could not have been a more different experience. Again the tour was good, but it was also much less formal and told more of the stories about the family who had owned the land than about the house itself. They even told us about the slaves (conspicuous by their absence in the story of Oak Alley). Partly this was because they have restored some of the slave quarters at Laura, but mainly because this is where the *Brer Rabbit* stories were first heard and translated by an American - they originated as Senegalese folktales. It was refreshing to visit two very different places, and it felt better value for money too.

The Laura plantation is also obviously run on a different scale to Oak Alley - there is no café, a smaller gift shop, and the house is still being renovated. There was not a hooped skirt in sight. Our presenter, Troy (seriously) had a cartoon type voice with a rising inflection in the middle of each sentence, just a little irritating. However, he was friendly, interesting and blatantly enthusiastic about the place, telling us extra information at the end when the rest of our tour group had to rush off for their bus.

We were quite relieved by this as several of the group had been winding us up with inane comments. One guy kept hitting the wood used in the cellar and repeating 'just like oak' (well, duh-huh), while another could not believe the beams had not been re-sanded - holding Troy up for several minutes while he argued the point. The audience was also obsessed with how old things were; keen to know what was 'original'. We stayed out of this conversation knowing that even if things were 'original' they were still nowhere near as old as most new builds in Great Britain.

The funniest aspect of the tour was the name of the German family who used to own the house: 'Whackaspacks'. Every time Troy said it we would snigger, and when we told him the slang meanings of the two parts of the word he laughed...and we like to think that he cannot say it anymore without bursting out laughing. Although that probably would cost him his job.... We refrained from commenting on another family member's name: 'Fanny Rucker'.

We headed on to New Orleans on the River Road, unfortunately hitting the city during rush hour. When we finally reached the Mardi Gras RV Park and Red Carpet Inn and Suites (sounds fancy but essentially a car park) we were checked in by a friendly young man who signed us up for a camping discount club (Good Sam). After checking out the restrooms - OK, but pre-fab tiny plastic shower capsules - we grabbed a supermarket tea then crashed out.

We were spending the next two days in New Orleans; a place that is lively enough generally, but now on the edge of Mardi Gras we would need all the energy we could muster.

## 18 – Are you being served?

If you spend 90 days anywhere you are going to eat a lot of meals, and one might think that with travelling constantly and having fairly limited catering facilities the result would be 'hurray, I can eat out every night!' But believe me, you do get bored of eating out - and fed up of restrictions such as when, where and what you can eat.

Certainly we almost always made our own breakfast, often our own lunch, and we ate in the van on average two nights a week. Not that we needed to do this in order to stay on budget, there are so many places to eat cheaply in the States. These include Jack In The Box (McDonalds-esque) where we both had dinner for a princely sum of just over \$5!

In fact, and in spite of this cheapness, we would probably have opted to home-cook more often, but in some places it was just too awkward to organise this. For example, while we were in hotels in New York and Las Vegas (obviously), or when we were in primitive (i.e. no microwave and sub-efficient fridge) camping with a limited (one) selection of shops available in Death Valley.

Most evenings we *did* go out to restaurants, which raised the question of 'where to go to eat?'. Very occasionally the choice was obvious, due to a lack of choice, such as in Death Valley and the Grand Canyon. But on the occasions when we were faced with picking from at least half a dozen unknown eateries we almost freaked out. Almost, but not quite.

Our sanity was saved by our *Lonely Planet* guidebook, which listed



recommended restaurants for many of the places we visited. We trusted it with an almost religious faith, and nine times out of ten it was spot on. When it did let us down it was normally because the restaurant in question had closed, changed hands, and so forth. Either this, or the food was just not to our taste, and the guidance provided by *Lonely Planet* had just not been descriptive enough. Without this, our second 'bible', we would have definitely spent more time in McDonald's ...not a pleasant prospect.

Of course not every small-town makes an appearance in the countrywide guide book that we were using, and if it does get a mention it could just be: 'Drive through Smallston, and carry on to Somewhere-bigsville', nothing about where to eat in Smallston. On occasions such as this we either relied on personal recommendations - a risk if you ask locals as they may have vested interests - or we wandered from place to place checking menus, popularity, and environments. In Mariposa, near Yosemite, we literally walked through the whole town and back in order to see all the restaurants before choosing where to stop. Actually, this was less of a hardship than it sounds, seeing as the whole town was only about ¼ mile long!

Quality of service was one thing that we could not easily predict before choosing where to eat. Inevitably, given the number of restaurants that we visited during our 13 weeks stateside, we were subjected to a real mixture of customer care. Some waiters and waitresses were extremely good, some were shockingly bad, but most were passable - and therefore instantly forgettable.

Our most attentive waiter was in Las Vegas, in Caesar's Palace 'all you

can eat' buffet. This was a refreshing surprise given that staff working in these cheap, stuff-your-face type establishments often care little for their customers. And who can blame them seeing as they probably have a high turnover of patrons and a low level of tips. As mentioned earlier, Caesar's offers a better class of buffet, though it costs more than most other hotels on the strip. Gone are the chicken legs and bowls of mac 'n' cheese, instead you can have crab legs and Chinese dim sum - among other delights. The higher level of service that we received here was probably a reflection of the upscale restaurant, but this does not entirely explain why our waiter was so good.

As soon as we put down a knife, or lowered a cup from our lips, he was there at our table, checking if things were finished or if we needed more. When he stood to one side waiting to be needed he seemed incredibly tense and uncomfortable having nothing to do. This was in stark contrast to his colleagues who happily gossiped in the corner of the room, trying to work out whether the pasty English customers were high rollers on a break from the casino, or whether we were low rollers who would eat the buffet dry before we left.

In fact our waiter's bearing, plus his smart appearance, politeness and efficiency provided clear clues suggesting a military background - though what he was doing working in a casino restaurant who knows. On one occasion his keenness got the better of him when he raced to our table at the end of the meal to remove our hot chocolate mugs – the only problem was that Emma's was still half full and when he realized this he aborted his mission at the last moment, swerving back to his station.

If Sergeant Service (note, his real name has been changed for his

safety) was our most efficient waiter, than there were others who were more entertaining and friendly. Three spring instantly to mind. First, an elderly woman in Sacramento in the retro dining chain Johnny Rocket's. These diners are very cool, and very cheesy, featuring juke boxes on each table. Our waitress obviously loved her job and took great delight in bringing us ketchup not in a bottle but squeezed out to make a smiley face on a small dish...I wanted to preserve it as a souvenir but sanity - and Emma's hunger - won out. The waitress also offered to go shopping with our credit card. Cute, or criminal?

The funniest thing she did was, we think, unintentional. We both ordered BLT sandwiches (this was before the infamous BLT incident in the Florida Keys, back in the days when having a Bacon Lettuce and Tomato sandwich was an innocent experience, free from the risks of being brought a plate of bananas by mistake) and our waitress asked what bread we wanted. The choices were communicated as 'wah, wah, wah, and rye'. Bemused we plumped for the second choice - white, we hoped.

The second most memorable eccentric waiter was in a Denny's in Bakersfield. Statistically we should have encountered many more bizarre servers in this chain, given the number of times we visited. However, most of the staff was much of a muchness, with 'too busy to interact' being the defining characteristic in most cases. On this occasion a young man, whose friendliness was as welcome as it was unexpected, waited us on. He got very excited by the fact that we were British not, for a change, so he could discuss Lady Diana, but because it meant he had an accent. Curiously he, a Californian, had always wanted to sound 'different' and now, to us, he did. We

encouraged him to visit the UK so he would have an accent to everyone.

The third, and most eccentric waitress that we encountered was actually on a previous visit to America, about a year and a half earlier – that shows how memorable she was. This was the holiday when we spent two whole weeks in Disneyworld, Florida. The restaurant in question was the Prime Time Café, a 1950s themed diner in the MGM Studios theme park. Our waitress's name was Shirley and she was so in character as a 50s 'mom' that it was easy to believe that Walt Disney had conquered the problems of time travel. The atmosphere in the diner was so fun that we visited twice during our stay, and encountered Shirley on a further occasion when she ran out of the restaurant as we were walking past to give us a hug. This would have seemed creepy coming from most people but Shirley was so disarming that she carried it off with ease. She was also a stickler for manners, and this is what made her so memorable. On the first time we ate at the diner she made me take my baseball cap off while we were eating and she also discouraged us from putting our elbows on the table, teaching us a little ditty to help us remember: 'Mabel, Mabel, strong and able,

Take your elbows off the table!'

Now some people might have found this rude, but she also let us just order milkshakes and pudding on one visit, and anyone who lets us do that can get away with saying anything to us!

Chatty waiters and waitresses who build up a rapport with their customers are generally a good thing. The theory is that if they chat with you then they like you, if they like you then they will serve you well, fast and without 'sneezers'. If

you have never heard of sneezers then watch the US television comedy *Friends*. Or just use your imagination. Sometimes however, friendly can become over familiar.

This happened to us in Carmel, California, where we had burgers at Friar Tuck's. The waitress was attempting to be funny and friendly, calling us 'kids', patting me on the back, telling Emma she was a liar, that sort of thing. It felt a bit like we were having lunch at an aunt and uncle's house, the way she fussed over us and the poor quality of the jokes. At one point we asked 'do you have mayo?' to which she replied 'no, we're a restaurant' - and then bought the mayo. It was a little stifling and uncomfortable, but at least we were not the only ones getting her attention. A very mis-matched middle-aged couple, blatantly having an illicit lunch date, sat near us and were 'told off' for kissing. We forgave the waitress for her madness though, because the food was 'the best burger I ever had', to quote the ever eloquent Emma.

Irritating service was not always saved by good food. Top of the list in this category has to be Lyons, the restaurant near San Francisco airport where we ended up with flobby prime rib and a waitress who growled at us. This was certainly the most overtly hostile service we received, although in Cocoa Beach - part of the Space Coast in Florida - we also encountered fairly aggressive staff.

We were in a Chinese restaurant - one recommended by *Lonely Planet* and only reached after several wrong turns. As in New York we ordered far too much food but, fortunately, our waiter failed to bring out one dish. We decided to keep quiet as we were already full, and the meal was more costly than expected. However, the dish was on the bill and when we pointed this

out the waiter went away and found the food, previously overlooked when the chef served it up and now somewhat congealed. In spite of protestations that we did not want it now, having finished our meal, the waiter got quite belligerent and said he would have to pay for it if we would not. He would not accept that it was his mistake seeing as we had ordered it, and we ended up agreeing to have it to take away, a little concerned that otherwise he would stop us from leaving. Promises followed that he would wrap it up and give us 'silverware' with which to eat the dish later. What actually materialized was a standard take-out box, and no silver (or even plastic) ware. We were both cross with ourselves for letting him intimidate us and we retaliated in the only way possible - no tip - saving more than the dish was worth.

On other occasions speed of service (or rather a lack of it), was the only complaint we had. Whilst this was harder on our stomachs it was at least less upsetting than rude service. In Tusayan, near the Grand Canyon, we suffered from the least attentive waiter in the world, finally giving up after the main course and paying at the counter even though we had yet to receive the bill. At least the starter and main plate had arrived relatively quickly, our waiter just decided never to speak to us again in case we made his life harder by asking for something. I think he had concluded that we were trouble after he put a glass of water on our table and belatedly realized it was meant for someone else. Not really sure how we were supposed to know this seeing as it was just plain water, but he returned and snatched the untouched glass back with a resentful stare.

In Van Horn a month later we suffered from the reverse: attentive

server, slow service. On this occasion we were in Pizza Hut, there not being much choice in this small Texas town, and because we thought it would be a quick and easy meal. Our hopes seemed confirmed when the waitress attempted to take our order three times in the first 5 minutes, but then the pizza - not a complex or unusual order - took ages to arrive. While we waited and I glared at the waitress every few minutes she kept smiling and reassuring us it would not be long. In fact she appeared to be a little in awe of us, me in particular, almost curtsying when speaking to us while subjecting other customers to a fairly scary attitude.... it was probably our accents. When the food came we only managed two bits (it being about 10pm by then), and asked for a take away box for the rest - another long wait. The problem was that the chef was preparing food for take out as well as to eat in and the waitress was on her own taking telephone orders as well as serving. The restaurant did a surprisingly brisk trade, confirming our suspicion that Van Horn had little else to offer diners.

One thing that was consistent throughout our travels was an annoying habit of starting to clear plates before we had finished eating; a practice not related to whether waiters were good or bad. I usually eat faster than Emma and often my plate would be taken while she was still eating. On one occasion, in Disneyland, I was even offered desert before she had cleared her plate. This irritated us so much that by the end of the holiday I had developed the habit of leaving one mouthful on my plate, to eat in sync with Emma's last bit, something I barely had the willpower for. Evidently this plate-clearing practice is not frowned upon in America, like it is in the UK.

In order to avoid sitting in restaurants for hours subjected to unpredictable service, but also avoid preparing our own food, we turned to take away on several occasions. Although this did not protect us from eccentric staff, it did mean that we did not have to be exposed to them for long. Plus we could wear our nighties while we ate, and fart more freely during dinner.

The most curious delivery staff were the man who bought our pizza in St Augustine - commenting 'whoever designed this campsite should be shot' - and the man who bought our pizza in Lafayette – remarking 'to you Brits "bloody" is not a bad swearword is it? But "f\*\*\*\*" is. For us Americans its the other way round'. We were not really sure how to respond while our pizza-guy swore repeatedly with a friendly smile, when he started to refer to his 'inside girl' we were utterly confused and reacted by closing the van door with a quick good bye. Charm personified.

In terms of the food itself we tried a variety of types, from homemade meatloaf to freshly cooked lobster. The quality and value for money varied enormously between restaurants, and not always in direct proportion to each other. For example Death Valley was one of the most expensive places to eat but the food was mediocre, whereas the Hour Glass Tavern in New York was one of our best meals and included a bottle of wine, but hardly broke the bank.

The most consistent aspect of American cuisine is the portion size - XXXL. We soon learnt that in order to avoid doing an *Incredible Hulk* to our clothes we would have to share more food. Often we split starters and/or puddings, only having one each if we had skipped a meal or when the main course came with a starter - usually a bowl of soup or a salad. Not that this



saved my waistband!

America is also the home of 'all you can eat' establishments, or 'eat all you care to eat' as they were often called to avoid sounding like an obesity-encouraging challenge. These places were often cheap - useful for us on a 13-week budget - and although the quality was low it was often not too bad. The cheapest we encountered was Cici's in Homestead, Florida. Here we had limitless pizza, pasta, salad, puddings and drinks for around five bucks each (about £3). The food was hot, regularly refreshed and there was a wide enough selection of pizza toppings to suit all tastes. The environment *did* leave a lot to be desired - tired looking furniture and plastic cups - but who cares for that price? Unfortunately the group at the table next to us nearly spoiled our appetite.

First they were incredibly noisy, with one of the two women throwing such statements out as:

'If I was a high court judge...'

'Waitress, leave the tray, it stops us spilling food on our computer'

'You cannot go to medical school if you are needle phobic'

'I am training to be a beautician, one of my jobs is to remove facial hair'.

Second, they were quite ugly, as the women both had literally eye-catching long chin whiskers (rather ironic given the profession one of them was training for). Their male companion was actually blind, the first occasion when I have thought that a fortunate affliction.

The most bizarre eat-all-you-can experience however, was when we walked into KFC in Biloxi and discovered we could have a buffet. Finally some bright spark had found a way of marketing the less savoury bits of the

chicken, organs, beaks etc, and we tucked right in!

To be honest almost every place where we ate served up food that was at least edible - the obvious exceptions being the much-maligned prime rib in California and chilli overload in Louisiana. But we did find that US food had a general tendency to be blander than British restaurant fare. This was most noticeable in New York - perhaps because we did not stray far enough from the tourist route? Certainly we found tastier food in less tourist orientated places, such as Long Pine, California, or parts of the Florida Keys.

Taste aside we also encountered a very mixed approach to food presentation - I have already mentioned the multi-plate method favoured by Waffle House. Smaller, more out of the way eateries seemed to abandon conventions with greater ease than big fancy city places or maybe they just did not know the conventions in the first place. Garnishes included whole apples and whole chilli peppers - who needs sprigs of parsley? And the area in and around Death Valley seemed to view sweet corn served in a bowl with its cooking water as a delicacy - we were served it two days running.

However, the best - or worst - example of food presentation was the jacket potato Emma had in Key Largo. It was served up still wrapped in tin foil, and with the melted topping smeared on top of the foil. Someone phone Egon Ronay - this is one for the book!

On the subject of presentation I must briefly mention Starbucks. We visited a lot of coffee shops in this chain, not by choice but because you walk through two branches every time you cross the street in most American cities. In each one we were served our drinks in the take-away cups, rather than in

proper china mugs, even when we stayed in to have our coffee. We were not sure if this was a reaction to clumsiness by patrons suffering from the 'coffee tremors', or a desire by staff to speed the destruction of the Earth's environment. As it turned out it was for neither of these reasons. Instead it was simple paranoia – we should have guessed. A member of staff in Starbucks in Universal Studios, Orlando, Florida, told us that it was because customers often stole the mugs as souvenirs.

Not that our own food presentation when we cooked in the van would have won many awards. Some, but not many. As the holiday progressed our manners regressed. We would usually sit on the bed in our pyjamas, sipping shandy from a Denny's souvenir cup (plastic, not cardboard like a coffee shop I could mention.... and have). In our other hand we would hold a pastry wrapped 'hot pocket' on a kitchen roll 'plate'. Any sauce-y dishes would be served in their cooking tray. We were so white trash. Belch!

At least home-cooking usually provided a cheaper, quieter, and more flexible alternative to eating out. The hardest task was finding the supermarket. You get used to the shop names that you know and frequent, for example Tesco means food, as does Waitrose. Even in the UK it can be a little confusing in some regions where local supermarkets still dominate. In the US we really struggled at times to decide which shops to aim for, except in California where Safeway exists. We did eventually learn what stores sold food, and more importantly which sold nice food - some were a bit Kwiksaver. When we moved from region to region we also discovered that the dominant supermarket chain changed as well. In California Safeway and Vons led the

way. In the Deep South we found the grim Winn Dixie, and in Florida we found our favourite Publix. This last one sounds more like a pharmacist than a food store, but served clean, quality products - a real Waitrose of a place!

In Florida we also found our most unusual supermarket, Sedanos. This was in Homestead, on the edge of the mainland, and is a Cuban food store. Consequently all the labels were written in Cuban and we were starting to guess what they meant when one of us noticed Publix was next door, much the safer bet – on account of being able to read the signs!

Pre-prepared food that only required reheating was our primary requirement when eating in the van. Better yet were foods you ate cold. We did not have a particularly extensive kitchen and were incredibly grateful to have a microwave. *Mélange* is a sophisticated way of describing what we ate, *mismatch* is a more appropriate term. For example, on the night of the 24th of January, whilst near Clearwater, Florida, I made the following journal entry: 'Tea - *mélange* - bread (cheese-filled) and dip; potato things; hot pocket; rice pudding. All microwave, all good'

The most culinary complexity that we produced was S'mores. Or rather our attempt at these renowned American treats. They are a kind of step up from fire-toasted marshmallows, often being made by Cub Scouts or families round the campfire. The name derives from 'give us some more' - I think. The sweet dish is basically constructed from a Graham's cracker (like a square Digestive biscuit – a comparison that cause some consternation when we first mentioned it to an American as they thought we were talking about *digested* biscuits, their imagination ran riot!) with a piece of chocolate on and then a toasted marshmallow, although the actual composition and method of

preparation varies according to taste. Our first attempt involved the correct cracker base, slices of Snickers and toasted marshmallows - close enough. We were in Kernville, California, with our only campfire of the trip and the opportunity seemed too good to waste. Our first few marshmallows burnt (we never realised until then how easily you can set marshmallows on fire, if we had known this then it would have made starting the campfire so much easier!), toasting to melting point but *not* charcoal point is a difficult art, but we got some to the correct consistency. We then hastily added them to the cracker and chocolate before jamming them in our mouths. Verdict? Not that nice. The cracker was too dry, the Snickers was too hard (frozen by sub-zero environment) and the marshmallow was nice enough, if very messy. Later attempts saw us making them in the microwave, heating all three elements, but still not enjoying them. We soon rejected the cracker and just ate marshmallows. At least it was service with a smile...and a sticky marshmallow-strewn face.

## 19 - The 'spirit' of New Orleans

What is the spirit of New Orleans, a city founded in 1718 by French explorers? Courage? Resilience? Luck? Actually, it is probably bourbon. Certainly there is enough of that particular spirit to flood the street that bears its name.

We arrived in Louisiana's party capital a matter of weeks before the Mardi Gras celebrations. Once we realized that this was how the timing of our visit had worked out we were fairly disappointed - especially as several other parts of our schedule had placed us in parts of the country just before, or just after, special events (Yosemite with no waterfalls, San Antonio with no rivers, and the giant sequoias with no access...other than for snow mobiles). However, in retrospect I doubt that our wallet, or our livers, could have survived the party. As it happened we were visiting during the Mardi Gras *season*, and the associated activities of two days in town were tiring/liver-pickling enough.

The RV Park where we were staying was near the main ring road in a fairly rundown, industrial area. We had to brave public transport again - or risk the cost and hassle of parking in the city centre - and we expected a long journey with the obligatory 100 stops we had learned to know and hate on the San Franciscan buses. In anticipation of this we fortified ourselves with muffins, juice and coffee - all included for free at the campsite, a rare but welcome bonus.

The bus journey did take about 30 minutes, however the proximity of the ring road meant it only stopped a few times before arriving downtown. Not

that we knew when we had reached the centre of town. Fortunately a lady travelling on the bus realized that we did not know where we were going, perhaps she cunningly deduced this by the way we kept trying to read the names of the streets that we passed, or perhaps because we had fixed expressions of bemusement? I suppose it might also have been due to the presence of the map we were clutching. She told us which stop to get off at, and also where the bus would pick us up for the return journey.

Once off the bus we headed straight to the French Quarter, easy to find by using the time honoured technique of 'following the crowds'. My first impression of New Orleans was that it had a nice, lively ambience. The busy streets did feel like a party was going on, although walking home at night through the quieter areas where it was less busy we both felt vulnerable - shades of New York's meat-packing district seven weeks ago.

Emma had visited New Orleans with her parents when she was much younger and remembered certain parts like the promenade by the river. I was gratified to note that her memory of the bars and strip clubs on Bourbon Street was hazier - presuming that this was because she had not visited them, rather than being due to alcohol-induced memory loss because she had!

We spent a couple of hours wandering to and around the French Quarter, getting our bearings and choosing somewhere for lunch. During this time we spotted a crowd sitting on some stone steps near Jackson Square. Sensing some free, or at least cheap, entertainment we walked over and saw that there was a group of four youths limbering up to do a show. It was a little early for lunch so we found a place to sit near the back of the audience and

settled down. Why near the back you may wonder, where your viewing pleasure may be restricted? Well, better that than being called on to 'volunteer' in the show or being singled out as the butt of jokes.

20 minutes later we stood up and left. Either the theme of the show was 'our equipment is broken' or the show had not started because their equipment really was broken. We were not overly impressed, especially as the entertainers heckled those spectators who revealed a lack of loyalty by refusing to sit on cold steps for hours. However the 20-minute break had given us a rest, built up our appetites and been quite entertaining in its own rights - 'Michael Jackson' had popped by and moon walked a little.

We settled on Johnny's Po-Boys for lunch – as recommended by our ever-present *Lonely Planet* guidebook (ever present in our rucksacks, in spite of its resemblance to a house-brick in both size and weight). A Po-Boy (pronounced poor boy) is a filled baguette. Neither of us ever found out the background of the name, but were in agreement that they were very tasty. I had hot, very fresh (practically wriggling) calamari and Emma had grilled chicken. The crowded restaurant suggested we were not alone in our opinion of the food - it was the kind of place where diners have to coordinate their eating technique so one moves forward to take a bite of their sandwich while the person next to them leans back. The origins of the name 'po-boy' may simply be that someone came up with the following joke, immortalized on the toilet doors in the restaurant: 'Po-girls' and 'Po-boys'. And it just stuck.

After our large lunch we waddled our way down to the river, our first daylight glimpse of the mighty Mississippi, in order to book a jazz brunch cruise (not for the same day you understand...even our appetites have limits -



or at least our jeans do).

Emma had gone on a Mississippi jazz cruise before and thoroughly enjoyed it. You may be wondering if there was anything on our trip that Emma had not done before, and if not, why do so much again? Well, the answer to the first question is yes, there were things that she had not done before. On top of this, her memory really sucks – so she was happy to do the things that she *had* done before as well. The river trip from her youth had had dinner included and she had not enjoyed this aspect of the trip, as the food had been too spicy. Perhaps she would fare better with a brunch; surely bacon and eggs would not be served up sprinkled with chilli...? Unfortunately we did not get to find out the answer to this question because the next day's cruise was cancelled and, as we only had one more day in New Orleans we decided to give it a miss. Instead we elected to walk back to the French Quarter via the river. At least the walk down to the river had not been entirely wasted, the exercise helped our food go down – at least a little bit.

On the way back to the Quarter we spotted a crowd and, braving disappointment again, we hurried over. This time we were approaching the back of the crowd and could not see what they were watching until we got there. For all we knew it could have been a dead body, a car accident or - worst of all - the dodgy 'we can not start our show' entertainers from the morning. Our fears were realized when we got to the crowd, it was the same youths, except this time the show had got off the ground. We found a space to watch from and it actually turned out to be a fairly fun mix of break dancing, acrobatics and comedy. They were quite talented - the finale was a flip over the top of seven people lying down. A concrete sign of their skill was that they

had managed to get a crowd despite the technical hitches earlier in the day and, more importantly, they convinced most of us to part with some cash.

By the time the show ended we were ready for more food - it was definitely a good that job we did not go travelling whilst on diets, though we really needed to go on one on our return to the UK. The famous Café Du Monde got our patronage on this occasion. Famous, according to *Lonely Planet*, for coffee and beignets (doughnut type things). Once again we were obviously following the trend as the café (essentially a marquee) was packed, and we had to stalk people in order to get their table when they finished their meal. The food was very nice, although we did sit in fear of pigeon poo while we ate - the thrills of semi-fresco dining!

Bourbon Street was our next destination, one of the main thoroughfares during the Mardi Gras parade, and without a doubt the most famous. When we arrived on the street it was still daylight and we wandered up it looking for a restaurant recommended by our guidebook, and by the people who we had met at the BBQ van in the KOA site in San Antonio. It was a bit of a dry run for later, as we figured the street would be crowded, noisy and harder to navigate after dusk.

Bourbon Street turned out to be pretty wild by daylight however. Most of the strip clubs were already open and there was little need to go into them, as the advertising outside was quite explicit by itself, especially at 5pm in the afternoon. Walking past the 'Bottomless Club' we could see a live bare bottom through the doorway and hurried on for fear of being charged for this glimpse. Every other shop was a strip club, and the rest of the buildings were bars.

People on the street were already drinking and the area had a heady aroma of dope, stale beer, and horse dung.

We returned to Bourbon Street an hour or so later after taking care of some top priority housekeeping for the next day...booking a meal. By night this part of town was much wilder and seemed to be the only populated street in New Orleans. We headed straight to a bar where live jazz was being played as we had been told that this was a 'must do' while visiting. What people had failed to mention was that in order to try this activity we would need a second mortgage.

On entering the jazz parlour the first sign we saw noted that you must buy a drink per set the band plays. This was not overly surprising so we ordered and sat back to enjoy the music. A few minutes later two things happened to destroy our good mood. First the drinks arrived with the bill: \$16.75 (about £10) for a bacardi and coke and a vodka martini. Expensive enough, but the bill also had a 20% *suggested* gratuity already added on - not a very subtle *suggestion* and one we were too embarrassed to ignore. The second thing that happened was the band went on a break about five minutes after we sat down. There was no way that we were going to buy another drink in a hurry so we nursed the ones we had for an hour and listened to most of their next set. In the meantime we were presented with three further opportunities to lighten our wallet. First a band member circulated selling CDs, and then another came round with a tip jar, and finally a strange old man walked in selling praline treats from a wicker basket - catering for the munchies. Costs aside it was actually quite an enjoyable hour and the band, the New Orleans Jazz Vipers seemed good – at least to my untrained ear.

On leaving the bar we learnt the correct method of listening to live jazz. Buy a much cheaper drink in a plastic cup (the most popular drink being a 'hand grenade') on the street and just listen from the doorway. Sadly a technique that we only noticed once we had blown our budget for the day.

Fortunately dinner was cheap as we ate at the Clover Grill, a small very American diner. We chose it because *Lonely Planet* described it as very entertaining.

Now, a lot of the entertainment-value of a restaurant depends on the staff and some of the people on duty when we visited were not particularly friendly, making a big difference to the experience. The food was very nice and cheap however and our waitress, who was being trained/observed, was crazy enough to keep us entertained through most of the meal. It felt a bit like a locals place, with the more senior staff chatting at length to customers at the counter. This feeling was re-enforced when we left. The cook shouted 'bye', we shouted it back, and then I heard another person mutter 'tourists!' How welcoming.

So far we were having a very mixed visit to New Orleans with good experiences following bad quite quickly, and vice versa. This continued as we made our way back to the bus stop.

Bourbon Street, in fact most of the French Quarter, is lined with houses that have beautiful wrought iron balconies - and these are packed during the Mardi Gras parades as they offer some of the best views in town. Even while we were there the balconies were quite busy and people were throwing plastic beads (known as throws during Mardi Gras) down on unsuspecting passers

by. Emma was singled out by several 'throwers' and soon had a collection of four sets of beads. In fact she could have had more if she had accepted an invitation from a young man to show her boobs for a set of beads. 'Maybe if they were gold' was the response, and in that case I would have pulled her shirt up myself. And what did I get? Well, a middle-aged woman tried to entice me up to her balcony and kept blowing kisses at me...Vive la difference!

Sadly the warm fuzzy glow from Bourbon Street deserted us before we got home. First we had to work out where to get the bus from - not where we had assumed when we had blithely ignored the instructions from the lady who had helped us in the morning. Next we had to wait by a very dark and deserted bus stop, with an old homeless man who stood too close and advised us not to go to the cemetery at night. He was a little threatening, but also seemed quite genuinely down on his luck so we gave him some change – the least we could do having spent so much on a drink earlier. Eventually the bus came and we got back to the van for some sleep, and to prepare for another long day in the party-town.

If there was a fault in the manner in which Emma and I approached Travelling (the overall experience, hence the capital 't') it was that we tried to do too much. In actual fact the fault was that we did not have enough time to spend in most of the places we visited. Our second full day went something like this: up very early; bus to town; sprint to National Park Service Centre for spaces on the limited capacity free walking tour (just beating an elderly, infirm, woman to the last spot – not actually beating with a stick you understand, but nevertheless not something we are proud of, however someone has to get the

last spot); jazz brunch; boat ride on the Mississippi; tour of Mardi Gras museum; back to van by 6pm. In summary it appears to be a busy day spent rushing from one thing to the next, but as with much in life the interest lies between the lines.

Take the walking tour. Our desire to attend this had two motivating factors. One, we had enjoyed other ranger programmes. Two, it was free. As it turned out the walking tour was full of information and the presenter was interesting - although he did have a habit of closing his eyes for minutes at a time while speaking. Again I believe that this was Japanese technology at work, providing miniature auto-cues on his eyelids. However, what the walking tour did not really involve was walking.

Much of the hour and a half was spent standing in the street listening to our guide; the lack of movement is probably a survival instinct that has evolved to suit a presenter who talks with his eyes closed. Emma and I were the only non-Americans who did the tour, resulting in a certain degree of bullying - albeit 'friendly'. Several references were made to a famous battle that took place in the area in which the British faced heavy defeat at the hands of the Americans. We took the comments in good grace of course and, towards the end of the tour, we had a little revenge.

The guide was describing the age of some of the city and must have noticed us smiling at how '200 years old' resulted in gasps from the majority of the audience. His next comment was directed at us: 'Of course, that is not very old to the British'. At this we had two options of how to respond. Disagree with a: 'No, no your history is just as long and venerable as that of our tiny insignificant island.' Or we could agree: 'Yes, your nation's history is but a

blink to us'. We chose the second option.

The jazz brunch at the House of Blues restaurant also needs further explanation. When we booked the meal the night before we were hoping for a two-hour gospel music extravaganza - it was going to be on a Sunday after all. What we got was a very nice 'eat all you want' buffet and a one-hour live jazz/blues show. The show was not quite what we had expected, and was much shorter than we would have liked. However, it was well executed and performed with such energy that we were joining in clapping, twirling napkins, and stamping feet.

Oh, and there was something else we got at the brunch - hammered. Unlimited mimosas were included and the waitress for our area quickly realized that we intended to get our money's worth. I am not really sure how many we drank, but I do know that the quantity of orange juice in the cocktail was less each time. In fact the last ones were pure, unadulterated champagne. When the show ended we were a little tipsy and grabbed some deserts 'for the road' – trying to discreetly steal them, despite the protests from our waitress that we could have whatever we wanted, it being a 'eat all you want' buffet and all. . So there we were, a little drunk and squashing Krispy Kreme dough-nuts into our pockets. And it was not even midday.

Our next activity was a boat ride on the Mississippi. There is not much else to say about this, it was nice and relaxing - if a little cold. For much of the trip there was no narration and the experience risked becoming dull. Not that the narration had been that thrilling, preoccupied as it was with describing the cargoes recently unloaded at the wharfs we were passing! Fortunately the

alcoholic buzz from breakfast saw us through.

By the time we returned to dry land we were sober enough to walk in fairly straight lines to our next destination, the Presbytere museum. This had been recommended to us on the walking tour as an opportunity to experience Mardi Gras without the necessity of actually being in town while the festival was taking place. And presumably without the associated costs and liver damage.

The museum was interesting and fairly colourful. It was also much more extensive than we had expected, full of rooms containing costumes and other festival paraphernalia. We took our time looking round several rooms that were arranged in a loop on the ground floor and then came to a small theatre area where you could sit and watch film clips of past parades. We sat and watched these for quite a while, grateful of the seats as we were feeling the combined effects of an early start, a long walking/standing tour and a semi-liquid lunch. Around 4.47pm we suddenly heard a warden announce that the museum would be closing at 5pm. So we dragged ourselves to our feet and dashed upstairs for a quick look round the rest of the museum.

And that was when we discovered there was more to see upstairs than in the galleries below. We ended up practically running from room to room and reading less and less of the exhibition labels - something I as a historian, museum professional and generally dull person find extremely hard to do. The rooms did contain a lot of similar stuff, masks, costumes, etc. Nevertheless we would have liked to spend more time there. One of the last rooms we went in had dressing up clothes and a 'photo-me' booth. Sadly we had no time to play dressing up, but Emma did take a photo with me standing behind a cut-



out of a costume. The resultant picture of me appearing to wear a huge pink dress and looking hung over makes it seem that we were really there for the party.

The staff told us we could revisit the next day for free, but sadly our tight schedule left no time for this. However, we certainly did not feel cheated that we had not seen it all, we had seen so much and Emma had got in free on her student pass. The highlight of the museum was seeing David Schwimmer's signature on a poster, he had been a Krewe Captain one year (the Krewes are the social clubs who organise balls and parades during the festival). Ok, so it was only a highlight for us *Friends* obsessed Brits, but I am sure that some of you can relate.

When we left the museum we headed straight back to the RV for an early night. We had done 90 minutes on the walking tour, 90 minutes brunch, 60 minutes boat ride and 60 minutes in the museum. And we used to moan about the length of the working day!

Our last day in the Deep South began with a very momentous occasion. We changed the bed! Well, the van did come with two sets of linen so we thought we should make an effort to swap the sheets over once during our 12 weeks in the van. And it really was just once, mainly due to the aforementioned difficulties of making the bed in such cramped quarters.

After our January 'spring clean', we drove out to a nearby swamp for the romantically named *Honey Island Swamp Tour*. This was to replace the tour we had cancelled during our rainy day in Lafayette. The morning was sunny, facilitating our bed changing activities and raising our spirits for the

afternoon tour. Of course clouds rolled in once our domestic chores were completed.

The headquarters for the *Honey Island Swamp Tour* were very modern and sophisticated, consisting of a shack and three portaloos. Unsurprisingly the base also boasted a range of merchandise, including alligator heads, turtle shells, and other exotic gifts - such as T-shirts!

Our transportation for the trip was a shallow aluminium boat that looked fairly insubstantial. In fact it resembled a tin can to some extent, an image we hoped would not be conjured up by the alligators we hoped to see. It certainly did not appear to be large enough for the 20 or so of us who made our way on board. Our guide, Kevin, did not seem to share this concern however, but then who would if you were being paid for each body crammed on board?

Kevin was a funny, interesting Cajun, though he did have a tendency to be self-deprecating. For example, he described himself as the under-achiever in his family and played down a college football career cut short by injury. The tour itself lasted 90 minutes, though it was advertised as a 2-hour excursion. This discrepancy probably arose from the lack of questions asked by the group, as some people seemed very disinterested in the experience and one man took a mobile phone call while in the middle of the swamp. I am happy to say that this was not me, our phone (purchased in New York) did not have any reception in the middle of the swamp.... or indeed in the middle of most cities. The tour would probably have also lasted longer had we seen more wildlife.

We saw some birds and a few animals, but we were quite disappointed

that we did not see any alligators...though possibly this was for the best given our boat's resemblance to an open-top tin of sardines. The creatures we did see appeared out of the undergrowth with surprising convenience, leading us speculate that they were not there by chance. Either they were tethered, enticed to the same spot by food, or drugged - or a combination of these things. OK, so this sounds fairly far-fetched and paranoid enough to be worthy of an American, but it is more believable when I set the tone for our wildlife spotting by recounting the circumstances of our first sighting.

There we were, chugging down a narrow, shallow channel of water separated from similar channels by thin strips of land crowded with vegetation. Suddenly Kevin slowed and stopped the boat and pointed to the nearest bush. We all followed his gaze and craned our necks, risking tipping the boat by transferring all our weight to one side. What was it, an alligator nest perhaps? No, there nestled in the grass, stock-still and eyes wide open like a rabbit caught in the headlights was ...well, a rabbit! Yes, just what you would expect to see in the swamp, Kevin told us they can swim well! We also saw several nutria-rats, which felt more natural as they are a scourge of the area and seemed exotic, unlike rabbits.

We also learned that nutrias have their mammary glands on their backs so they can feed their young while swimming – leading to a thoughtful discussion about how humans would look if they were built like that as well. We did not see nutrias feeding in this fashion, but did see several young 'rats'. The glimpses of nutrias were few and far between, largely restricted to two separate 'spots' in fact. By chance one on each side of the boat...*Photo Opportunities R Us* should be the tour's strap line. During the trip we also saw

a Great Blue Heron - though it could have been a model seeing as it never moved, and some distant osprey. Well, Kevin said they were osprey, another tourist said 'they are hawks', and repeated this ten times - perhaps thinking it would make it come true in a 'there's no place like home' style.

Dubious wildlife aside the trip was relaxing and the views incredible. Trees laden with Spanish moss, weird bulbous cypress knees breaking the water's surface, and we even saw an Indian village. But above all, it was the vastness of the space that again struck us. England was starting to feel very small.

We headed to Fontainebleau State Park after the tour for a quick look at Lake Ponchartrain. We were the only visitors by the lake, and it was very quiet and peaceful. It was also very picturesque and Emma took some 'arty' photographs as the sun set. She has an urge to do this every now and then, fortunately never when we are in precarious positions (such as up snow laden mountains) or when we are in a hurry (such as every other day during our travels).

I think we needed quite a 'back to basics' day after the two days in New Orleans and this really fitted the bill. We drove back to New Orleans via the Lake Ponchartrain Causeway, a huge bridge mentioned in our guidebook so obviously worth a look. Sadly it turned out to be quite dull, as it was pitch black, quite expensive, and interminably long. The only way we stayed awake was by playing 20 questions. Still, we refused to lose the peaceful mood established by the day, until we got lost heading back into New Orleans.

We spent an hour or so trying to find the RV park and also debating

where to eat dinner. Eventually we settled on eating in, and then proceeded to trawl two separate supermarkets before buying our meal - largely because we were hunting for Krispy Kremes. Dinner is not dinner without them!

## **20 - Are you sitting comfortably?**

Those people with a weak disposition should probably skip this chapter because it's all about comfort stops.

90 days of travelling exposed us to a lot of restrooms...and exposed is a very appropriate word given some of the rooms we visited. In the best traditions of British toilet humour I've decided to bring some of these visits to your attention.

Our feelings on campsite bathrooms have already been made abundantly clear - clean and with lockable doors being the main criteria required. When we were on the road and nature called we did not have the luxury of turning down one establishment and driving to the next, as we sometimes did with camps. We were much more of a captive audience. Fortunately there did seem to be plenty of public toilets in the USA - at least compared to the UK - and whenever we stopped for fuel there was a restroom on hand. The trick sometimes was getting access to the toilets.

I have never really understood the practice of keeping public toilets locked and forcing people who need to use the facilities to ask a staff member for the key. Presumably it is to make sure customers only use them, but would a non-customer needing the toilet really be denied access? Apparently not, at least in some places, as Emma and I discovered during an emergency visit in Downtown Disney, Orlando, Florida. We went to the nearest building, a cinema on this occasion, and the staff member did let us use the facilities even though we had not paid to see a movie. He just made us go one at a

time on the principle that if we were planning to sneak into a screen we would want to be together, although Emma took so long to come back we both wondered if she had abandoned me for *Harry Potter* or *Lord Of The Rings*!

The only other explanation that I can think of for keeping public restrooms restricted to key access is to prevent theft - but really, what would one steal? Actually I saw this programme about people who hoard their own bodily fluids, so maybe some weirdoes hoard other people....

At least the key is normally not hard to get hold of, we never encountered any sadistic staff prepared to risk exploding bladders by saying 'no, you can't have the key'. However, on two occasions getting access was more of a pantomime. The first instance occurred in California, en route to the Redwoods. We had just refuelled the van and Emma went in to ask if there was a restroom. In reply the surly young cashier handed her a very large plastic cup. 'Am I supposed to use this?' Emma asked - only half joking and half prepared to use it, such was her need. This prompted swift gesturing on the part of the staff member to point out that a small key was attached to the large cup - how handy, you can take a beverage in *there* with you.

More farcical was Emma's experience in the restaurant where we had lunch in Carmel. These things always seem to happen to Emma, must be her ridiculously tiny bladder. Either that or I am a coward and send her to scope out the toilet situation rather than risk embarrassment myself. Anyway, once again she approached the member of staff and requested the key. 'Oh, it's on the counter attached to the red tin' replied our slightly crazy and over familiar waitress - whose flaws we excused because we had been served the best burgers ever. Emma looked at the counter; saw no red tin so went to try the

restroom in case the door was already open. No, firmly locked and not occupied, unless by someone who had been in there since before we came in for lunch. Rather than ask the waitress again Emma had another look at the counter, at which point a patron (evidently a regular) started gesturing and saying 'there, the red tin'. Emma followed his directions and saw a very battered, very silver tin with a key attached. She picked it up laughing and exclaimed 'oh, *this* red tin, the *silver* one?' 'Yes, that's right' the locals replied in unison, completely missing the sarcasm in my travel companion's tone. In fairness the tin probably was red. When it was last painted. Twenty years ago.

You may think that because access was so difficult privacy while in the restroom would at least be assured, sadly on many occasions you would be wrong. Quite apart from the high percentage of toilets that did not have locks at all, there were a number of other designs where protecting customers' dignity had evidently not been considered. Often cubicle doors had large gaps down each side, or were so low that the user could stand up and see the whole restroom quite easily, meaning others in the room could easily look in. The most bizarre set up was in a Texas petrol station where the restrooms appeared to be individual - the customer could lock the main door - but they contained two toilets. In the Gents a urinal and a normal WC, which made some sort of sense. But in the Ladies there were two WC's - not in separate cubicles but right next to one another. What is that about? For toilet training (now watch me and copy...) or to allow for the nightclub phenomenon of women going to the toilet together? Or, possibly, for Siamese twins? The toilet doors that offered the most protection were appropriately brand-named 'Hiney Hider'.



At times we wondered whether the 'open-plan' approach to bathroom design was in order to allow users to relax and enjoy the view while occupied. Certainly some restrooms were decorated in a livelier fashion than seemed strictly necessary for such functional rooms. The KOA site where we stayed in San Antonio had restrooms featuring a floor painted to resemble floorboards, a ceiling painted to look like the sky, and decorative transfers around the sinks – very fancy, but I think we would have rather paid less for the campsite and put up with dull restrooms! We certainly could have done without the decoration in the Big Sky Café. This was a restaurant in San Louis Obispo and it contained a very disturbing range of artwork in its restrooms best described as monkey porn. Photographs of naked men and women posing with monkeys - discreetly shot but even so. Then there was the sign in a restroom in the Hurricane restaurant in the Florida Keys: 'Employees must wash hands. If no employee available customers must wash own hands'. Cute.

However it was a toilet in San Antonio that provided the most entertaining decoration as Emma (again) discovered the following reading matter scrawled on the cubicle wall:

'If you love your man show some class,  
don't write his name where you wipe your ass'.

And so, reluctantly, Emma put her permanent marker pen away.

On other occasions Emma was less willing to curb her artistic nature and left several bits of graffiti across America - albeit easily removable. She is such a conscientious rebel. This spate of criminal activity was actually my

fault because after visiting a restroom that had baby changing facilities - brand-name *Sturdy Table* - I informed her that someone had very humorously scratched out the S and the Y. Emma took up this cause and stuck wet toilet roll over at least the 'S' in every restroom she could - but only when people were not looking.

Very few public toilets actually included anything other than the basics - and on some occasions not even that - so added facilities such as baby changing tables were few and far between. The toilets in Death Valley did incorporate 'lady tables' however. So named by us because they were only in the ladies cubicles, these were small stainless steel spring loaded tables that were folded against one of the cubicle walls. The function that they served fortunately eluded us, though it did result in a long conversation. Suggestions included: a resting place for handbags...or a bottle of water given the valley's summer climate; and somewhere to put coffee cups while talking to 'gal pals' ...women rarely go to the bathroom alone after all – certainly not in Texan petrol stations it seems.

In Las Vegas we also had a phone next to the toilet in our hotel room...who would you call? Housekeeping? 'Yes, I've just noticed the toilet roll has run out. Would you be a dear and pop up with some? The door is open'

The type of restroom that we first encountered in the Redwoods was the most dramatic contrast to our bathroom in Vegas, where a fleet of staff was at the end of a line to assist with any issues arising while you 'made your toilet'. Restroom is probably a misleading name in fact; more appropriate would be

'hole in the ground'. Once again Emma formed the advance scouting party, but within seconds of entering the room she rushed back out for reinforcements.

The first thing that struck you when you approached the toilet hut was the smell, from a distance of about 20 yards; it did not leave our nostrils all day. To be fair none of the other 'primitive' restrooms we used during our travels were so pungent, evidently this one was long overdue for a clean out. When you consider the design of these toilets it is not surprising they stink. They are literally just toilet seats above pits in the ground, from which the waste is periodically dug out. No flusher, no cover for the seat. Fortunately the rooms usually lack lights - otherwise you would surely feel compelled to look into the pit.

It was not the smell, nor the darkness that caused Emma to demand my company however, rather it was a fear that there might be an animal living in the hole waiting to bite her while (and where) she was at her most vulnerable. Seeing as we had just passed a bear-proof bin this was probably not an irrational fear. Though surely nothing could survive prolonged exposure to that stink. These types of toilets certainly made us appreciate our porta-potty in the RV.

Basic though these toilets were we could not really complain about them. They were mostly deep in the semi wilds of the National Parks, so at least there were public restrooms at all - and most of them were clean. The dirtiest restrooms we had the misfortune of using were those in Tombstone, Arizona. First they were inadequate for the size and popularity of the tourist town, but second they were just plain dirty and poorly maintained. Perhaps

the council had decided to give visitors a more authentic 'wild west' experience.

Standards of cleanliness certainly varied from place to place - something I am sure anyone who frequents public toilets in the UK, or in fact anywhere, will be familiar with. In Homestead, Florida, we used the restrooms on our campsite with more trepidation than usual.

Our host had repeatedly informed us that they were clean, but in a pleading manner that suggested he was trying to convince himself. We had our doubts especially because we were in the overflow part of the site and using portacabin toilets rather than the main restrooms. However, they turned out to be very well kept, if basic, and were decorated like the bathroom of a granny's house – all peach frills. In contrast the permanent restrooms in the main part of the camp were a dump (excuse the phrase!).

However, the prize for the most entertaining, and also most mechanically challenging, restroom experience has to go to the toilets round the rim of the Grand Canyon. Emma (inevitably) went into the restroom and soon observed that all the cubicles were occupied. So she waited and looked in the mirror.... ah, the vanity. Actually vanity was out the window during our travels, Harvey had no mirrors (save for driving). Anyway, making the most of glancing in the mirror on this occasion she realized that she could see the head and shoulders of one of the women in the toilet. Emma quickly averted her eyes, thinking 'oh my god, she's a giant'.

A few seconds later the toilet flushed, the door opened, and Emma braced herself to make small talk with a very big lady. But the woman was

normal sized, and very amused when Emma told her she had expected a giant. The toilets were like thrones with a large step up to them, essentially they were glorified porta-potties, and under the throne was the holding tank. This we discovered to our displeasure later in the day when walking by a toilet block while staff drained them. The other thing about these toilets was that to flush them required the user to step on a foot pedal. Fine, except you need your full body weight and small children cannot manage it. This Emma also learned while meeting her 'giant' because the other cubicle, where no head and shoulders was observed, was occupied by the lady's kid - not, as Emma initially surmised, by a normal-sized adult.

Nine times out of ten I expect our toilet stops were quite mundane, but it is always the unusual things that stick in your mind. And at least the visits described above gave us something to laugh about - even if not at the time. Perhaps they will make a *Carry On* film about it one day...

## 21 - Sunshine state

We left the Deep South on January 13th, one month before we were due to fly home. During these last four weeks we planned to visit three more states, but we were not concerned that this might be over ambitious. We covered two of the states in one day.

Glorious sunshine greeted us as we unhooked the van ready to leave New Orleans. Typical, we were going to spend the whole day on the road so the weather was nice. Still, at least we were not going to be driving on a massive, featureless road through massive and equally featureless landscapes as we had done for much of the time between California and Louisiana. The 90, although still a major road, is nothing compared to the I10 and for the first part of our drive it felt more like an English B road. We were kept amused by the house names marking the drives for the ramshackle huts that we passed. *Empire Hilton East; Always Under Construction; The Dog House; Do Drop In, The Passing Wind, E-Z Living* and many more. Despite being surrounded by swamp, miles from any sizable settlement, and looking like they were just piles of driftwood, almost all of these houses had power and satellite television. Ah, the wilderness!

We passed beyond these swamp huts and into Mississippi with the same pomp and ceremony that had greeted us on every state boundary - i.e. nothing. The part of the state that we were crossing, the southern most tip, is only about 70 miles wide, as the crow flies, so perhaps state troopers see no point patrolling the border here. After all any undesirables would have

travelled through the state in five minutes or so, so why stop them?

The 90 took us right beside the Gulf coast at this point and the views were spectacular. None more so than the town of Pass Christian where huge houses with pools in their front gardens lined the road on our left and on the right was a wide, white beach, and the sparkling sea. This was definitely a place to return, and perhaps retire, to. Sadly, we had no time to linger and pushed on to Biloxi - the only stop we made in Mississippi.

Biloxi feels a bit like Southend or Blackpool, with gaudy restaurants and souvenir shops lining the seafront. It also contains several casinos, including one shaped like a fort complete with docked boat - shades of Vegas. In spite of the tacky feel we spent an hour or so in Biloxi, primarily to refuel both Harvey and ourselves. We also took the chance to stretch our legs, walking three miles along the beach, enjoying the first bit of really hot sun of our travels. The beach was practically deserted, just some worryingly large bird footprints, and us. Bliss.

We left Biloxi and soon passed into Alabama, with nothing more than a sign to alert us to the fact that we were crossing into our ninth and penultimate state. As with Mississippi we were passing through rather than visiting the state - Alabama is about 50 miles wide where we crossed (again as the crow flies).

We did stop in Mobile (pronounced moebeel, not like the portable telephone) but by the time we did it was early evening and the visitor centre we headed straight to was closing. We drove around the town for a short while, looking for sights mentioned in *Lonely Planet*, but we were too preoccupied to properly appreciate our surroundings.

What was on our minds was the daily concern of 'where shall we stay tonight'. We had already rejected a camp just before Mobile due to grubby restrooms so now we left the town in search of alternative accommodation. First stop, Blakely State Park - closed. Second, the town of Fairhope and the Driftwood RV park - difficult to find, night check-in available, but a little grubby so we headed on. Third, Fairhope Park - somehow missed it as we drove on pitch-black country roads.... starting to feel a little desperate. Fourth, a town called Elberta and the Wolf Bay Plantation RV Resort...again after some wrong turns. We finally found the park, nicely laid out and well lit (but to be honest we were ready to sleep anywhere) and began the process of night check in.

Just as we did this a little old lady came out of the clubroom and asked how long we wanted to stay at the camp. We told her that it would only be one night and (over) emphasised how tired we were having driven for hours looking for a camp – in case she was about to tell us that a minimum booking was a week. The old lady, evidently the campsite manager/owner, agreed that we did look stressed and allowed us to stay for free because it was only one night and our van was 'only a baby'. She even gave us a 'spot' next to the very nice individual restrooms. We were mildly suspicious that we would wake up the next morning to find an invoice under the windscreen wipers, but the only catch was that she asked that we pop in for a chat before leaving. We were so relieved after chasing round all evening and celebrated with a slap up tea.... from the local petrol station, the only place still open.

The next morning when we popped in for a chat with the manager she tried to entice us into staying longer - hence the free first night. It was not a



hard sell however and as soon as she realized our intention was still to move on she lost interest and our 'chat' was over. We had a long journey ahead so were glad she did not insist on a gruelling discussion.

Our next day's drive took us into Florida and all the way across the top of it to the east coast – over 400 miles. From our guidebook we knew there was little to see, the main settlement on the route being Tallahassee. Despite being the state capital, Tallahassee is described as offering 'little of real interest to visitors' and also 'not worth a special trip' (*Lonely Planet*, p.653). So we planned as few stops as possible. For companionship we had a book on tape, Thomas Harris reading *The Silence of the Lambs*. As this was an abridgement it only lasted about a third of our journey and it was only '20 questions' and other games that kept us from going too crazy.

Other than Tallahassee, Pensacola was the only town on this route that I had heard of, and although we stopped near both of them it was not to do the tourist thing. We did not even properly leave the I10.

We took the Tallahassee exit to fuel the van and feed ourselves. This exposed us to our first human contact since the campsite - except ourselves of course. Our Waffle House waitress was weird and a little creepy - telling me how after having two kids she had had her tubes cut.... She also cooked our food, badly, as the chef had 'popped out' and loudly commented 'last night was bad for tips'. We swiftly moved on, suitably reminded why we had decided to give Tallahassee itself a miss.

By the time we reached St Augustine on the east coast the campsite we had

aimed for was just closing (you may have noticed a pattern with this). The drive had taken all day, even though we had only made three stops and had driven further on other days. Partly this was because somewhere west of Tallahassee an early lunch had become a late lunch when we crossed into Eastern Standard Time and lost another hour. But at least this campsite had night check in and, more importantly, vacancies.

Ocean Grove RV Park had read well in our camp directory.... sadly this did not translate to real life and the restrooms were pretty grim. Our plan of a two night stay was rapidly reassessed and an alternative site - a nearby State Park - chosen. Two things prevented us moving on that night. First, the State Parks normally do not do night check in. Second, Ocean Grove had a nice hot spa - ideal after a day on the road.

We soaked for 15 minutes enjoying the dusk view of... a busy road a couple of feet away. Something about the heat must have fried our brains because we dared each other to go in the nearby unheated pool. We managed to dash down the steps into the frozen depths, and more impressive we managed to crawl back out as well. This drew bemused looks from a couple who had stolen our spot in the spa...Germans we assumed. This assumption, based on the fact they ignored our salutations and also based on prejudice (that had been carefully honed during holidays when we could not get near to the swimming pool due to towels 'saving' the loungers), proved incorrect and we chatted to them for a while until we were forced to abandon the spa or risk permanent water damage.

Hot spa aside, Ocean Grove was just too grotty to justify its inflated prices so we spent the next morning searching for, and booking into, the

Anastasia State Park. This site had nice bathrooms, was cheaper and its only negative quality was that the 'spots' were unpaved - hardly a reason to reject it, and in fact the parking bays were lined with trees which was rather lovely – until a squirrel started throwing acorns out of the trees and onto the top of the van that night.

We spent the rest of the day in the town of St Augustine using the 'sightseeing train' to, well, see the sights! It was a hop on and off service and during the afternoon we covered the whole route at least once. The narration during the tour was quite interesting - though some of the content was a little dubious: 'the Lightner Museum has a collection second only to the Smithsonian in the US' Really? Now we were glad that we hadn't visited the Smithsonian, because it must be crap!

St Augustine is a town full of interesting old buildings and museums; in fact they are a little obsessed with how old it is (it *is* the nation's oldest city, founded in 1565). The train was certainly a good way to see the town, especially because we got free parking included with our tickets. We also got free entry to the Old Florida museum.

The museum consisted of three small outside spaces mocked up to represent different periods from the state's past, where visitors could try historic activities. These included sheep feeding and ploughing in the Pioneer Era; scraping hides in the Timucua Indian Era; and chicken pushing in the Spanish Colonial Era. Actually you were just supposed to stroke them but we tried (unsuccessfully) to push them off their narrow roost...just to make it more interesting.

Once we had finished looking round the museum, and assaulting poultry, we had a look round some of the shops. As we were travelling for 13 weeks there was a real need to budget, so luxury items such as souvenirs and in particular postcards were not priorities. Before we left the UK we told people that we would not be sending postcards, mainly for financial reasons and besides we sent email bulletins home every week. We relented when it came to our parents however and sent three or four cards home during our travels. St Augustine, with all its history, seemed a good place to buy some cards and we quickly found a gift shop - complete with crazy cashier. Either she was spaced out (she was a college student – more prejudice) or just tired, but she offered to let us rob the shop and said she would burn it down to cover our tracks - all because we did not have the right change for a few postcards!

At nightfall St Augustine goes very quiet, certainly in January, and all the shops and museums closed quite early. It felt a bit like a Cornish town, or possibly Whitby in Yorkshire, off-season and after all the grannies have gone home for tea. We did not feel like spending another evening just reading in the van, but fortunately another option presented itself in the form of *Pot Belly's \$4.75 Movie Theatre* (actually \$5 when we visited). Emma and I love going to the cinema, we go once a week at home, and managed to clock up eight times during our travels. As soon as we saw an advert for *Pot Belly's* we could not resist a visit, especially after the telephone information service told us that 'Mr. Pot Belly highly recommends the *Last Samurai*' - not that we are into Tom Cruise but because this suggested that Mr. Pot Belly was a real person, and

perhaps we would even meet him!

When we found the cinema it was an unassuming, small grey building which Emma declared felt like a 'dirty old man's cinema'...although she would not reveal how she knew that. The lobby was lined with huge display cases crammed full of movie memorabilia, probably worth a fortune but displayed as if it was part of a jumble sale. Amazingly, the theatre actually had more than one screen and we could hear the other film, *Mona Lisa Smile*, whilst standing waiting in the lobby - though fortunately not during our film. In fact, the only thing that you could hear during our presentation of *Last Samurai* was the wheezy old projector, or possibly the projectionist. Nevertheless the film was good and the experience was a classic. We even got waitress-served burger and hot dog at our seats, which were more like church pews, complete with a shelf in front to put your elbows on if you were kneeling down – or in this case to balance your food on. Sadly we did not get to meet the great man himself, Mr. Pot Belly, we only saw old photographs of him meeting Hollywood stars.

We left St Augustine with a little reluctance as the quaint town does have quite a lot of appeal. Nevertheless, we also felt a lot of anticipation as we got back on the road because we were about to enter a very exciting leg of our travels - something I had been looking forward to since we had drawn up our schedule. First we were driving to the Space Coast where we would visit the Kennedy Space Centre, and then we were going to drive on to Orlando and spend five days at Universal Studios. Yes, New York, the Grand Canyon and Death Valley were wonderful experiences, but I am a 12 year old in a 20 something year old's body - I love theme parks!

Our route south from St Augustine along the Florida coast was beautiful, especially when we had sea on one side of the road and intra-coastal water on the other. It brought back memories of driving north towards the Redwoods in California, but warmer and sunnier. We were even driving on Route 1 again. The drive took us through Daytona where we resisted the urge to take Harvey for a high-speed race on the famous beach, and we arrived on the Space Coast by late afternoon.

I expected this region to be very built up and crowded, but actually the area surrounding the Space Centre is a wildlife refuge, Merritt Island, which is where we headed first. Thinking about it I suppose it makes sense to put something so noisy (and potentially dangerous) as a shuttle launch in the middle of nowhere. So our first taste of the Space Coast was a six-mile wildlife drive, full of beautiful birds (including some gorgeous pink specimens that we photographed because they were pretty and then later discovered that they were Roseate Spoonbills...more of that later), devoid of many people and even featuring a brief glimpse of an alligator.

From here we drove straight into a government-restricted area, and then rapidly straight back out - with only minimal assistance from a gun-wielding guard.

For the second night running we opted for a government run camp, this time the port-run Jetty Park. This proved to be basic but fairly cheap and clean, plus to be honest there was little choice of campsites. For the first time we were actually lucky with the timing of a visit, if we had turned up with no booking the day before a shuttle launch we would have been sleeping in a car park or a lay by.

The Kennedy Space Centre (KSC, not to be confused with a fried poultry restaurant chain...) was quite an expensive place to visit - we paid nearly \$35 (about £19.50) each and that was with a discount. However, there was a lot to see and if you spent the whole day (as we did) you definitely got your money's worth. There were two IMAX films, exhibitions, live shows – a Q and A session with a genuine spaceman, a coach tour, activities, gift shops (including a toy that is 'voiced by Buzz Aldwin'), and restaurants. The highlight for me was the coach tour.

We were driven out towards the shuttle launch sites and could climb an observation gantry to get views of various launch pads. Once again the most striking thing was the scale of the features. For example the vehicle assembly building has a US flag painted on the side, and the coach we were on could have driven down one of the stripes. It just all looks so small on TV. I also enjoyed sitting in several of the original space vehicles in the 'rocket garden' (a reference to rock gardens that I only just worked out!) The rockets are so cramped its a wonder that the astronauts are not still in them as living displays!

There was a risk of the Centre being a bit 'look how great we are' at times, but the human cost of the space race was not glossed over and a memorial to those people who have lost their lives in its pursuit was prominently placed within the Centre.

By the time we left the Space Centre we were feeling a little 'spaced out' having seen similar footage of the shuttle launch dozens of times. We were not even done for the day however as our tickets included free entry to

the nearby Astronaut Hall Of Fame. This had loads of museum style displays about around 40 of the astronauts, plus an interactive gallery - the real reason we visited. This included lots of great hands-on activities but unfortunately was really busy. We spent most of our time queuing for the star attraction - a ride where you can experience 4G.

After waiting for about 30 minutes it was our turn - two people ride at once, but in separate seats. I was more nervous than Emma; paranoid that I might throw up, but as it turned out I actually enjoyed it more than her. We both felt nauseous for hours, after our quick ride. Heaven help the astronauts, and they train at 16G!

We left the space coast at about 6.30pm and decided to crack on to our next destination, Orlando, that night. This was not our original intention, but we were getting greedy as we began to reach the end of our travels and wanted to make the most of the four weeks left. Who needs sleep anyway?

In fact it only took a couple of hours to drive on to Orlando and the *Turkey Lake Camp* where we based ourselves - *baste* ourselves, geddit? There was only one hitch, the camp was locked up for the night so we had to drive an extra half hour to the Stage Stop Park in the inappropriately named town of Winter Garden - it was boiling!

The Turkey Lake campsite was open when we returned the next morning and had one site spare, which we quickly snapped up. This is another local authority camp and at \$15 a night one of the cheapest we stayed in. What made it even better value for money was its proximity to Universal Studios - just 15 minutes away. There are closer RV Parks that



provide shuttles into the theme parks, but these camps cost \$50 or more a night. Based on this we had expected to pay through the nose in order to camp in Orlando, although the savings we made were soon offset by having to pay \$8 or \$10 a day to park at Universal Studios - a little harsh given the cost of entry to the park itself.

We had a five-day pass for the theme park, which is actually made up of two different parks - Universal Studios and Islands Of Adventure - and this proved to be ample time to see everything. Unlike Disneyland the parks were not uncomfortably crowded on the whole - not surprising as all the children were back at school after the Christmas break. This probably goes some way to explaining why we decided that the parks were better than Disney's LA offerings. The other reason is simply that they were better - or at least they were more in tune with our tastes. Universal felt more like Disneyworld's MGM Studios park, with cooler, more grown up rides themed around films or TV shows we were really into.

The original park on this site, Universal Studios itself, mainly contained the film rides, and of these *Shrek*, *Terminator 2*, and *Men in Black* were our favourites, offering something a little different from the standard fare of roller coasters or spin-you-round-really-fast-until-you-are-sick rides. Plus there was another ride that had good therapeutic qualities.

Emma visited Universal Studios some years ago and one of the rides still there from that previous trip was *Jaws*. Emma is phobic of sharks.... you can see where this is going can't you? She decided to re-visit the ride and I was prepared for sobbing, clinging, and possibly some reaction from Emma

as well. As it happened the ride was not that bad, partly because I was prepared for sharks to suddenly appear. It was cheesy rather than anything else, but at least Emma came away from it having put a bad memory to rest.

We spent half our time in this film-based park, and half in Islands Of Adventure (IOA). The latter was more children orientated and many of the rides were themed around cartoons. IOA is also newer, and thus was more crowded. The best area in this park was the Super Heroes Island - full of rides featuring the likes of *Spiderman* and the *Incredible Hulk*. In keeping with the cartoon-theme in this area a girl sitting next to me on a scary ride uttered 'holy crap!' - very *Batman*.

Universal Studios also featured live shows and actors dressed as characters, in common with Disney and in fact most theme parks these days. The characters tended to be funnier and more mischievous than Mickey or Donald however. For example, *Scooby Doo* whispered lascivious things to Emma, and Lucille Ball struck up conversations as if we were old friends whenever we saw her. The most eccentric character we met was Merlin. First he threatened to turn a nearby kid into what I heard as a 'turd'. When I checked if he had said 'turd' or 'toad' he assumed that the kid was ours and tried to set us up for a group photo. This was one of several times we almost ended up adopting children in theme parks, possibly because staff find it hard to believe that childless couples would visit.

The coolest characters we met were the Marvel Super Heroes, who all drove up on quad bikes one lunchtime. This included the following photo opportunities: Emma with *Spiderman* (Emma: 'look at his package! These

costumes are really tight aren't they?'); me with *Captain America* ('Take care Sir'); Emma with *Wolverine* (heavily padded to give the impression of muscles); and me with *Rogue* and *Storm* from the *X-Men* (Emma told *Rogue* that she was my favourite. Her response? 'Awesome'. ...And a step away from me.)

IOA also contained all the water rides, which, seeing as it was January, we were reluctant to try. Nonetheless, on our penultimate day, just before we were ready to head back to the van, we braced ourselves (with ponchos) and did all the wet rides in one swoop. This day was a bit warmer, but we would probably have done them anyway, even if it had been raining, because we hate missing things out. First we went on the log flume, *Dudley Do-right's* log flume to be precise. This was a cartoon character I had at least vaguely heard of, but there were some that we encountered that neither of us had a clue about...but then have the Americans heard of *Danger Mouse* or *Mr. Benn*?

The log flume was actually quite scary, you appear to be submerged at one point, and certainly got us wet, mainly on our bums. Then we went on a raft ride, less wet, and with more camaraderie with the other people in our raft. This rapport was along the lines of 'hahaha, that bit's going to get you wet...oh no, the boat's going to turn!'. The final water ride was themed on *Jurassic Park* and was again quite scary, especially when you felt like you were going to fall out the boat.... who needs safety harnesses? It also succeeded in soaking the parts the log flume had not reached - our faces and upper bodies.

I decided that we were not wet enough yet, or at least that Emma was not wet enough. To remedy this we went into Camp Jurassic, an adventure

playground featuring two areas of water cannons where people can shoot each other. I took the higher zone, and recruited random children to help me in my bid to saturate Emma (ma ha ha ha! – evil laugh). My plan worked a little too well however, and when Emma walked round the corner to meet me after our dual I nearly put my hands on her chest to protect her modesty, something her white top and white bra were failing to do! We quickly hid in a cave (seriously) and changed her top (we came prepared for a wet day when we packed the bag that morning) before walking back to the car. We recounted this story to a staff member as we left the park, and were greeted with a stony silence. Evidently a sense of humour is not required to work in theme parks!

While we were spending our days in the parks we spent most of our evenings in the City Walk area of Universal Studios. This has shops, nightclubs and a huge selection of restaurants. Too tired for the clubs, we did visit some of the restaurants - including Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville - live music, a round of 'ritas (yes, just one each, due to having to drive home and, more importantly, the cost), and semi cooked burgers. Jimmy Buffet is somewhat of an institution in the US it seems - though we had never heard of him.... maybe an age thing. We spent our last night in a very decadent blow out at the Hard Rock Café - totally worth it!

Two nights were spent elsewhere in Orlando. The first was a very nostalgic return to Downtown Disney (downtown from Disneyworld), Walt's version of City Walk. We had spent many happy evenings there during our holiday the

year before and recreated one of these by visiting the same restaurant and having the same meal again.

The second evening spent outside the Universal Studios complex was at a dinner show *Arabian Nights*. This show was a freebie, offered in return for listening to a 90-minute time-share spiel. The tickets were worth \$100, so it seemed too good a deal to turn down really. The timeshare spiel took place far too early in the morning - starting at 8 am - and went on far too long, two and a half hours. However, we emerged victorious, having eaten a free breakfast, received our show tickets plus nine drinks tickets, and, more importantly, having not signed up for timeshare. The process was not without trauma though.

First of all we had to lie and pretend to be married, then we had to give contact telephone numbers for back home (for which my recently cancelled mobile number sufficed), then we had to endure the spiel. The psychology used was at times interesting to observe, at other times plain laughable. For example our 'seller', the hairy-lipped Betty began proceedings by showing us photos of her family. Then, having explained the system and 'got to know us', we were shown some of the condos. They were admittedly very nice, and filled with the aroma - and actual presence - of freshly baked cookies. More amateur psychology followed when Betty failed to get us to sign up, either with the sums or her sad face and tear filled eyes. In fact, she stopped just short of 'but I have ten small children to feed!' We were left to stew for some time, and then Betty's boss came over.

She was by far better looking than Betty and the situation was akin to a scene in *Friends* when Chandler's plans to quit his gym are foiled by a

'spandex treat' employed to keep members. Nevertheless, the boss failed to convince us, although the deal was starting to look tempting by this stage.

In spite of assurances that 85% of the condos were sold, they kept lowering the price until they were practically giving it away. Emma did most of the talking, but I was the strong silent one saying 'no' loudly from time to time. Finally the boss seemed convinced that we were no-hopers, and so we were told a third staff member would come to sort out the tickets.... after more stewing time. The third person checked everything had been OK but then also tried to find out what else they could have done to get us to sign up. And this was described as NOT hard sell!

Eventually we got our tickets, from a forth person who tried to sell us an upgrade for the show. Phew! We were wrung out by the time we reached the theme park - and it was only 10.30am!

Oh, and the actual show? Well, it was not overly Arabian. Sure there was a belly dancer in the pre show bar area, where we cashed in virtually all of our drinks vouchers in the space of 20 minutes because all drinks during the show itself were free, but that is where most of the Arabian theme stopped. We were ushered to our seats - front row as we finally gave in and paid for a cheap upgrade - and were then given a fairly edible but uninspiring meal as the show began. I was expecting a feast - I had heard about the banquets served at the medieval themed dinner shows. So what arrived, salad, chicken and vegetables and then a sliver of sponge cake did not really impress. But at least our tickets had been free.

The show was a series of feats of horsemanship, linked together by a

very vague story about an Arabian Princess' wedding. The stunts performed by the horses and their riders were very exciting, although slightly marred by the fact that several visiting vets in our row were debating whether the animals were sedated or not. To ease our consciences we tended to agree with those who said the horses had not been drugged, they were far too frisky.

The show ended in the traditional manner of Arabian weddings: a minute's silence for peace/overseas troops, a rendition of 'God Bless the USA', and a snowfall. Quite.

We marked our last day in Universal Studios by wearing our custom-made travelling t-shirts. These were printed on the front with 'Travels In A Tin Can. TNT USA tour 2003-04'. TNT stands for our surnames, Thomas and Tonin, though Emma is always at pains to point out the other meaning of the initials, repeatedly saying: 'together we're dynamite', maybe one day someone will even laugh (other than Emma who laughs every time). The back of the t-shirts simply said 'tour dates' and then had a blank space where we wrote the names of all the places we visited with a fabric pen.

During the day we got quite a lot of comments, usually from men who read (slowly) the words emblazoned across Emma's chest...hmmm, wonder why? But also several 'natives' remarked that we had been to more places than them - Americans do not seem to travel much.

We also had our faces painted; mine to look like *Wolverine*, Emma to look like 'Bad Girl Power' (a famous super hero...obviously). My make-up made the 'real' *Wolverine* so jealous that he pretended to strangle me while

we posed for photos. Mainly people just stared rather than commenting - there is that lack of sense of humour again. We did manage to get a discount on our lunch though when Emma jokingly asked for a 'super hero discount'.... and actually got it. Sadly the food - Chinese - was a bit dodgy, the spring roll tasted distinctly of tea - maybe the real reason for the discount?

Emma also made a fan of the female singer in a live street show based on the *Blues Brother's* film. She was told that her make up was great and that she was the singer's 'soul sister' – getting a mini private serenade from the singer.

Surprisingly the make-up stayed on through two meals, an ice cream sundae, several rides and a cinema visit. In fact we used a whole pack of wet wipes removing it from each other's faces that evening. Certainly value for money.

It was not just with a lot of effort but also with a certain amount of reluctance that we removed the face paint; it was the last trace of the theme park, the last we would visit during our travels. But, we still had three weeks left altogether, and were about to hit the road again on a leisurely drive to the Everglades, and hopefully some 'gator encounters.



## **22 - They're like living sofas!**

When we left Orlando we were moving from one extreme to another again. Swapping the lights, noise and crowds of the theme parks for the peace and quiet of the Everglades National Park, which covers much of the southern end of the state's mainland. However, we were not headed straight down to the park. Instead we were planning to reach the park after three days, even though the distance was only 269 miles (a mere trifle for us hardened travellers). There were a few things, people, and animals we wanted to see first.

First stop on leaving Turkey Lake Park was breakfast, no real surprise given our track record. In our defence the sign said 'all you care to eat breakfast buffet - \$3.99' – very hard to resist. The food was very good and filled us up until the evening, the only drawback was that the man at the next table kept talking to us. He was with his adult son and used us as an (unwilling) audience for his thoughts on married life. Although irritating he was always polite, giving us no real reason to shut him up. We could have left I suppose, but we had not eaten all that we cared to by that stage.

Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park was our destination for the day, or what was left of the day once we reached it via slow roads. The park is on the west coast of Florida and made it onto our itinerary late in the day when I happened to notice in our guidebook that it is home to manatees.

Emma and I fell in love with these massive marine mammals the year

before when we saw some in Seaworld, Florida, and so decided a detour was a must. The park is massive, 166 acres, and contains a variety of native Floridian wildlife, including eight manatees. The manatees are the big attraction, and seeing as they can grow to 15 foot and nearly 200lb 'big' is an understatement. Sadly these creatures, also known as sea cows and related to elephants, are endangered, not because they have natural enemies, but due to loss of habitat, and increasing anglers and boat traffic.

We reached the park three hours before it closed, plenty of time to look round, but then had to pay over \$9 each to go in – which seemed a bit steep seeing as we had an annual pass for the national parks. But this was a *state* park - don't you just love bureaucracy? We then had to wait for half an hour for a boat to take us into the park, choosing this over the alternative (a tram) because we thought going on the boat would be more fun even though it would take longer. As the boat arrived we found out that we could actually have driven Harvey into the park rather than waiting! Annoying, but still we would have two and a half hours to look round and the boat should have got us into the park in time for the 3.15pm wildlife talk about the manatees.... *should* being the operative word.

The boat journey started well, lazily cruising down a narrow creek reminiscent of our swamp tour near New Orleans, but with less tethered bunnies. However, our guide made the mistake of telling us how the boat's motor worked and how wonderful it was. And then it broke down. We had to wait 20 minutes to be rescued and then ten minutes while it was fixed, in which time the guide stoically ignored us and the boat kept drifting into the undergrowth either side of the creek. We asked if our guide could

radio ahead to ask them to postpone the manatee talk until we arrived but she refused. So we all sat there watching time pass, getting frustrated and sharing wisecracks about how we could call AAA (the U.S equivalent of the AA or RAC) on our mobile phones. Eventually our guide abandoned ship, returning to the park entrance with the repair crew. Fortunately the engineer we were left with was friendlier than our guide, and nursed the ailing boat along to get us to the park. We rushed to the ranger talk – ten minutes late - to discover that it had been cancelled due to staff shortages. Great, we thought, having a really good time.

Things immediately improved when we went to the main viewing area and got to see the manatees that the park cares for, from above and under the water. They were being fed massive quantities of lettuce and it was just incredible to watch them lumbering around eating. It was like the salad bar at Pizza Hut, but with less mess. From above the water all you can see most of the time are their huge blue-grey backs big enough for three or four people to sit on - like living sofas. We spent a long time trying to take photographs of them - quite hard to do when 98% of the creatures are featureless – and we came back home with a lot of photos apparently of blue walls.

We finally dragged ourselves away from the manatees an hour before the park closed in order to finish looking round. This involved a nature trail, but without the normal excitement of nature trails: 'What will we see? Will we see anything?' This trail was more like a zoo with all the 'wild' life in enclosures. We did get to see some nice birds and animals however, including a hippo, a fox, some very photogenic bald eagles standing (tethered/drugged?) by a US flag, and a three legged deer. Several factors

spoilt our enjoyment of the walk though. One, it was cold and we were dressed for sunshine in shorts and t-shirts; two, I broke my sunglasses; three, the animals were being put to bed so we did not get to see them all (although it was quite amusing watching the rangers try to catch the fox, without the horses and hounds we Brits would have used). All in all not a lucky visit to the park, but worth it for the manatees alone.

We left the park as it closed and embarked on our regular trial of finding a campsite before nightfall/offices close.

Five or so minutes later we were checked into the Covered Wagon Campground. This is a very cheap campsite and included free doughnut and coffee breakfast, but only on Saturdays. Fortunately (for once) we checked in on a Friday night. We even got a discount, not for any membership schemes but as a result of the manager celebrating the approaching weekend a little early with a liquid lunch.

We began the next day lazily, in stark contrast to most mornings over the last few weeks, but still did not lie in very late. On this occasion however our sleep was cut short by a desire for doughnuts rather than a need to cover hundreds of miles before evening. In return for free breakfast (Krispy Kremes and mediocre coffee) the price we paid was engaging in conversation with our fellow 'RV-ers'. We sat with three old women who were classic snowbirds, spending every winter in Florida. They were friendly enough but grilled us, not about our travels, but about Diana, Princess of Wales.

'Is it all true what we hear about her?' One *Golden Girls* look-alike asked, the

minute we sat down.

'Well, what have you heard?' Came our cautious reply.

They knew more about her than we did.

We spent the rest of the morning driving to Clearwater, via a stop at a roadside sunglasses stall. As Emma drove I tried to find us a camp for the night, normally a fairly simple task as most places only have a few campsites to choose from. On this occasion it took a lot longer, in part due to indecisiveness and a plethora of sites to choose from, but also because lots of camps were booked up - an omen of difficult times to come.

We settled on Indian Rocks Beach, a nice site with a heated pool and five minutes walk to the beach. It was also the dearest camp that we had stayed at yet - two and a half times the cost of the previous camp, and no doughnuts!

We made the most of a sunny day by staying outside until dusk, first on the beach but then retreating to the pool due to windy weather and noisy seagulls. The birds were actually quite entertaining, regimented by one who controlled their 'attacks' on our lunch, and survived several attempted coups by the other birds following his failure to secure our food.

Another short drive took us to Bradenton near Sarasota and a second relaxing day in a row.... it was starting to feel like a regular holiday! The journey involved crossing Tampa Bay on an impressive (but unfortunately toll) bridge. We were treated to a sunny view of the bay on one side and the Gulf on the other.

Sarasota made it on to our itinerary due to the presence of a family friend who we had arranged to meet before we left the UK. The prospect of actually speaking to someone we (or at least Emma) had met before felt a bit strange and we spent a while tidying up the van in order to show it off. We also practiced the art of conversation on each other, as we realized that the patois we had evolved (consisting of in-jokes, body language and telepathy) simply would not do in mixed company. Once we were ready we hiked back to the camp's entrance area to use the pool while waiting for our friend, Pam. Hiked is not an overstatement in this case, as the Arbor Terrace Campsite is huge, and we were a long way back on an overspill site - though fortunately one with hook-ups.

Pam ended up about one and a half hours late, due to a miscommunication on the directions side. Still it gave us plenty of time to lounge and read. She arrived with her aunt, also Pam (yes we were confused too), and they made appropriate 'ooh' and 'ahh' noises when we showed them around the van. We then headed out to her holiday home on Long Boat Key. Pam is a snowbird, but one with enough sense to have a fixed second home as opposed to an RV. She also spends a lot of time in Italy, which is how she became a family friend ...long story.

After a long gossip we headed to a local restaurant for a delicious fish meal. The dinner was made even better by Pam uttering the phrase 'my treat'...maybe we should have met up with more people during our travels?

The next day we headed to the edge of the Everglades National Park, once we finally got going. The delay was caused firstly by a need to dump our grey

water - today featuring an audience of all other campers in the area and a supporting cast of biting ants - lovely. The rude and inefficient staff in Dunkin' Donuts caused our second delay. DDs are the rivals of Krispy Kremes, and are not a patch on them for doughnuts - or service! Luckily we went in for bagels rather than doughnuts!

The weather was again very sunny but also increasingly humid as we headed south towards Naples – a very appropriate Mediterranean climate in fact. Naples was not as picturesque as its Italian namesake, though to be fair we only visited two Wal-Greens (like Boots) and a Wal-Mart (like ASDA...sort of) in a bid to get our digital photographs downloaded. Not exactly the tourist view of the town. And then we finally reached the Everglades National Park, our sixth national park.

Our first glimpse of the Everglades was spent in the Gulf Coast Entrance visitor centre, picking up maps and a listing of events. Then we left the park and headed to our camp on Chokoloskee Island. Beautifully named, but a little run down - at least judging by the campsite. Still, our spot was near the ocean (in fact nearly everywhere we visited from now on to the end of our travels was near ocean), the site was relatively clean, and the staff was friendly. Most importantly we had hookup - air-con having replaced food as our primary desire (at least until dinner time).

An hour or so later we headed out for dinner at Joanie's Blue Crab Café. This was another *Lonely Planet* recommendation, as with many restaurants we visited. The only difference from the others was that we never actually found this restaurant, despite knowing exactly where it was.

Joanie's was reported to be in the town of Ochopee, so we headed towards this settlement. And somehow missed it - not the restaurant, the whole town. After a while we turned round and drove back, stopping at the only building we had passed, a disused petrol station. It turned out that this was Ochopee and the unlit building next to where we stopped was Joanie's. Blatantly we were not eating there tonight, or probably ever, so we headed back towards our campsite. We stopped in Everglades City and ate at the Seafood Depot (also listed in our guidebook).

Renowned for fish dishes, Emma and I both had all-you-can-eat shrimp salad to start. Emma then moved onto crab claws, and I had chilli (beef, not seafood!). The meal was very good - though we were so hungry after the Joanie's fiasco we would have eaten anything - and good value for money, especially as we left with a doggy bag of American 'biscuits' (a bit like savoury scones).

Following a quick breakfast of nearly fresh biscuits, we headed off into the wilds of the Everglades. Well, actually Route 41, a main road through the park, but still pretty wild. En route to Shark Valley visitor centre we saw masses of alligators and stopped several times to take 'snaps'. We also spotted lots of different birds including a rare (according to our leaflet) wood stork.

We ventured gingerly out of the van the first time we stopped to look at the 'gators, but then approached others with increasing boldness - until one thrashed loudly in the water near us, causing us to beat a hasty retreat. We also attempted to take photographs of some turtles sunning themselves on



the riverbank, but they proved rather uncooperative. Ibis, wood storks, great white heron, and lots of 'gators lingered long enough to be photographed however, identified not due to any expertise on our part but because we had a glossy leaflet about the area's native fauna. The highlight of our drive however was to see Joanie's by daylight - and open!

On reaching the visitor centre our first priority was to tell a ranger we had spotted a wood stork. His apathetic reaction to our sighting was fairly crushing, although understandable as we later saw loads of this 'rare' bird - apparently it is not an endangered species at present. However, a second ranger was impressed about the roseate spoonbills we had casually photographed on the Space Coast. They *are* rare and shy, a fact borne out by how hysterical our fellow tourists became when a spoonbill was spotted later, about ten miles away as a reddy-pink speck!

Second on our agenda was, inevitably, food. After a quick look round the facilities at this entrance to one of the country's largest National Parks we realized we were going to go hungry - or die of heart attacks. The only food on offer was crisps, and we already had our own in the van. In the end we had a bizarre semi-healthy concoction of tuna dip with crisps followed by Oreo cookies, and raisins.

The main attraction at Shark Valley is not its namesake, thankfully for my phobic companion. Instead there is a 15 mile paved road through parts of the park, which you can traverse by foot, bicycle or tram. We opted for the third mode of transport due to a lack of time for the first option and a lack of

balance for the second. While we waited for the tram we sat in on another ranger talk.

The topic this time was energy and food chains but could have been called 'biology for the insane' (or Biology 101 as the Americans might have put it), as its language and proliferation of cuddly toys was aimed at primary school age kids or possibly embryos. However, it was fun and seeing as we were half of the audience it would have been cruel to leave part way through. The lack of crowds was probably due to the weather, humid again but today featuring lots of showers. However, our tram was packed - largely with a group from an 'elder hostel', which we learned was like a 'youth hostel', but kind of the opposite!

The two-hour trip proved good value for money at \$26 between us and it almost got us out of the rain (the almost due to the fact the tram was open-sided). The guided trip taught us lots about the ecosystem of the everglades and confirmed some of our earlier bird identification work - it also taught us the names of more birds. From an observation point we were given an idea about the scale of the park as it stretched out around us. The word, once again not really doing justice to the experience, was 'BIG'.

Unfortunately the tour also gave us 'saw grass fatigue' as the ranger leading the tour was obsessed with this rather dull plant and took every possible opportunity to leap from the tram into the grass - often thigh deep in water. This aspect of the tour could certainly have benefited from a 'gator passing through close by.... for entertainment value.

The ranger was the first one we had spoken to about our wood stork

sighting, so after the tour we decided to tell him about our roseate spoonbill in an attempt to redeem ourselves as interesting people. Sadly he was too busy talking to the elder hostel group, loudly announcing he prefers to talk to them than to young people - how very friendly!

After the tram trip we took a walk along the route by ourselves, through a thunderstorm. This was a charming, if soggy, experience and we encountered more wildlife as we walked. This included a baby 'gator and a crowd of pig frogs - at least judging by the noise they made we think that is what they were. That or actual pigs.

It was quite late by the time we left the park, and even later when we arrived at our next campsite after going to Homestead for a food shop, email session and dinner. We were staying at the Flamingo State Camp - deep in the park and reached at about 10pm via a very dark road. During this night drive we saw lots of wildlife on the road: two deer (fortunately in enough time to avoid them) and also dozens of frogs - less fortunate on occasion.

The first thing we noticed when we woke up the next morning was how close we were to the sea, a very pleasant surprise. Unfortunately the sea view was about the best thing to happen to us until quite late in the day. We knew it was going to be a bad day when there was a curt note on our windshield telling us to register at the site office.

When we had arrived at 10pm the night before there was no notice board stating which site we should take, so we had just had to find a site and

park, though considering the fact we had pre-booked the note seemed a little harsh. Next, our breakfast croissants were too salty - disaster, may as well go back to bed! Going back to bed was not an option however as we urgently needed to book campsites for the last leg of our journey, the Florida Keys. It would be peak season by the time we reached the Keys and, seeing as we had already been turned away from some of the mainland campsites reservations seemed a good plan.

What should have been a relatively easy exercise ended up taking half a day which would have been better spent enjoying the park, or even pulling out our own fingernails. The first complication was that the nearest public phone was the only one for miles around. We had to wait a while to use it, got nowhere with the first few calls, and then felt too pressured to try more sites due to the long queue that formed round us like a lynch mob. Part of the problem was that sites were too busy to answer the phone, but also every call took an age while we entered the 90 digit code for our phone card, and then the pin number and telephone number. After we gave up, and once we had finished freaking out along the lines of 'we'll have to sleep in lay-bys forever!', we had lunch. This consisted of brie on stale bread, overripe melon and stale cookies. And it improved our mood no end.

We then drove to the Ernest F Coe Visitor centre, the main one for the whole park, and spent another stressful hour or so on the phone. At least they had more than one telephone and the end result of this hard labour was that we had booked camps for almost every remaining night of our travels, and with minimum alterations to our intended itinerary. To celebrate we looked round the visitor centre - not that great and a little run down. The Everglades

certainly felt in need of a cash injection.

We spent the afternoon doing several shorts walks in the park, marvelling at the variation in terrain. From the Pahagokee overlook all we could see was an expanse of grassland - how I imagine Africa. But then we would enter hardwood hammocks - like copses - which felt like jungles. Towards the end of the day we stopped to photograph the sunset at Paurotis pond – no, I do not make these names up, but *Lonely Planet* possibly does. Here we narrowly avoided an alligator attack, due in part to a warning by fellow photographers, but largely because the ‘gator was a log!

The evening was spent eating cold dinner - our campsite was primitive, so no microwave - and ordering our earlier telephone work. Then we got an early night, in readiness for a hideously early start.

In a lapse of sanity/desire for adventure we had signed up for a canoe trip when we first arrived in the Everglades. This meant rising at 6.45am and putting on all our clothes (plus woolly hat in Emma's case in a *Blair Witch* tribute) because it was so cold. Emma (ever the voyeur) saw one lady donning three pairs of trousers in readiness for the trip.

Our adventure began with a brief chat by ranger Doug about where we should canoe too. We settled on the bay as opposed to canoeing up the river, as we would see more wildlife this way, though the going would be harder. Next our merry band - four couples, three singles and Doug - walked down to the dock and, after a quick paddling lesson, boarded our canoes. These were

aluminium and open topped – as it were – with wooden planks to perch on, quite unlike the kayaks that Emma and I had used before.

We were in the water for about three and a half hours - again good value for money at \$40 between us. The boats took two people each and Emma took the control (freak) seat in ours, which is the rear seat. Amazingly, and in spite of several collisions, we survived the trip without breaking off our engagement.

Most of the other people were very friendly, except for two of the singles who were obviously more experienced and very frosty whenever we collided with them - imagine! The trip consisted of periods of sustained paddling and then breaks when we floated in place and Doug told us more about the park. He also pointed out wildlife, not that we saw much except pelicans, some waders and a distant peregrine falcon.

Once out on the water exerting ourselves, and also once the sun came up, we even got warm and stripped off some layers. Doug had not been kidding when he said the going might be hard, especially when we were paddling into the wind. However, the breaks gave us time to partially recover and we were grateful for these.

What we were not grateful for was the stop near - or in my case in - a mangrove 'mangle'. Interesting though these plants were, the ground round them also exuded a strong sulphur smell. We were very pleased when Doug said we were going to move off again, though this pleasure was short lived. He asked if we were feeling lucky, to which the group stupidly replied 'Yes'. 'OK then' our intrepid ranger said, 'we'll try to go round the key (small island) but if there's not enough water we will have to head back against the wind'

Inevitably the water soon became very shallow and paddling turned into dragging oneself through the wet sand using the paddles like punting poles. Tim blithely declared the water would get deeper again...and then gave up and turned us around. By this stage the S.S. TNT was moving slower than all the other boats as we skirted close to (or perhaps over) the recommended weight limit for the trip (too much Denny's for us!) We got very stuck but, with lots of effort/cursing and mud splattered clothes, avoided the ignominy of having to be towed back to deeper water by the ranger. It was a close thing though. Oh, on the plus side Emma saw a ray fish – not much compensation for the aching shoulders.

The last part of our excursion consisted of a slow paddle back to the dock while Doug told us more stories. The highlight among these anecdotes was that the bald eagle, national animal of the USA, is a scavenger and thief. How refreshing to meet an American not so blindly patriotic.

After we docked Emma and I hung around helping Doug load up the canoes onto a trailer, and discovered he had known we would not make it round the key. He thought our group could cope and that it would make the trip more memorable, which it certainly did. Fortunately for Doug we lacked the energy to throw him in the sea. Instead we made our aching way to the overpriced Flamingo restaurant to re-fuel.

Leaving the Everglades for the last time we drove back out to Homestead after our early lunch. That night was meant to be spent on the first of the inhabited keys, Largo, but we had been unable to secure a campsite so had a limbo night teetering on the edge of the Florida mainland. We stayed in a no-

hook-up over spill spot in 'Pine Isle Park' or French Canada (or 'Canadia' as Emma was determined to call it) as it turned out to be.

At least we only paid \$10 for the privilege of parking in their field, and we did have full access to all the park facilities. These included porta-cabin restrooms and a heated pool (though heated was a loose term, and by this I mean it was a lie.)

We soon realized two things about this camp. First as one-nighters we were seriously out of place. When we checked in someone else was told that five months was the minimum stay for full hookup. Second, as non-French speaking people we were also in the minority. Signs were in French; the Canadian flag was at the camp entrance, and people 'bonjour'd' us as we walked around. At least the people were friendly and the place had a distinct community feel - people played 'boules' half the night.

More than anywhere else Florida had made us feel very transient compared to most RV-ers. We did not have garden furniture; picket fences or tomatoes growing round our van....

We went out for dinner to a very cheap, tasty, but grubby Italian restaurant called Cici's. Returning to the camp we noticed very sophisticated security systems at work - a cardboard cut-out of a sheriff. Surreal.



## **23 - Walk on the wild side**

During 13 weeks on the road we saw a lot of different animals - and not just road kill either. From alligators to manatees, penguins to baby giant pandas, even a tank full of dolphins. As wonderful as these sightings were however, these animals were all in captivity (or, in the case of alligators in the everglades, so common as to be, well, common). Seeing animals in the wild, and in unscheduled encounters, was always more exciting - even if the creatures were docile. There's something about the unexpectedness and 'discovering' the animals for yourself, rather than looking in a cage and saying 'yes, that's the rare lesser spotted thing-umy, I cannot see it but the label says it is there.' We had a number of such discoveries, and a few pseudo-sightings. Among the latter were coyotes (dogs); raccoons (cats); and alligators (logs).

Sheep and rabbits on leads in Times Square aside, the first real wild animal encounter occurred in Yosemite. This was the occasion I mentioned earlier when we were rushing back to our bus stop after a final hike when suddenly three savage creatures emerged from the woods - mule deer. OK, so we did not think they were savage at the time, but we did later find out they are involved in the highest number of human/animal attacks in the park.

Despite our fears for our mortal bodies we were very excited to have spotted these deer. In the UK we have driven past 'deer crossing' signs on countless occasions without even a whiff of antlers. But here we were seeing them clear as day, well clear as grey blobs at dusk to be fair. Over the next week or so we saw deer on three or four more occasions - even in broad

daylight. I am sad to admit it but they lost their appeal as their rarity value decreased. We were a little 'oh yeah, a mule deer two inches away from us, what a pest, crowding us. Oh look, there's a chicken.... I wonder how far you can push it before it will fall off its perch?'

Some of our more exotic brushes with wildlife occurred not in National Parks, despite us visiting about half a dozen of these, but in urban areas. San Francisco proved especially wild. On our first day in the city we were restricted from walking along one of the busy shopping piers by the group (flock/herd/stink?) of vomiting seal lions - nice! A couple of days later we spotted three skunks, foraging in a back garden. At least, we think they were skunks, according to a 'nature programme' we watched once they could have been cats that had fallen in white paint. Famous naturalists the Warner brothers tell us that it is an easy mistake to make. We opted not to investigate further and instead took photographs, from a safe distance.

Normally we had no choice but to observe the animals we spotted from afar. Being 'wild' life they did not tend to let us get closer. The immediate aftermath of sightings was usually spent culling hundreds of pictures in search of the perfect shot. Perfect in this case meaning 'vaguely distinguishable...if you squint'. The beauty of our digital camera meant we could zoom in and re-crop images several times before they deteriorated into individual pixels. By this method we revealed a whale flipper in the bottom 100th of a photograph that apparently just contained sea and sky. Our excitement and pride in this shot was short-lived when everyone we showed it to reacted with supreme apathy.

Well, I would like to see them time a shot on a moving boat pressed up against dozens of other tourists. Guess you had to be there.

In Big Sur we actually managed to get within a foot of a very wild creature.... a ground squirrel! We came to the conclusion he was either blind, near his burrow, or too hungry to leave the patch of grass he was eating. Eventually he fled. A young key deer was the only animal we saw that displayed neither the flight or fight instinct. This species of small deer is native only to Big Pine Key in the Florida Keys and, with little else to do except sunbathe, we decided to find some.

After two long designated walks through hot, poisonwood infested forests we were feeling fairly cheated. We were also very freaked out because a snake had fallen out of a tree really close to us on the second walk.... cunningly disguised as a branch! Was this going to be the first *Lonely Planet* recommendation we could not find? (Not counting Joanie's) We *had* seen some exotic creatures on one of the walks, round a pond called Blue Hole, including a pink dragonfly and an albino catfish. We had even heard about an 11ft alligator from a local person, imaginatively named 'Ali' (the 'gator, not the local person you understand). But we wanted to see key deer. To this end we went off the beaten track for a smelly walk by the sea on No Name Key.... but still no sightings.

Inevitably, once we decided to give up and head home we spotted an adult deer in the woods near the main road. We stalked it a bit taking photos but then a much better subject appeared. A juvenile deer on the verge rather than in the woods. We took loads of photos from the van and then on foot quite close to it. Finally I approached in order to scare it off the road. Its

reaction? It walked closer, presumably having encountered humans before and expecting food, eyeing my hat hungrily. This was very sweet but we worried for its safety, and that of my hat. My next move was to 'shush' and wave my hands. At this the deer skipped away, then wandered back, like it was a game. After I repeated this exercise with more energy it eventually went into the woods, very reluctantly!

Quite often sightings took place when we were walking on our own, such as the deer, and it was certainly more special when we were the only people to see the creatures we 'discovered'. The moments seemed more magical, partly because there was no one there to say 'oh, a lesser spotted hornswaggler, we see those all the time'.

This was exactly the case when we went on a short nature walk on a campsite in Elberta. At the end of the walk were a wooden jetty and a river. The trees flanking the river were full of huge brown birds of prey, literally 30-40, out of proportion with their surroundings and a surreal sight so close to civilization. We spent some time trying to photograph them on the wing, then headed excitedly back to the campsite to ask if they were buzzards – our best guess. The disinterested response to our giddy-school-child question? 'Yes'.

One of our most exciting discoveries was in Vermillionville, the museum in Lafayette. As mentioned earlier, we spotted a dark coloured creature, about the size of a cat skulking by the river. As we got a little closer we saw it looked like a mutated beaver or otter, as far as we could tell in the second or two before it did what most wild animals do and turned tail and ran. Unfortunately this 'find' soon lost its romance when we were told: first, they

are common in the area – in fact they are so abundant as to present a problem; second, they are called 'Nutria-Rats'. Lovely!

One occasion when crowds of people did not spoil our enjoyment of wildlife spotting was on the Big Sur coast when we encountered a living floor of massive elephant seals piled on top of one another. In fact, we were glad that we were not alone in their presence. Suppose we had got trapped under one of their blubbery bodies? With no other humans around who would post our flat bodies home to our grieving families (in a cartoon style)? Besides, some of the people there were volunteers explaining the habits of the seals, an unexpected but welcome resource in the middle of nowhere.

Surprisingly these were not the biggest animals we saw in the wild, though they were the ugliest. In Monterey we had our semi planned encounter with three humpback whales while on a boat trip. The lack of certainty about whether we would see anything during the excursion made for an exciting 'spot', although the experience would have been much better if we had piloted the boat and found the huge mammals by ourselves. Had we but been rich enough, and skilled enough, to do so!

The most abundant sources of wildlife were, inevitably, the national parks. Mule deer in Yosemite, alligators in the everglades, etc. We had hoped to encounter critters in Death Valley - though perhaps this was optimistic given the harsh reality of the environment there. In particular, and quite sadistically, we were very keen to see ducks that had become encased in salt crystals

after landing in short-lived lakes in the valley and then getting caught when the water evaporated. We had heard about them from the rangers, billed as the coyotes' favourite ready-salted snacks, the equivalent of a bag of crisps. Sadly we saw nothing and had to make do with stories of other people's varied sightings. These included an emu in Badwater (apparently an escapee), and a wildcat (or at least its foot prints) in the giant sand dunes. This last actually turned out to be a Great Dane, much to the spotter's embarrassment.

Perhaps it was for the best that we did not stumble upon a coyote chowing down on duck wings, it might have been a little nerve wracking. However, saying that we showed an unhealthy lack of fear around the creatures we did encounter. We were positively blasé around six foot alligators by the end of our first day in the Everglades. In fact the most worried we got was in the Florida Keys when we visited a bird sanctuary featuring uncaged pelicans wandering around on top of the cages. This was such an obvious 'poop' risk, especially given the size of the birds, and we spent the visit with one eye on them at all times. Luckily we escaped unmarked, unlike one unfortunate woman who took a hit while we were less than a foot away. Although, it is supposed to be good luck...

Proving that size is not everything our most memorable encounters were with the tiny Key deer, and an even tinier owl. Emma - the Bill Oddie of our party - spotted this bird in a copse in the everglades. Well, I say Bill Oddie, but actually Emma's ability to identify wildlife often stops short of knowing what things are. Until we started dating her knowledge in this area was roughly

'animals do not fly, birds do'. Now she can tell the difference between blackbirds, thrushes and starlings, almost every time. I'm so proud. She is good at spotting wildlife though, some hunter's instinct in-built in females I think.

On this occasion we had been having a bad day, struggling to plan our next leg of the journey, and the sighting was a real ray of sunshine. We spent about ten minutes watching from a metre or so away as the tiny owl - possibly a screech owl - sat lazily on a branch. All this time we tried to take photographs of our find, hindered by failing light, shaky hands and an uncooperative subject. The bird would not stay facing us, despite our attempts at attracting its attention with calls and thrown pebbles (not at it.... mostly). Eventually however, the owl responded. It flew away! Perhaps David Attenborough is safe for now...

## 24 - Keys-ze living

By the end of January, having spent more than two months off work, we were ready for a holiday! Since mid November we had visited ten states and stayed in dozens of different campsites, so yes, we needed a break.

Fortunately we had built a couple of weeks of R and R into our schedule, planning to spend as little as possible of the time driving and a lot of the time lying down. Our destination of choice for this holiday from holidaying was the same one favoured by many native RV-ers - the Florida Keys.

This stretch of islands spans 126 miles from the southern tip of the state's mainland and is comprised of lots of beaches, lots of hippies, and very little in the way of roads. One main carriageway cuts through and between all the isles, and the directions to most places consist of 'mile marker 32, Oceanside'. For variety there may be 'mile marker 32, Gulfside'. It made a refreshing change from navigating the big cities.

In spite of our intentions to take things easy we did not spend the entire two weeks sunbathing.... if nothing else it would have made for a boring chapter if we had. Our first drive off the mainland took us to Key Largo, one of the bigger islands and located at mile marker 106 (so 20 miles from the mainland). Dolphins were what drew us to Largo, one of our pre-booked luxuries as Emma was going to swim with them. Although, perhaps if she had been aware of the reality of this experience prior to taking part she would not have regarded it as a luxury.

There she was, shoe-horned into an undersized wet suit (which



prevented her from lowering her arms to her sides and which was described by Emma herself as the 'jelly baby' look), further encumbered by flippers, mask and snorkel, and plunged into a tank of sea water best described as 'not warm'. Not exactly the romantic vision of gliding through crystal clear warm water we had both imagined.

Then there were the dolphins themselves, two characteristics of which we had not properly comprehended when booking the excursion. First, they are really really huge, one was seven foot long and most are at least man-sized. Second, she was swimming alone with four of these massive mammals. Well, swimming was at times a little inappropriate as a description of her marine activities. Semi-drowning was often the best course available in light of the aforementioned swimwear and water temperature.

Emma had expected to either be swimming with other paying visitors, or to only meet one dolphin, so she was a little shocked on discovering what she had let herself in for. Fortunately the first hour of her session was devoted to a briefing on dry land provided by Kyle, a surfer dude by looks, attitude and, probably, actual fact. Kyle taught Emma various dos and don'ts about swimming with the dolphins. When to make eye contact, how to swim without presenting aggressive body language (not swimming head on towards the dolphins), to swim without using your arms, etc. This took about five minutes. He also taught her about biology, anatomy, genealogy and copulation - spending about 20 minutes each on these last two subjects. Great preparation - just not for swimming with them! Then it was time to get kitted up, and get in the water, for which she had about 40 minutes.

The first quarter of this time was spent swimming round in the massive

tank acclimatizing to the water and trying to calm her breathing as the cold, nerves and excitement were pushing her to the edge of hyperventilation. Perhaps sensibly the four dolphins (Bob, Cosmo, Julian and Samantha) ignored the noisy flappy intruder in their midst during this time. Emma did see Sugar, the sea lion, during this time, an added spectator participating in her swim. It was actually a miracle that she could see anything, as the water was so cloudy.

Emma spent the next thirty minutes swimming rapidly back and forth clutching props ranging from palm leaves to noodles (foam floats) following shouted instructions from the staff that were observing her swim. They gave her tips to help her interact with the dolphins and seemed genuinely pleased when their suggestions worked, telling Emma 'well done' and 'you got it' (imagine the tone of voice of cheerleaders). It was almost as if they were training a new dolphin, and I half expected them to throw her a fish when she did something right! Happily Emma's only reward for her efforts was an increase in attention from the four dolphins as they swam with her. At times she had several near her at once, flanking her sides and swimming beneath her as she gamely attempted to match their speed. An impossible task. Unbeknownst to her she was also interacting with the father of one of the dolphins, a massive brute that swam alongside her - but in the 'tank' next door.

The first time that the dolphins swam with her, Emma nearly drowned as in the excitement she swallowed water down her snorkel, which would have been a most unfortunate end just as the dolphins were getting interested. This event, complete with the sounds of Emma choking, has been

preserved for posterity on our digital camera, to be replayed infinitely whenever we need a laugh.

By the end of her session Emma was an expert dolphin swimmer, communicating with her new friends via sounds such as 'bree-ka-ka-ka' through her snorkel and even diving a couple of times while they followed her moves.

And my role during these escapades? Well, I was the official observer and record keeper. This task involved watching Emma (easily done and something I have considerable experience of) and taking photographs – a little trickier. It is hard enough for me to take good photographs of stationary objects, I just do not seem to have the hand to eye coordination/intelligence, but to add in moving targets just seemed unfair. Unfortunately I could not ask Emma to stay still, let alone get the dolphins to do this, and so I snapped away (taking movies and still photographs) and hoped for the best. To my credit, well actually probably due to the Japanese technology I was using, I managed to get some photos and (more usefully) some short films of Emma's exploits. As the session went on I was actually getting rather good at timing my actions so that I pressed the button to take a picture just before there was a good shot, giving the camera time to react. And then the battery ran out.... long before Emma's designated time in the water ended.

It was with great reluctance that Emma swam to the edge after her allotted 40 minutes, however as she stood on dry land and nearly collapsed with exhaustion she realized a longer swim would have been out of the question. Her legs were now dead from the swim, joining her arms and shoulders, which had paid the price for our canoeing madness in the

Everglades...the previous day. The swim had been booked for months, and dreamed of for longer, so a feeling of anticlimax would not have been surprising, but Emma did not experience this and as she gave me a big wet hug she had a huge grin as she announced 'my legs are made of jelly!' She spent the rest of the day recounting her adventure and she also had some souvenirs to keep the memories alive. No, not dolphin teeth, but photos of the dolphins, 'head shots' purchased from the sea life centre where her swim had taken place. Emma had also taken an underwater camera with her and when we finally got the film developed at the end of our holiday we marvelled at her shots of various parts of the dolphins' anatomy - some of which were even identifiable!

The next day we bid a fond farewell to Key Largo and its friendly dolphins and headed on down through the Keys. We were both feeling a little melancholy as we travelled. Emma's marine experience was one of the last pre-booked activities of the holiday and it felt like our travels were rushing to an abrupt conclusion. In fact the only pre-arranged events left to look forward to were a hire car for our last day and the flight home - oh, the excitement! However we had nearly two weeks left, and the time actually went quite slowly - mercifully.

From Key Largo to our next base, Fiesta Key (seriously) was a mere 30 miles, but actually one of the longer journeys left. It took about half a day to drive to the campsite, because in that time we saw so many interesting places that we kept stopping. It was the opposite of driving through Texas where you could spend a day on the road and only feel inclined to stop for food or gas. The

sights for the day included: shell world and treasure shop, two massive souvenir shops - the second of which was shaped like a castle and 'guarded' by an immense model lobster; the Rain Barrel - a series of very expensive shops run by artists, hippies preserved from an earlier age; and Windley Key Fossil Reef State Geological Site - like a mini national park. All of these places were within a couple of minute's drive of each other - the Keys are a weird microcosm.

Most of these places only provided us with brief distractions, however we spent over an hour at Windley Key State Park. This was the home of the stuttering ranger previously mentioned, who gave us a very entertaining tour for free.

On reaching Fiesta Key KOA we were ready for some partying or at least some sunshine, and so we quickly found our spot and parked. As soon as we did so it poured with rain.

From now until the end of our trip the camps had quite a different atmosphere from those we had stayed at earlier in the tour. They were much busier, and not just with snowbirds, but families too, and Fiesta Key KOA came complete with a bar and drunks. We only spent two nights there but the children next to our first spot were so noisy we asked to change site. We also encountered some very obnoxious natives in the huge pool during the brief period we spent sunbathing.

We had been trying unsuccessfully to snooze for an hour or so while our fellow campers swam, chatted and in fact breathed noisily. Then we became aware of a couple, probably in their thirties, who were either newly

weds or having an affair. We came to this conclusion because they appeared to be having sex in the pool. This act came complete with groaning and rhythmic thrusting against each other - with the woman pressed up to the pool ladder (which we later discovered they had broken). The climax, as it were, came when the woman exclaimed 'you can do what you want, you're from the USA!' Step forward the next president of America.

We left Fiesta Key after our two nights, and with no regrets. This was due to the pool incident and general noise levels on site. It was a bit like Butlins but with more booze. When we ready to hit the road we did the RV-er equivalent of shaking the dust from our feet - we emptied our chemical toilet and dumped our grey water.

Next stop Sunshine Key (again, seriously). Although our journey took us across Marathon Key, which is one of the bigger and more developed islands, the most exciting thing that this mini-road trip bought was crossing the seven-mile bridge. This structure is famous for being, well, seven miles long. You can be forgiven for not having heard of it because most things in America are famous; it's a cultural thing!

Sunshine Key RV resort was a massive site - it covered the whole island, practically. However it was also very popular when we visited so we were only able to secure a dry site.

The resort proved true to its name and we soon discovered the only serious problem with no hookup - no air conditioning. Fortunately we were close to the swimming pool and therefore had an easy method of cooling down. The pool was very nice, if a little crowded, and we spent most of our

time besides and in it. Actually I caught a few too many rays and decided that the Key should adopt 'sunburn' as its new name. My discomfort was not without positive implications however. We bought a very powerful cooling aftersun lotion and found that it doubled up as a non-mechanical air conditioner when slapped on your chest in the middle of the night.

The other problem with having no hookup was a fear that having the lights on in the van would drain the battery too much. The solution was obviously to minimize time spent in during the evenings, a technique we practiced in Death Valley and returned to now. Our first evening was split between the exotic sounding Hurricane Bar and a cinema. The bar was disappointingly un-exotic - perhaps the atmosphere had been blown away? The meals were also a little on the skinny side, resulting in second dinner purchased at the nearby supermarket. The cinema did have more atmosphere and resembled some hybrid of part theatre, part airport lounge inside with groups of swivel chairs arranged round small tables. We did not care, we were just happy to get our movie fix - this time *Mona Lisa Smile*.

The next night we took a trip down memory lane to the Banana Bay Hotel. Memory lane for Emma as she had stayed there with her parents and had fond recollections of the place and a particular meal. For me it was just confusion cul-de-sac because I had not been on the scene that far back in Emma's misty past.

One meal later and we had successfully proved why you generally steer clear of places that you remember fondly. Our waitress was very stressed and tried very hard to make sure all her customers knew it. She

shared her personal problems with anyone in earshot; shouted across the room to us to take our order rather than walking to our table; spilled half Emma's chowder in to her saucer; and took our order for turtle pie before remembering it was still frozen and therefore off the menu. On the plus side the main courses were very tasty, but it was not exactly the nostalgic experience Emma was hoping for.

The next day we went on a nice drive down the Keys and back to Sunshine Key, that's all it was a nice drive. Yes, that's right.

Or, if we are being completely honest we wasted half the day moving on to our next campsite only to discover our pre-booked spot had been given away and the alternatives were (for want of a more sophisticated word) 'manky!' Fortunately we were able to get back into Sunshine Key for an extra two nights. There was one nice part to our morning, meeting a British owner of an Internet shop - a rare (though expensive) chance to go online since leaving the mainland, and a nice chat.

The extra days that we had on Sunshine Key were largely spent sunning ourselves, a pattern that followed us down the Keys and to the end of our travels. It was generally the evenings that provided more varied experiences. And by varied I mean crazy, because the Keys certainly seemed to produce some of our more interesting dining encounters. And by interesting I again mean crazy. Take for example our jaunt out to the No-Name Pub.

This establishment is situated, unsurprisingly on No-Name Key, a moniker born more out of boredom rather than humour I feel.... given the



number of islands in need of names. Very hard to find, we nevertheless persevered, as the pub had been recommended by our (almost) trusty guidebook after all. Plus, we really had few other options for dinner. The crowds that greeted us when we did reach the No-Name were ample evidence of this fact, so we elected to eat at the bar rather than wait for a table. A near fatal error...

We ordered pizza, delicious, what we did not order was crazy man, but apparently he was complimentary...better than a side salad I suppose. At first Gerald Hepworthy was just a bloke who sat next to us, but then we discovered two things. First, he was named after a bar in a bacon culture (at least this is what Emma heard\*). Second, and more scarily, he was Canadian! Bless him though he seemed harmless, and lonely, so we let him strike up conversation and sat back to watch where it would go. And it went something like this: religion; sex; politics; hypnotism. So much for small talk along the lines of 'lovely weather we are having' or 'so you guys are Australian?' or even 'So, Princess Diana, what is really going on there?' Instead he asked us questions including 'You're both literate right?' He also talked about drugs so much that we thought he was a dealer, a suggestion strongly denied - well you would, wouldn't you?

The highlight of our interaction however was when a drunken woman approached him. At first we thought she must be his girlfriend but soon realized she would be that friendly to anyone meeting her need for cigarettes. At least he blocked her from invading our space, and at the same time (very seriously) tried to implant the suggestion that she stop smoking. By the end of the night we decided he was gay, and was actually trying to pick me up, totally

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\* Actually 'a bard in a pagan culture'...obvious really.

ignoring Emma. Another suggestion strenuously denied...perhaps self-hypnosis?

From Sunshine Key we hotfooted it to Key West, the southern most part of the USA, and the penultimate campground for us. We were booked into Boyd's Campsite for five nights, complete with full hookup, choice of spots... and tepid pool water. Well, nowhere is perfect!

Key West is the party island, frequented by aged hippies who settled there in the 60s. It also features a nightly sunset celebration where crowds gather in Mallory Square to watch the sun go down, and street performers gather to entertain and profit from said crowds. These include classic acts such as fire eating and escapology, but also some very bizarre performances, including a man who seemed to have invented a language for speaking to his cats and whose performance consisted of getting his feline friends to jump from various platforms to other platforms. We only watched part of this show and left before he could ask for financial contributions. Why encourage his madness?

On our first evening on the island we drove into town and watched the sunset celebration. We then walked (far too far) to a very cosy Italian restaurant, Mangia Mangia – where the waiters have the cute tradition of seating couple's next to complete strangers, in order to encourage conversation/awkward silences. Did I say cute? I meant irritating.

During the meal we noticed the couple next to us were obviously a little tipsy, or in the woman's case a lot. But this was no ordinary drunk, no; this

was the drunk from the No-Name pub! Had we acquired a stalker?

Fortunately she did not recognize us, being preoccupied with mopping up spilled water with her jacket and rubbing lemon slices on her arm. The staff were at first mortified that our meal was being spoilt, and then burst into (discreet) laughter on hearing that we had encountered her before. They also gave us a free pudding for our troubles, or for giving them a giggle, I am not sure which. It was a shame that Gerald was not there to hypnotise the drunk into sobriety!

This incident did not cause us to swear off the bottle for life, despite showing us up close the hideous effects of alcohol. Key West has a serious club/bar culture especially on Duvall Street, and the party atmosphere is in fact so strong, so insidious, that we – (usually) non-drunken-party people - even caught the vibe. We spent an ill-advised night drinking in town with a complete stranger, and needed the next three evenings off to recover.

The day, our first full one in Key West, began in a civilised fashion. We decided to get the bus into town rather than drive because parking the night before had been a nightmare. The last bus back was quite late, so we thought we would be able to fit in all the sightseeing that we wanted to do. It turned out that Key West did not have that many sights to see and the day was certainly spent at a slower pace than in places like New York or San Francisco. We took the trolley tour - another hop on and off car disguised a train - and covered the whole route by the end of the day.

The only other tourist attraction that we wanted to do was the glass bottomed boat ride out to the coral reef. The trip is advertised as being fairly

romantic because on the return journey you have a glass of champagne and watch the sunset. Unfortunately the weather had gone very cold and overcast by the time we boarded, but at least we would still get the champagne.

Our crew consisted of Donny, driving and narrating, and Peter, selling drinks and snacks. Due to the weather we all sat inside during the journey out, it was a bit dull to be honest, and then there was a mad dash to the viewing area once we reached the reef.

Thanks to our youth, and elbows, Emma and I managed to get a window each. Donny then told us what we were seeing, switching his attention from one side of the boat to the other periodically. We could all hear all his commentary however, which was interesting but also sometimes confusing:

'Does he mean that fish?'

'No, he means one we cannot see...'

What we did see included barracudas, snappers and grunts. Plus dozens of types of coral and a stingray. The viewing lasted about 40 minutes, but it felt like about five - not enough considering the journey was 40 minutes each way as well.

At least the journey back did include the glass of champagne - or in our case three glasses each. This was because 40 something year old Peter took a shine to us, probably because we were chatty and everyone else was fairly reserved. He invited us to meet him for drinks at 'Pepe's' later that evening, ostensibly because he had not had chance to chat to us much and the beer was only a buck. Part of us thought 'yeah right, bye bye strange creepy man',

but the part of us that was already sloshed declared it to be a grand plan. Unfortunately, this part was controlling our legs and so we headed to Pepe's and ordered two beers.

'OK' came the response, 'if you tell me what sort you want'.

To which Emma shouted out 'the one dollar sort!'

At this, everyone in the bar laughed, at our accents and our cheapness.

Charming!

The beer turned out to be chilled bitter and not very nice, so we only had four each. We decided to eat while we waited for Peter, a good decision in the light of how much we ended up drinking.

Peter and Donny arrived during our meal and we joined them in the bar after we had eaten. Except by this time Donny had left. We were far from alone at the bar with Peter however as the place was very crowded. For the next hour or so we drank and our host told us about himself - how he was a published author, his grown up daughter was at Harvard, he had a boat - in short, fairly obvious lies. At one point a woman joined us and started chatting me up (though that could just have been the beer boosting my ego). Anyway, while I spoke to this girl Peter told Emma that if I left with my new friend he and Emma would take his boat and sail to Cuba. He said they would be there by lunchtime, but judging by how close Cuba is to the Keys he obviously planned to sail very slowly or do other activities en route....

Fortunately the strange girl failed to pull me, though we did try to set her up with Peter to get rid of him. Eventually we left the bar and went to Peter's 'nearby' van for extra clothes. Emma and I were only in shorts and t-shirts because it had been sunny first thing in the morning, turning cold as

soon as we donned our shorts, so Peter generously offered to lend us jumpers to keep warm. This genuinely seemed like a good idea, as did stopping for more beer from a liquor store on the way (complete with brown paper bags to hold the bottles in while drinking the beer on the street. Such class!) At this store Peter also tried to encourage Emma into stealing some sunglasses, fortunately she was not drunk enough to be coerced and he was too drunk to notice that she did not do it.

We were both too sober to lower our guard completely around Peter and when we reached his van we kept a fair distance from it, in case he tried to bundle us in. Judging by the amount of clothes in his van - he lent me a coat and Emma a shirt, jumper and hat - we were fairly sure that the van was his home, rather than him living on a boat as he had told us.

Suitably warmed we then walked back to Duvall Street where Peter's 'friends' were doing a duelling piano act in a bar – literally two grand pianos (plus pianists) opposite each other and playing songs, telling jokes, and ritually humiliating people in the audience. We had heard about this show and wanted to go, but probably would not have done so on our own. Peter sat us at the front and we stayed quite a while, which we certainly would not have done had we braved the bar by ourselves. The act was good, but very rude, and within the first few minutes of sitting down I found myself being blinded by a flashlight held by one of the pianists as he shouted out 'You should not have bought your wife to a gang bang!' Well, obviously I should not have. But then I did not realise that I had.

We also kept drinking. Well, Emma had by this time sensibly started swapping bottles with Peter so that he drunk nearly two out of each round –

plus shots between each round. I stupidly kept drinking all of my beer, but fortunately avoided the shots.

The end of the evening was signalled by Peter trying to snog Emma while I was in the restroom – how original! Funnily enough our new found friend left soon after his rejection, stripping us of coats and jumpers, but leaving his baseball hat as a memento - later binned. We were therefore left stranded with no cash and the last bus missed. Luckily there was a cash machine near the bar, and luckier still we remained competent enough to use it, get a taxi and find Harvey. However our directions to the campsite were a little vague, to say the least: 'Please take us to the campsite.'

'Which one?' asked the driver, sensibly.

'Er, the big one?'

We got back about midnight.

Sometime later I declared 'I'm going to the toilet', rolled out of the bed through the back doors and found the restrooms. Did I mention I was naked? And did I mention there was a full moon? Er, well, two in fact.

Emma followed to check I was OK - which I was not – and to bring me a pair of shorts. Although definitely the worse for wear Emma did not present a picture of sobriety, stripping in the middle of the men's washroom when I remarked that her nightie was inside out.

When we recounted this story to our friends back home some of them suggested that Peter was probably interested in both of us, a 'swinger'. Having seen the high proportion of homosexuals in Key West this did not surprise us. For the second time in our travels we felt like a minority group - the other time was in New Orleans when our skin colour as opposed to our

sexuality singled us out.

The day after our drunken adventure was spent in bed, reading, and being very, very quiet. Summed up in my journal with the following sentence: Took a while to get going!

The day after this we rose early, fully recovered - with the exception of my pride. We had planned to have Sunday brunch the day before, but I was blatantly in no state for eating until the afternoon, so I made it up to Emma on the Monday morning. We went to Flagler's Hotel, very posh, and finally put the memory of the Four Seasons in New York to rest by being able to afford the breakfast buffet. We sat looking out to sea as we pigged on bacon, sausage, eggs and 'make your own' waffles.

From the hotel we drove to the marina for a spot of parasailing - perhaps not the obvious choice after such a greasy meal! However, I had never parasailed and with just four days left of our adventure we decided to treat ourselves and knew the budget would stretch to it. We shared the boat with a family of four, and half of them had the first ride before it was our turn.

We got buckled into life jackets and harnesses, stood on the back of the boat and then, whoosh! The views were amazing and the experience exhilarating; however I did think I was going to wet myself. This was not due to fear of heights or of water, but resulted from the more mundane cause of a full bladder. Honest. We had a water proof camera with us and now have lovely closes ups of each others faces - we could not lean far away from each other - and of our feet. During the trip they dunked us three times. We had been pre-warned they would get our feet wet, but seeing as the water reached



our bottoms they either flunked biology or my bladder gave up. Eventually they wound us back in for a dry landing on the boat. What a rush.

We spent the rest of the day at the Southernmost House so called because when it was built it was the southernmost house before you reached the sea- though today there are houses beyond it. The house was built in 1885 by Eduardo H. Gato Jr., a Cuban cigar maker and is now run as a very exclusive guesthouse. Fortunately it is also open to the public as a sort of museum/visitor attraction. Before we went in we walked to the southern most point of America, where a huge buoy provides the background for photo opportunities. In the distance you can see Cuba, provided that is that it is not cloudy as it inevitably was for us. Having brushed Peter off two nights before this was the closest we would get to the land of cigars and communism.

A visit to the Southernmost House, entrance \$7 each when we were there, included a tour of the museum, a cocktail, and all day use of the beautiful pool and surrounding decking. We had been recommended it as a well kept secret frequented by locals more than tourists and it was certainly not crowded. Apparently lots of people visit just to use the pool, but we decided to do the museum too seeing as we had paid for it.

The museum was largely housed in two rooms and the focal point was the complete collection of signatures of the American presidents. All but one of these was displayed - Bill Clinton's was in a drawer. Our guide also pointed out Hemingway memorabilia, Tiffany glass and played a gramophone cylinder on a 100-year-old machine. The curator in me died at this act, especially as he did not even wear gloves. However, the rest of me joined Emma for a nice

couple of hours sunbathing on decking with a view across the ocean and dipping in the lovely cool pool.

We left the house in time for the sunset celebration, gorgeously obscured by thick cloud, and then headed to Margaritaville for dinner. The last time we had been in this restaurant chain had been in Orlando, Florida, at Universal Studios, and we had had a fun evening with cheap food and free live music. Sadly this time the music was canned, the re-fills on drinks were not free and the service was poor. Guess we are not in a theme park anymore Toto!

In the light of how cheap the entrance fee was, and how warm and small the pool at our camp was, we decided to spend our last day in the Keys back at the Southernmost House. We even got free parking this time. Although the weather was mixed, from sun too hot to sit in to freezing rain in a matter of minutes, we had a very relaxing day - due in part to the free cocktails. Once the sun started to lose its warmth we retired to our van to change. Ah, the beauty of having a house on wheels, then headed to Mallory Square.

We spent the evening at the sunset celebration again - there really is little else to do cheaply in Key West. This time there actually was a sunset, which Emma photographed over the heads of the ten person deep crowd watching it.

Our thoughts turned to food, as always, once we had seen two shows and the sunset, but after last night's disappointing meal we were very undecided about where to go. Eventually we settled on a return to Flagler's Hotel where we had a three-course meal for a reasonable 23 dollars a head,

and one pre-dinner drink each for a less reasonable =price! The food was very nice, if a little on the small size, but actually this was something of a relief after the huge portions served up in most American restaurants. The service was also excellent, lots of young men appearing out of nowhere with cutlery and bread, tucking us in and putting napkins in our laps. Emma loved it - especially the last part.

Returning to the van that night we felt very spoilt, and then reality hit us. This was our last night in Key West; tomorrow we would begin our journey home, first to the Miami area. And then we would have to pack!

## **25 - Homeward bound**

The day that we left Key West was hot and sunny, typical weather for setting out for or coming home from holidays. As we drove away from the campsite the next thing I noticed - after the weather - were the flags in people's gardens and outside many of the businesses too. Americans seem to be obsessed with them and we saw them everywhere we went during our 13-week trip. Perhaps they are worried that tourists will claim territory while on vacation, so they remind everyone that the country is theirs? Given the track record of European visitors to the continent this seems to be a reasonable fear.

The journey was fairly uneventful as we cruised up Route 1 through the Keys. When we got to Homestead we stopped at Denny's for brunch (obviously), and then Kinko's for emailing, just for old times sake. After this stop we changed to the I95 to make better progress, and immediately (and ironically) hit traffic. While Emma drove I sat on the bed and sorted through my treasured collection of souvenir leaflets, or as Emma called it 'my three carrier bags full of crap'. I managed to reduce this down to two bags, while avoiding smashing my head open every time Emma had to brake and I was slung forwards off the bed.

We had to return Harvey to West Palm Beach the next morning, cleaned and full of petrol and gas, and empty of unpleasant 'waters', so we were very keen to get settled on a campsite and start this process. Well, 'keen' is not really the word, as we knew it would be a laborious few hours. 'Anxious', that is the

word. What actually happened to us however brought the phrase 'the best laid plans of mice and men' quickly to mind. We aimed for a nice site in Jensen Beach, not pre-booked because all our other sites outside the Keys had not required this. Needless to say, the site was closed and security staff informed us it was full. OK, plenty more sites around. In fact we found a site close by...also full. Here a man helpfully informed us that 'this *is* the Treasure Coast, in Snowbird season'.

Oh, so *that's* why sites are full.... and the 'Treasure Coast' is what exactly?

We did not have time to pursue this, or to feel sorry for ourselves, so we consulted *Woodall's* and then headed off towards port St. Lucie. Here we found a campsite. Still full, but with a space for parking. No hookup but it was getting late by this stage. We decided to settle for this and worry about dumping in the morning, because the alternative was to drive round all night and perhaps still not get hookup.

By this stage we were feeling very stressed and followed the suggestion of some loitering campers to head to Sonny's Real Pit BBQ for dinner, and pack/clean afterwards. This exotic sounding establishment was within walking distance so we set out, ignoring the two odd young boys on bikes who were repeatedly chanting 'deep open spaces' and looking in dumpsters. On our way back we saw them again and freaked them out by repeating their chant before they spoke. It would appear they had the last laugh however as they haunted my dreams that night.

The food at Sonny's was plentiful and cheap, but did leave us with upset stomachs the next day, not surprising given the 'pig-fest' it was and our day thus far.

Back at the van we were up until midnight cleaning and packing. We did not even have sustained air con for fear of using up what little petrol we had left in the tank. Instead we sat outside in very little clothes to cool down once the jobs were done. We must have looked a sorry couple of souls.

The next morning we rose early, and sought advice from the site manager about dumping, as there did not seem to be the usual communal dump station that we had come to expect. Although friendly the response was that we would have to wait until someone left and then use the dump station on their plot. They did however let us set out a jumble sale style stall in the recreation room. We put out all the things we did not want/could not pack, including food, beer, toiletries, tapes, and some books. By the time we left, the table was virtually clear. Of course, the beer went first.

Eventually we were able to dump, the one aspect of living in an RV we would not miss, complete with the seemingly obligatory audience. Next stop, propane - of which we had used very little - and petrol, of which we had used a lot having covered about 8,500 miles. Finally we were ready to hand Harvey back and we drove off looking for the address for the drop off.

I had phoned the hire company earlier to confirm the place and time for the drop off, and to see if we could get away with leaving the dumping for them to do. Unsurprisingly I received a negative response to this question. What was surprising was that I was given a different address for the drop off - so it was a good job we had called otherwise we could still be out in America now, driving round looking for the drop off point ..... wouldn't that have been sad? In spite of a very bad phone line and Hans, the company's

representative, having a very thick accent, I was fairly certain that I had the details correct and we arranged to meet at 11am.

Emma and I finally found the address at 10.55 and pulled into the car park of a biggish two-story building. We could not see any signs for the hire company and the building seemed to consist of several offices and workrooms for different businesses, most of which seemed to be deserted. There were however some large garages round the back, which we thought looked about Harvey-sized.

I began knocking on doors and asking people if they knew of the RV Company. The response was generally polite, but wholly negative, so we phoned Hans again. Apparently he was back at their other office having waited for us (where we were) from 10.30 to 10.45. Communication breakdown evidently - and fairly appropriate given our run of luck since leaving Key West. Perhaps this was a sign that we should not go home? Sadly this was not the case, as Hans said he would come back out straight away.

While we waited, the man who owned the office building came out demanding to know why we there and forced us to park in a fairly inaccessible space. The car park was hardly busy so the only reason for this action was meanness – just because he could. Fortunately we did not have to wait long.

Hans told us he was from Switzerland (explaining the thick accent) and that he was an agent for the hire company, rather than working directly within the organisation. He actually ran a company that exported ambulances and similar vehicles to Europe. We considered offering to drive one to Europe for him, figuring it would prolong the adventure and traffic jams would never be

an issue if we had flashing blue lights on our vehicle, but then reality kicked in, so we just responded with 'oh, interesting'.

Next the agent inspected Harvey inside and out, a very nervous time for us, as we obviously did not want to lose our deposit. We also wanted him to say how lovely it was and be impressed with how well we had treated the van. It was a bit like waiting as a little child for praise from your mother, or for a treat from your master... if we were puppies. When Hans concluded his checks he did indeed praise us, with words, not a bone. However, he did then give us an unexpected reward - he misread the final mileage, saving us some money we had budgeted. Before he could correct this error we quickly settled up for the extra costs he did say we owed. This amounted to very little in the end, as they owed us for things like the pillows we had had to buy a lifetime ago in Petaluma.

What happened next almost broke our hearts - we had to say good-bye to Harvey! Our home and transport of 13 weeks, but also the representation of our dream of travelling. It was very emotional. It also made the end of our adventures seem more concrete and we were both a bit subdued for the rest of the day (actually Emma was a blubbering wreck). Hans then drove us to Jupiter - the nearest town - where we had arranged to hire a car to get us to Miami airport. What we actually got - a Chevy - seemed more like a toy car; it was so small and plastic looking after the RV. However, it was quite fancy and very fast.

By the time we picked up the car we were ravenous, having skipped breakfast and being food obsessed, so we started looking for somewhere to grab a bite. We did not just want anywhere though; we wanted Denny's - the



bedrock of our travels. Fortunately we found the diner, and without going too far out of our way. We both ate massive sandwiches and shared a piece of cake, and then I ordered coke with a shot of cherry. This is 'an American thing' which I felt that I had failed to take full advantage of. However, when the drink came and the fruit syrup refused to mix with the coke I suddenly felt less hard done to.

The rest of the drive to Miami was on busy roads and the route to our hotel seemed very complicated - due mainly to my navigational skills being left in Harvey's glove compartment. Eventually we did reach the Holiday Inn Express, a nice, clean hotel - if a bit soulless. Emma immediately collapsed unconscious on the bed, hardly surprising given the last two days, and I re-evaluated our budget.

By the time Emma resurfaced I had arrived at the very precise conclusion that the amount we had left to spend was 'a lot'. This was working on the exchange rate from November, which we knew had changed in our favour during the intervening months, so we probably had 'more than a lot' left. It was quite gratifying to think that all of my careful (or to use Emma's word 'anal') recording of our finances had been rewarded by us keeping well within budget. We went out for a very expensive and decadent meal to celebrate.

The Red Lobster is a restaurant chain that we had nearly visited in New Orleans and again in Sarasota. In Miami we actually made it in and discovered that it was more posh than we had imagined - we had put it on a par with Beefeaters in the UK. I set the tone for the evening by ordering a

'lobsterita', a margarita that arrived in a comically large glass featuring red Mardi Gras beads with a plastic lobster on. Once we had secured some of these beads for Emma we were set up for a nice giggly evening. For our main course we both had the 'lobster lovers' dish. This included: Caesar salad, lobster pasta, Maine and rock lobster. It was very filling, very nice and very messy.

Our waitress was a gem - our luck really had changed. She helped us open the lobster shells for us, opened our wet wipes, and let us hold a live lobster after the meal; in return she got a good tip and a hug. On the downside she did try to give us the wrong desert, but then she seemed to do this to all of her tables because it was *her* favourite pudding. The evening ended with our waitress giving us a lobster anatomy lesson before we posed for a photo holding the poor creature. We were both glad that we had already eaten by this point. Strangely we both later agreed we do not rate lobster that highly.

The next day we rose fairly early to get packed and drive to the airport. It was Friday 13th, well suited to our moods. It was not that we did not want to go home and see our friends and relatives; it was that we did not want 'travelling' to be over. But more than that we did not want to spend all day in airports and on airplanes. We dropped off the car and got checked in with no hassles, in stark contrast to our experience on arrival in Newark in November. Evidently Americans do not care who leaves their country - they even put us on an earlier flight to make sure we did indeed leave.

We were bound for Newark and there we would change flights for

Birmingham. Going on an earlier first flight meant more time hanging around in New York's airport, a relief given the lack of facilities at Miami airport. Fortunately what we would not have to do at Newark was collect our bags and check them in again, they were already checked through to Birmingham. This seemed like magic, but then we are easily pleased. Before boarding we grabbed a sandwich, as breakfast in the hotel had been inedible save for the coffee.

The flight to Newark was brief, a relief given that Emma was sat next to a snoring Scot with halitosis. It could have been worse; he could have stayed awake and forced us to talk to him for the whole flight. Early indications suggested that he would in fact do this as within minutes we knew the following (too much) information: he was Scottish, he was tired as he had driven from Key West overnight, he had been there refereeing a women's football championship. The only other thing of note was the meal served on the flight. Short journey equals mini food - tiny bag of crisps, snack-size 'M&Ms', and a minute turkey roll. Either that, or we were given child portions, or these were normal sized foods and we had just habituated to the gigantic food of Americans.

On arrival into Newark a surreal sight met us - snow. I know it explains why all the old folk from the New England area were in RVs in Florida, but it was still strange to think that a couple of hours on a plane could transport you from summer to winter. We felt a little underdressed in the airport, but at least had our big coats with us - something we could never manage to squeeze in to the suitcases. While we waited for our flight we shopped, picking up some duty free and making sure we spent our budget!

Our flight to Birmingham was through the night, not that we slept much. We did however see the sunrise, which was pretty cool. And then we were landing. As we left our final tin can we were back where we had started. Perhaps wiser, certainly older, and definitely fatter! Emma's parents met us and within a few days it was hard to believe we had been away. Time to start planning our next adventure.

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