



Planning the Route

When we first began fantasizing about our trip, we mused, “Gee, we can stop anywhere we want, anytime we want—we’ve got a *whole year!*” Well, that is true, but you can’t stop everywhere you want, every time you want. This is another case in life where choices have to be made. We’ve often said that we could do a whole additional year and never visit any of the places we went the first time. This country is really amazing!

You can’t do it all

As much as you might think you will be able to see everything you want in the time frame that you choose, *you won’t be able to*. We suggest that you pick a theme or areas of interest to help focus your trip. Even then, you probably won’t make it to everything. Things will happen to make you change your itinerary, or you’ll add other things that necessitate reprioritizing your list. But that is OK! It shows that you have allowed the flexibility in your schedule which is so important to a successful trip.

We chose national parks, historic architecture, small towns, and college football stadiums—guess who chose that one!—as our areas of focus. During the trip, we added state capitals, mostly because the capitol buildings across the country are such historic buildings, filled with interesting stories and beautiful architecture.

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You want to explore the unexpected opportunities along the way.

Our focus on seeing all forty-three of the national parks in the continental United States—plus we threw in about fifty of the monuments, seashores, historic parks, and so on—gave us a reason to go places where we wouldn't have otherwise

gone. That total commitment to seeing all of them provided us with some of the most spectacular scenery and serendipitous moments of the trip.

It seemed we would never get to Big Bend National Park—way down in southwest Texas. Through sandstorms, heat, and miles of nothing, we forged on, and it turned out to be one of our favorites. Four parks can only be reached by water, which added another challenge to seeing them. They were all well worth the trip, and getting there was half the fun. Glimpses of some of these adventures are in the second part of this book, and for those who are interested, a complete travelogue can be found on our website.

Your trip may not have you on the move as much as we were, but again, make this *your* dream, not ours. Find those experiences that you will treasure and share over and over again both with each other and with other people.

Picking a theme

Some of you may have a firm idea of what your adventure will include. You have thought about it and planned it in your head for a long time. Others will have only a vague idea of what they would like to do. If you need inspiration to get started, there are a couple of techniques you may want to try.

Brainstorming with your travel partner or friends is always a good technique to get ideas flowing. The thing to remember with brainstorming is that there are no bad ideas. Often one of the most

off-the-wall thoughts will trigger the perfect idea. So let the ideas flow, make a list as you go, and weed out the crazy thoughts later.

The second technique is to buy some travel magazines—or to surf travel websites—to get ideas of what is possible. Once you have decided to take this road trip, you will just naturally have your antenna up and begin to see everything as a possibility. The trick will be to narrow down what you really want to do.

We began visualizing our trip on a weekend getaway. Because you are relaxed and away from the hubbub of everyday life, this is an ideal time to bounce those ideas off each other and begin focusing on your dreams. One last piece of advice: Don't get so locked into your plans that you don't allow room for spontaneity. This is the trip of a lifetime, and you do want the opportunity to “be a kid again” and explore unexpected twists and turns along the way.

Here are some additional ideas to get you thinking about your own aspirations:

- Play at least one famous golf course in every state.
- Trace the development of our country through the railroad expansion.
- Follow the Lewis and Clark Trail (or some other historic theme).
- Visit the headquarters of every company in which you own stock and see their operations up close.
- Ride all the famous roller-coasters in the country.
- Visit historic inns.
- “Antique” your way around the country.
- Visit all the famous baseball/football stadiums.
- Hike on all the famous trails (i.e., Appalachian, Pacific Crest).
- Visit museums in every state.
- Paint or photograph sites in every state.

The ideas are endless. It is just up to you to fulfill your dreams.

Don't over-plan

This brings us to a *major* piece of advice. Do not, we repeat, *do not* try to plan each day of your trip before you leave. Don't even try to plan each week in any detail. Now, we know that this will make some of you very nervous. Where will we stay? How will our friends know when to expect us? What if we can't get into our favorite museum? And on and on.

By the time you finish this book, hopefully you will be convinced that you can do your trip without a detailed schedule. We'll show you how to plan "on the fly" and make it fun and not intimidating. You do have to keep that sense of humor we talked about earlier and be willing to accept that things won't always go according to plan, but isn't that true of life in general?

If you try to plan your every move, you will begin to feel like you are on a forced march to that next commitment, not on a trip of joy and exploration. In fact, we will go so far as to say that you will end up hating yourself and not enjoying the experience. Frustration will set in when you can't keep up with your schedule, reservations, and false deadlines. You just can't predict that far ahead.

Breadth versus depth

When we left on our trip, we didn't realize that playing every day and living your dream could be so tiring! One of our motivations for taking our trip when we did was health and fitness. We were both in our fifties, pretty fit, and in good health. But you never know how long that will last, so do it while you can.

Depending on the kind of trip you have envisioned and your personal lifestyle, you will need to discuss how to best execute your trip. If your goals lend themselves to seeing fewer places but with more exploration in each area, then consider a vehicle and itinerary that allows you to stay in one place longer and to explore in a "hub

and spoke” pattern rather than continuously moving forward like we did. Because you will be setting up and breaking down as well as packing and unpacking less frequently, the wear and tear on your minds and bodies will be less!

If, on the other hand, you want to cover as much ground as possible and see a wide variety of things in this vast country, make sure your physical and mental condition can keep up the pace. We mentioned earlier about taking “vacations” from your trip. We know that sounds ridiculous, but it’s true! No matter how wonderful every day is, you will still need some downtime. We simply acknowledged that we were “road-weary” and looked ahead to a spot where we wanted to stop and spend a few days, and then we planned our “vacation.”

One such stop was along the shore of Lake Superior in a wonderful little Wisconsin town. Bayfield was one of those finds along the way. People we had spoken with at a restaurant one night said it was not to be missed. They were right. We golfed, we sailed, we lazed around in the sunshine, we did laundry, we shopped, we cooked, we attended a wonderful concert at Big Top Chautauqua, and we generally recharged our batteries for the next leg of our trip. Little did we know that our first big challenge of the trip lay but a week away when I suffered a broken ankle. But more about that later. During the course of the trip, we took one of these little mini-vacations about every two months. They made all the difference in our mental, if not our physical, outlook!

Laying it all out

Once you have your theme or goals set, then you should begin to lay the trip out, not in a detailed way, but at least in a general way. Believe it or not, it is easy to let a year slip through your fingers and not see everything you have envisioned. A general schedule, perhaps month by month, will ensure that at the end of the time you

will have covered the ground you wanted and will have seen most things you planned, along with many things you didn't plan. Your memory will be overflowing with the knowledge and perspective you have gained, and the stories, both funny and uplifting, will be etched in your mind forever. This is the beauty of a long trip, and it absolutely cannot happen in a couple of weeks or even a month or two.

Naturally, your goals will somewhat dictate your route, but weather, specific events you want to attend, and other personal factors will also help mold your route. For us, weather was a big factor, as we wanted to avoid ice and snow at most any cost. We didn't want to sightsee in the cold, and we certainly didn't want to drive in it. We know, we're wimps! For the most part, our plan worked. Naturally, November and December along the eastern seaboard weren't like summer, but we had appropriate clothes and really enjoyed some great days, even with some pretty low temperatures. We had only one day of any snow, and that was at Virginia Beach, of all places. We outran it all the way from Williamsburg and got tucked into a lovely condominium overlooking the ocean and just watched it snow on the beach!

By the time we got to the Southwest, it was starting to heat up, but again, you plan for it, dress for it, and think of the people who live in that heat! One of our favorite hot spots was the Furnace Creek Inn in Death Valley. Temperatures ranged from the high 80s at night to over 110 degrees during the day—but what a true oasis in the desert this was. Because it was off-season, the rates were more reasonable, and it was a real treat. We felt like we were in the Casbah!

Our itinerary is included in the appendix to help give you ideas. This itinerary was the sum total of our route planning before we left. We didn't stick to it completely—which was a good thing!—but it did give enough structure to keep us on track yet the flexibility to change as opportunities presented themselves.

Maps, books, and the Internet

Maps and books will become your friends. They are integral to both the planning and execution of your trip. If you start your planning six months to a year ahead, you will have time to savor the possibilities and read about different places that you may want to include in your itinerary. Use them as a tool, but don't become a slave to them or use them to plan an exact route.

As you can see from our itinerary (see the appendix), we grouped things we wanted to do by state. That worked pretty well, even though we visited some states more than once. For instance, our route took us through eastern Kentucky in the fall and southern and western Kentucky in the spring. Ultimately, we got to see most of the items on the list, just at different times.

Plan on taking a few books with you to reference along the way. Our personal favorite was *Road Trip USA: Cross-Country Adventures on America's Two-Lane Highways*, published by Moon Travel Handbooks. We enjoyed their zany presentation and casual, fun-loving outlook on things. It closely matched our own approach to traveling. Our route crisscrossed their routes several times, so we found ourselves going back to it many times to find hidden treasures. The "Rolling White House" had some great compartments right above the seats that were perfect for storing maps, books, CDs, audiotapes, and other necessities of the road!

Here's one tip we learned the hard way: Pick a brand of map and don't change. They all have different ways of marking things, and when you get used to looking at one type, picking up another is very confusing. We had AAA maps for every state prior to leaving, but we lost one several months into the trip. The AAA office wasn't handy, so we stopped at a gas station and picked up another map. Big mistake! Our eyes were so oriented toward the "AAA style" that it was almost impossible to read the new one quickly and accurately. We soon found the local office of AAA to replace our lost map.

Speaking of the American Automobile Association, a travel club of some type can be a valuable resource both in preparation and along the way. Most of the memberships include towing insurance—make sure it includes RVs, if you are driving one—which you hope you will never need, but you should have it available anyway. But it's their travel assistance that can be invaluable on this type of trip. We had AAA prepare what they call a "trip tik." Basically, it's a suggested route that includes the items on your itinerary. We found the trip tik to be useful at times, especially the detailed maps when approaching large cities, but we found that we didn't follow it most of the time.

What we did find to be invaluable were the AAA guidebooks. We secured one for every state before we left, stored them in the van, and discarded them as we completed a state, thus freeing up valuable cargo space. In retrospect, we probably should have secured them a few months at a time, because the ones for the second half of our trip were mostly outdated by the time we reached those states. There are both lodging and camping varieties, although the camping ones are not as complete as the Woodell's or Trailer Life guides. We found the best aspect of the AAA guidebooks to be the information on attractions. Hours, days, prices, telephone numbers, and directions made seeking out special places easy. The discounts on attractions and motels that we were able to use during the year paid for the price of the membership many times over.

Every state has AAA offices, which we found to be convenient, friendly, helpful, and a great resource for information, either locally or along the way ahead. OK, enough advertising for AAA. Pick a travel club that you like, but pick one for sure!

In Chapter 6, we talk about all things electronic, but the Internet is such a fabulous tool for planning a trip like this that we have to mention it here. Every state and most cities have websites with more details than you can possibly digest. The National Park Ser-

vice site has up-to-date information about the park system, and any kind of hobby or event of interest can be found by doing a search. Like much of the Internet, it can be overwhelming and you can find yourself spending way too much unproductive time

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“surfing” around in la-la land! Use it as a planning tool before you go and as needed on the trip, but don't forget that the goal is to see things for real—not on web pages!

Friends along the way

You will come to crave visiting friends along your route. No matter how well you get along with your companion, you two will soon be sick to death of talking to each other! The stark reality of this trip is that weeks and sometimes months will go by where you will see not one other person you know. Read that sentence again and let it sink in: *not one other person you know*. You will come to crave these visits with friends, family, and even other people you haven't seen for a long time.

Make these visits part of the excitement of your trip. Contact your friends and relatives as you make your plan, share with them what you are doing, and let them know *approximately* when you will be in their area. At this point, don't commit to anything more specific than “in the spring.” You don't want to have to sprint to be at their house on a certain day unless it's for a wedding or an important event you have agreed to put in your itinerary. Be sure to add them to your e-mail list and take their phone number with you so they can track your progress and you can keep in touch with them as you get close to their area. Most people will understand your need for flexibility and make accommodations for your crazy road trip.

Don't overlook the possibility of seeing someone you haven't seen in a long time. You will most likely really enjoy these visits and may even renew some old friendships. Phil had lost track of a junior high school friend but had continued to hear about his life over the years through a mutual friend. We were able to get in touch with him and his wife and had a grand visit with them. It was such fun for both of them sharing experiences, reminiscing, and teasing each other as if they had never been apart. We ended up building a special part of our website just for her first graders, and that twenty-first-century "pen pal" arrangement became one of the highlights of our trip (see Chapter 6). Near the end of our trip, we were able to meet up with them again for a second visit. The gifts and picture book from "my" first graders—who by now knew more about the geography of our country than most sixth graders!—are among the most treasured of our mementos.

When to schedule ahead

Never schedule ahead. Well, that's not totally true, but it is close. If there is something so high on your priority list that if you didn't get to do it (and if it can only be done on one date during the year), it would be a great disappointment, then by all means, book a room ahead and make sure that your plan will accommodate being in that location at that time—even if it means you have to backtrack, speed up, or slow down.

During the trip, we agreed to meet a friend from home in New Hampshire and travel to Boston with her while she was on vacation. She is originally from Boston and wanted to show us "her city." While she, thankfully, kept her plans pretty loose until we got into that part of the country—we knew it would be "in the fall for the turning of the leaves"—we still ended up missing a lot of upstate New York and most of Vermont in our dash to meet our agreed timeline in New Hampshire. That was kind of a bummer,

but we had a great time with her as our tour guide. Not only did we get to see Boston, but we also got to catch up on what was going on at home and have someone to talk to that we knew! It just means we'll have to take another trip back to that beautiful area to see the things we missed.

Another time, one of our children had a business meeting in Washington D.C. He brought the family along and we had a really fun weekend in our nation's capital. Another chance to talk to someone we knew! In fact, it was so bad that even though we were not yet near Washington D.C., we made special arrangements to leave the van in Connecticut and take the train down to D.C.—just so we could see them and enjoy the time together.

So even though these rendezvous were not pre-planned before we left, we still took advantage of the opportunities to work them into our adventure.

The other time to schedule ahead is if you want to plan a trip home during your adventure. If you decide to go for a whole year, you may want to come home for a special event such as a wedding, birth, or holiday.

Since we went from June to June, Christmas was a perfect mid-trip break. About two months before the holidays, we began projecting where we might be and which airports could be handy. We then began watching the airfares on the Internet from various choices until we nabbed a really good fare. Again, flexibility played a key role since we could choose to be in one of several places and our exact travel dates were immaterial.

Speaking of holidays, this trip could be a great chance to spend some of the holidays during the year with family or friends who don't live near your home. It can make a nice memory to do something different for Memorial Day, Fourth of July, or Thanksgiving. Experiencing the lives and cultures of people in other parts of the country was one of our favorite parts of our trip.