

The Lost Art of Road Tripping

By Brendan Leonard
© 2008 Mountain Gazette

I grew up in rural Iowa, and shortly after I turned 15, I started spending as many weekend nights as possible driving around Chickasaw County's grid of gravel roads, drinking beer stolen from someone's parents or purchased for us by Toots Kramer or one of the other local guys who didn't have a problem buying beer for underage kids.

We drove around for hours, guzzling Busch Light and Old Milwaukee as fast as possible, only stopping to piss in the middle of the road. We'd see maybe four or five cars per hour between the corn and beanfields. We needed a place to get away from our parents, the gossip-hungry eyes of our small town, and the cops. Our sanctuary was typically a rusted-out '85 Cutlass Ciera or Sunbird, where we could listen to Pearl Jam and wish we had prom dates. In the vernacular of New Hampton High School, this was known as "road tripping."

We didn't exactly have what you'd call "vision."

I had almost graduated from high school before a buddy made an observation about my driving.

"You know, there's no point in going faster than 35," said whoever it was, as we were rolling down another cornrow-straight dirt road, holding beers between our legs.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not like we're trying to get somewhere."

Fast-forward a few years, after I'd moved Out West, and things are quite different – gas is expensive, life is finite, and road trips are fueled by an obsessive desire to get somewhere, to see it all, but limited by the unfair rationing of "paid time off." Far fewer zits, though.

I quit drinking and driving when I quit drinking in my early 20s, and around the same time, discovered the joy of opening the Rand McNally U.S. Road Atlas and knowing only where the starting point was. My life has come to be defined by the road trip – from a 36-hour loop when Tim and I took off from Idaho Falls and visited Craters Of The Moon, posed for photos by Hemingway's grave in Ketchum, and climbed Borah Peak, to a 10-day, 8-state, 2-oil change, 3,700-mile siege Nick and I took from Missoula to Phoenix.

And then there's my marriage. Our trip to Phoenix ended with my moving in with my then-girlfriend. A year later, the girlfriend and I took a 10-day desert tour from Phoenix to Denver, along the way stopping in Zion National Park, where we decided to get married a couple years later. We spent our honeymoon living out of a rented Dodge Caliber,



bouncing from Anchorage to Denali to Seward to Homer, and back to Anchorage, in 10 days.

For the first time in America, we're looking at a generation who might never appreciate the road trip. Our cars have to have flat-screen TVs in the back of both front seats so our kids can watch movies or cartoons instead of looking out the window. They've got "the world" at their fingertips via iPods and laptop computers. And we've got \$4/gallon gas.

It's a far cry from the world of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, the heroes of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. I read that book when I was 15, and it blew my mind, even before I knew there was anything else beyond the dashboard lights and the cornfields. But I got there eventually. And when the original manuscript from *On The Road* showed up at the Denver Public Library, I showed up, too, for a look.

Kerouac had legendarily written the first draft of the book in one long multiday Benzedrine binge, on a roll of butcher paper cycling through his typewriter. Turns out it wasn't butcher paper, but teletype paper, and Kerouac had taped several pieces together for one 120-foot-long sheet. I took my paperback copy of *On The Road*, the one I bought when I was in high school, to compare the first sentence to the original manuscript. They were the same, except Kerouac had changed "Neal" (Cassady) to "Dean": "With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road."

I worshipped that book, and that ethos, and I still do. When I saw the original manuscript, all laid out in a glass case – "no pictures please" – it was a religious experience, maybe how some people feel when they see the Shroud of Turin. Nothing beats a road trip. If you want to know something about this country, you need to drive across it – Route 66, Wall Drug billboards, the PCH, and all those dotted green lines in the atlas indicating "scenic route."

There are certain things you should do on a road trip, and there are many things you shouldn't.

Turn off your cell phone. Resist the urge to check your e-mail when you stop at a coffee shop. Yes, America, just tell everyone you're going to be "OUT OF CELL PHONE RANGE" for a week. It's pretty goddamn awesome.

A road trip playlist is one of the most important components of a trip, as most of the songs chosen will forever be branded with memories of watching sunsets through the windshield at 65 mph, or doing that air-wave thing with your arm out the window, or watching your buddy eat a bag of Fritos while his dirty bare feet smear the dust on your dashboard. Always include Bob Dylan's "Tangled Up In Blue," "Isis," and a high ratio of Southern rock. Road trip music ideally embraces the spirit and the rhythm of the road – good old fashioned American rock 'n' roll, blues, and other guitar-driven music.

I keep a can opener, a bottle opener, a pen and a blank check in the glove box. These things are crucial. Soap, however, is not.

There's a sign on the door of the men's restroom at the Shell station on Main Street in Moab, and it reads "Please do not use our bathroom as your shower" or something like that. It's because the proprietors know their clientele, who are essentially people on road

trips who would, in fact, use their bathroom as a shower.

Here's what I do: Take a box of sanitary wipes, and swab out the problem areas – pits, crotch, crack, feet, preferably not all with the same wipe – every couple days. A box of those wipes takes up far less space in the car than a towel, a bottle of shampoo, a bar of soap and all the clean clothes you feel like you need when you get out of the shower.

The road trip is my chance to wear my favorite pair of pants every day and hope that people in five or six states get to see them. Ideally, I can pull over at night, cram all my stuff in the front seats of my Adventure Station Wagon, knock the back seats down and sleep in the back. Anywhere. And that is true freedom. Which is what we're looking for on a road trip. Even if it's just a feeling of freedom, because we know we do have to go back to our jobs at the end of it.

I had a conversation once with endurance mountain biker Matthew Lee about the idea of the Grand Tour, the 16th-, through 18th-century European tradition of a months-long regional trip designed to expose young men to art and culture. Lee said in the American era of vacation allotments, we've forgotten what it's like to take off on a huge trip and try to see it all.

As I write this, I'm gearing up for a short seven- or eight-day road trip with my best pal Nick. He's at a point of great flux in his life, so I figure he could use some time in the car with me and Bob Dylan and my 5-day B.O. The general plan is to take off from Denver and climb both Devil's Tower and the Grand Teton. Folks have advised me that they are, quote, on completely different sides of Wyoming, unquote.

I thought that was the whole point.