From the rear-view mirror, I saw a patrol car pursue me, with lights flashing.

I was sure I was not speeding. I had slowed down earlier when I noticed the same car, its beacon twirling, at the roadside.

"Frankly, I don't know what to make out of this," the New York State Highway Patrol officer said, chuckling, when I showed him my Singapore driver's licence. He had never seen one like mine, especially without an expiry date.

"I know many countries have different rules. Here, when you see a stopped vehicle with flashing lights, you keep to the farthest lane," he patiently explained and then waved me on.

I had earlier passed him, but on the nearest lane.

Highway patrolman, sun-baked Nigerian athletes training for the Winter Olympics, lobster fishermen, artists living among sand dunes, the Walgreens pharmacist who administered my vaccine booster shot - these were among my memorable encounters on a recent solo 10-day 2,700km road trip through north-eastern America.

For the same distance, I could have driven from Singapore to Chiang Mai with another 200km to spare.

Get the weather right and the region has a lot to offer - after the neon lights of New York get too glaring.

Upstate New York is filled with lakes, Olympic ski slopes and possibly the world's best factory outlet.

People know that factory outlets offer great discounts. But the goodies are probably two or more seasons old, in odd sizes and mostly secondary brands.

"Woodbury Common Premium Outlet is very unique in the world - you don't usually see top-tier brands such as Burberry, Dior, Celine, Fendi, Gucci, Jimmy Choo, Prada offering steep discounts in outlets," says my travel buddy, Hong Kong-based Mr Nobu Miyagi, who works for a Japanese retailing giant.

It is easy to see why this outlet - barely an hour's drive from the shady discount stores of Times Square - is on the shopaholic's must-do list.

But with a heavy heart, I drove off - reminding myself that I was just into the first week of an eight-month trip. I travel light, with only one soft luggage.

WINTER OLYMPIANS, LAKESIDE SERENITY

Venturing further north, within three hours, I arrived at the picture-perfect Lake Placid - one of the few destinations to host the Winter Olympics twice.

I spied bare-bodied American Olympians pushing their limits on pavements and grass slopes in the sweltering heat.

As members of the Nigerian team whizzed by on their bobsled, I smiled, recalling the endearing story about Jamaica's bobsled Olympians in 1988.

For a stupendous view of the area, as far as the eye can see, drive up to Whiteface Mountain, but check with the tourist information booth for visibility as it can get cloudy or misty.

Note that Lake Placid itself is accessible only by boat. Activities - and the town itself - are actually centred on its sister Mirror Lake, which has road connections.

Do a morning run or an evening walk around Mirror Lake and gaze at the pretty cottages dotting the edges like a string of pearls.

Pro tip: Even if you drive, choose a hotel in town for convenience. Covid-19 has not only affected tourism, but has also kept service workers home, with many restaurants closed.

I stayed at the Crowne Plaza, an old-school property and just a three-minute walk upslope from the town centre.

Besides an upgrade with my tier membership, it also ticked the boxes with free parking, an indoor pool, gym and self-service laundry - perfect for long trippers like me.

A LONG AND WINDING ROAD TO THE SEA

I was a tad early for the world-famous autumn foliage of Vermont, so I quickly breezed through and headed south-east towards the east coast.

But the vast expanse of rolling farmlands, undulating mountain ranges, small towns nestled among creeks and rivers convinced me to return one day.

Some six hours later, I finally saw the Atlantic Ocean and stopped at Portsmouth. With its rows of stately Georgian buildings and mansions, I was half-thinking I had arrived in England.

Being on the coast, I sought seafood, but discovered to my dismay that the most popular restaurant - with customers spilling onto the walkway - was called The Goat.

I decided that sea and burgers did not mix, so I pushed on a further hour to Maine's Portland, my pitstop, where I knew seafood was in everyone's vocabulary.

Pro tip: Stop for lunch at Vermont's Woodstock, a picture-book New England village, voted as the prettiest town in America.

Pop by rustic yet hip, organic cafe Mon Vert for its delicious sandwiches and drip coffee - a booster for the road ahead.

Nearby, a few stores away, check out Woodstock Scoops for its smooth, unadulterated Maple Creemee - I think a genie came out of the dispenser.

PORTLAND - A GEM OF MULTIPLE DELIGHTS

Windswept, romantic lighthouses. Foodie town. Craft beer capital with more than 70 breweries and seemingly with as many beer festivals.

Mix these together and Portland in Maine (not to be confused with Oregon's Portland in the west coast) is a nexus of nature, history and culinary delights.

Take a 20-minute local ferry from the downtown harbour to Peaks Island, explore the island on foot and admire the charming wooden houses, tagged with delightful names such as See-a-Sea, Uncle Tom's Cabin and High Tide.

While there, indulge in a perfectly cooked lobster that was still swimming in the ocean hours ago (islandlobsterco.com)

"We dump dead lobsters back to the sea. The restaurants take only live catch. And they must fit within our measuring gauge or we need to quickly release them back," Skipper Sean told me earlier on a cold morning at 4am, when I was peeking into lobster boats at the working harbour.

He sells his live lobsters at US$31 (S$42) a kilogram to restaurants. After discarding the inedible parts, the 22 per cent yield of meat works out to US$140 a kilo.

The famed Luke's Lobster roll in Singapore, with about 100g of meat, costs $25.50 before service charge and taxes. Add on the franchise fees and overheads and that is not far from Maine's pricing - so take heart and eat happily in Singapore.

The highlight of Portland was a foodie tour. Over three leisurely hours, a local guide weaved us through the cobbled streets of the old town and its harbour.

"Portland is an amazing food town because of its passionate operators. More than 90 per cent are owner-chefs and there are lots of mom-and-pop stores," said Ms Pamela Laskey, who started Maine Foodie Tours in 2009.

Pre-pandemic, on peak days, she filled more than 10,000 happy bellies each year.

Now, she has expanded her offerings to include history tours, happy-hour jaunts and also seafood speciality tours. Sign up for a crash course on Portland's culinary, social and historical layers - it will be money well spent.

For details, go to www.mainedayventures.com/portland-food-tours.

Pro tip: I picked Hyatt Place Portland Old Port for its convenience.

The well-rated hotel is steps away from most restaurants and the harbour. Newly built, it comes with a pool, gym and free hot breakfast. Secure paid parking is next door.

Do not miss the seafood chowder at Gilbert's - it is chock-full of lobster chunks, shrimp and fish, overflowing to the brim - just like Singapore's beloved ice kacang. Go in the late morning to avoid long queues.

Having tried five of the top-rated restaurants, I would return to Scales for its seafood, especially its excellent pan-seared scallops. It is related to the award-winning Fore Street Restaurant, which scores big for its flavourful meats.

For a carb feast, venture to casual eatery Duckfat for its poutine with duck confit.

CAPE COD AND ITS ARTIST SHACKS AMONG SAND DUNES

From Portland, I headed some 400km south towards Cape Cod - a long peninsula shaped like an arm bent at the elbow.

At its end, or fist, is Provincetown. Also known as PTown, the summer hot spot is renowned for its beaches and string of lighthouses.

Hidden between massive sand dunes by the sea, and cut off from modern amenities, are a few scattered wooden houses occupied by bohemian artists and writers who seek isolation for inspiration. I think Ernest Hemingway's coastal homes in Key West and Havana are more inspiring.

Pro tip: Make a mandatory lunch stop at the peninsula's elbow, Chatham Pier. Playful sea lions twist and turn beneath the wooden pier, hoping their antics are rewarded by tourists.

Next door, Chatham Fish Market was where I feasted on my best-ever haddock fish & chips. I paired it with a lobster chowder that packed a punch of flavour as well.

In Massachusetts, the state laws provide vaccine doses for anyone.

I will always be thankful to the Walgreens pharmacist - and America - who gave me a Covid-19 booster during my epic eight-month trip.

ALMOST THE FINAL 550KM

The last leg, or so I thought, would be a long day - a 550km drive from PTown to New York.

But after a night's sleep, I felt recharged and decided to extend my journey with a further three-day trip to Long Island, curious to find out why it is among America's most expensive places to live.

There, I gawked at Gatsby-era mansions and stately summer beach homes of the old monied empires - Hearst, Rothschild and Rockefeller - that are flanked by modern homes of the newly minted Wall Street Traders who take helicopters to work.

As I passed the service stations, it stumped me that a gallon of gas - or about 3.8 litres - in Long Island can cost almost 30 per cent more than New York City.

A road trip is a good bet during pandemic times. The road traveller avoids confined planes and crowded airports. It provides private space and allows me to pace my trip according to my whims and fancies.

I am able to explore more and go farther, and to enter less accessible places.

On the road, I switch on the radio, lower the window and let the wind toss my hair while cruising into the sunset.

Travelling solo has its own challenges and is definitely less economical. I am always more alert - I look over my shoulder more often.

Yes, the wine tastes better when shared, and the sunset is more glorious when we sigh in harmony with companions.

But the global pandemic has scuttled many travel plans, making some unwilling to leave their newly drawn comfort zone.

For me, I just try to live with the changing times.