



# *Nora & Drew on the road*

## Our First Motorhome & Our First Trip July 4, 2014 to August 12, 2014

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# Our First Motorhome and Our First Trip

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My wife has a condition that makes air travel difficult and after our last travel to Seattle in 2012 I swore to myself that we would not do that again. But Nora had been making lots of noises about wanting to see the grand kids who were now in Glendale, California and I felt trapped. On the one hand I didn't want to fly but on the other Nora insisted to the point of many crying jags that she wanted to see them— Skype was not enough.

One weekend in either late May or early June it came to me that I could buy a used motorhome and after discussing it with Nora (albeit briefly) I started hunting. The first one



I saw seemed a bit too small, too old, and from my perspective not in the best of shape. The next one we saw (a 1990 Winnebago) seemed perfect but I had committed to seeing one more. That one was in even better shape and five years newer. And so we bought The Beast; registered; picked-up the motorhome; and got it inspected.

By the time we had it we were well into June and we were slated to leave on July 4<sup>th</sup>.

There was lots to do. I'm a computer consultant and write custom software which my clients depend upon. So no matter where I am I must always be in contact and have facilities for writing any needed programs or program changes. So I had to work on solving my internet access issues as well as seeing how I would work in The Beast.

Additionally there were camping chairs to purchase, supplies to buy, memberships to join and each day presented a new challenge. Then a few days before leaving my wife fell

breaking her nose bloodying our sidewalk and ended up in the emergency room requiring a CAT scan and a whole bunch of stitches. I thought our planned trip was over.

However, all of her doctors (and she has a bunch) said the trip was not only still on but it would do her good. So on July 4<sup>th</sup>, late in the morning we headed out.

### **On the road - the first leg.**

Since I never driven a Class A motorhome (we once rented a small Class C decades before) and since this was our maiden voyage for The Beast we decided our first leg would be from Long Island to Washington, D.C. where would spend a few days with our friends Alice and John before continuing on.

The trip to Washington was uneventful until we got to the outskirts of Baltimore and found that our propane tanks were considered a “Hazmat” and we had to detour around the city. The rest to D.C. was without incident and so in the early evening of July 4<sup>th</sup> we pulled into our friends driveway.



Ten minutes later (perhaps just a bit longer) and we were in their car off to dinner at our mutual friend Sue's home.

Dinner was great and later we returned to The Beast to take our pillows and some other items into the house where we would stay until Tuesday, July 8<sup>th</sup> when we would continue on.

At this point I should note that had there been problems during this first leg we would have cancelled the trip and headed back home... if we could<g>. However, everything went well going down. Even our two cats didn't seem too upset. Yes, the pets came with us and we really weren't sure how that would work out. But it did. So Saturday morning I posted a

note on our blog. ([noraanddrewontheroad.com](http://noraanddrewontheroad.com)) saying California here we come and then sent an email to our daughter Renée saying there was this interesting website she should checkout. Yep, we hadn't 'till this point told her we were coming.

An hour-and-a-half later we received the expected phone call. Renée chatted about the kids for quite awhile before finally popping the question, "You bought a motorhome?" "Yes." "And you're coming to California?" "Yes." "You realize that's crazy don't you?" "Yes." After that we had a nice chat and told her we were probably leaving on the 8<sup>th</sup> which we did.

### **California, Here we come**

It seems that whenever we stay with Alice and John its impossible for us to get out earlier than about noon and that was the case. Heading out was interesting because we only had a vague idea of the route we would take. Essentially we would drive south until we could take route 40 west. Also we had no idea how far we would go each day. For example, I thought for sure that before we were done for the day we would hit Tennessee but as evening approached we were still in Virginia. We stopped at a rest stop and there looked up campgrounds in our copy of the Passport America campground book. We made a phone call, found they had space and headed off the main highway onto back roads to New River Junction campground which is located on the New River... clever, eh.

While we both liked this spot Nora loved it.



Perhaps it was because it was our first place to stay, perhaps it was the beauty of the river but it attracted Nora.

The night proved interesting. The motorhome has a sofa that turns into a jack-knife bed with storage underneath and one end that is open which allows the cats (remember the cats) to hide under there while we were



driving. But now that we were stopped they were out and about until bedtime. Then we closed our bedroom door and went to sleep... or we attempted to. The minute Sassy, our little grey prima-donna, realized started to moan. She has never “meowed” but has always made rather strange sounds and this night it was moaning because she couldn’t get to us.

Usually Sassy sleeps with us however Tokie, our black, over twenty pounds, bundle of love, is never allowed to sleep with us because she has a habit of jumping on our heads when we are lying down and with one litter box in the main cabin area it seemed best to us (not Sassy) to keep both of them out of the bedroom during the night. After about an hour (it seemed like days) Sassy settled down and we got to sleep.

The next morning after breakfast and after spending a bit of time sitting and just watching the river we eventually left and managed to get back on the highway and headed out.

By the end of the day we had made it to Knoxville, Tennessee and found a lovely place to spend the night just west of there. Bean Pot Campground may be our favorite spot of all. Highly recommended.



We only spent one night here as we did with virtually all of the places we stayed with the exception of one near the end of the trip and of course the ten-days we spent in Van Nuys, California at the Balboa RV Park while visiting our family in Glendale.

So the next morning again we headed out.

We drove a lot; hit lots of traffic jams; road construction; and

eventually got lost around Memphis when the exit ramp our GPS told us to take no longer

existed. Then we miscalculated how far it would be to the campground we wanted and so just as we were nearing it we saw a sign for another one and took it. We were now just outside of Little Rock, Arkansas.



It was a very nice KOA (Kampgrounds Of America) but, as we found with all KOAs, expensive. Further KOAs seem to want to charge for everything and everything seems more expensive than at other campgrounds or RV parks.

By Friday evening we camped just north of Oklahoma City in Pioneer RV Park in Guthrie.



Once we had left Arkansas trees started disappearing and I was already longing for the woods of the east. Pioneer RV Park was sure different from Bean Pot Campground.

As one of our friends wrote, we were at the beginning of miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles. From this point on trees would be scarce and the land very flat and dry.

So the next day we zipped through Texas.



I found it amusing that for us Texas was much smaller than most of the states we went through because we went through just the top “chimney” piece of the state.

By the end of the day we hit the New Mexico border and drove into Tucumcari, New Mexico on Route 66 (Just off of I40. This is the first “major” town you come to.

We stayed at the Cactus RV park but there are no cacti nor much other vegetation for that matter.



We had a wonderful meal at Del’s Restaurant there but despite that meal the town appears to be dying. It’s a sad town. There are two “RV parks” with park being much too much of a compliment. There appears to be some sort of bitter rivalry between the two. Many stores are shuttered; some falling down. Its only seeming claim to fame

is that it is on the famous Route 66.

Some people suggested that when I40 was built and Route 66 was no longer the premier route for heading west Tucumcari started to die.

In the morning while Nora was still cap-napping I took a walk for a few basic groceries and supplies.



Then it was back on the road heading west through New Mexico. At some point we stopped at a tourist trap and bought some T-shirts (4 for \$12) and a couple wooden snakes for our twin two-year old grandsons.

As Sunday drew to a close we stopped in Gallup. While Tucumcari is on the eastern edge of New Mexico, Gallup is at the western edge. And while Tucumcari was dying, Gallup appears to be a thriving town also on Route 66. We were here some years before when we flew into Albuquerque and drove to Sedona Arizona to a gathering of friends. In Gallup we did some food shopping in a supermarket and also did some laundry. Then at night, boom... flash... shazam!... we were sitting in the middle of a torrential thunderstorm.



The USA RV Park is quite nice. The facilities are great. Lots of washing machines and dryers at reasonable prices. The park pays particular attention to active military personnel offering free overnight parking to them. A nice gesture.

Again, in the morning it was time to hit the road with a plan to stop in an RV park near the western part of Arizona.

As we passed through Flagstaff we prepared to find an RV park (one had been recommended) but we never found it. In fact we found no place to stay so kept on driving into California and finally after a long exhausting day which left Nora a bit confused we ended up in the Mojave at Daggett, California at the Desert Springs Campground.

I can tell you we were really happy to come upon this place as we truly were exhausted but our exhaustion was coming to an end because now we were in California and all we had to do was get down to Van Nuys.

## California here we are

After a couple hours of driving we made it to the Balboa RV Park. The helpful staff arranged for Enterprise to pick us up and get us a rental car. After hooking up and getting settled the rental car folks arrived and we were off to get our Kia Soul.



Then we drove over to Glendale to our daughter's apartment and Nora was happy.

The kids were shy at first but warmed-up quickly and soon we were on the sofa watching Curious George while Renée prepared some dinner.



We were unwinding. Now our RV was truly our home away from home. We were parked,, no longer driving, relaxing, and delighting in seeing our daughter and grand kids.

On Thursday the 17<sup>th</sup> we went to a park with Renée and the kids.



But Friday Renée was not going to be available her camp councillor friend Erika, her husband, and kids were in Anaheim to attend a wedding and Renée went off with her two bundles of energy to visit with them.

But we were not bored. Friday found us playing tourist. We went to see Hollywood, drove through the Hollywood hills. Visited the Hollywood sign— a requirement of anyone from NY visiting Hollywood. Hollywood was perhaps the tackiest place I've ever been. I hated it. Nora loved it. Go figure.



What did I hate? People in super hero costumes prancing around the red-carpet area outside the theater where the Academy Awards are held. Super hero wannabee charging tourists to have a picture taken with them. Why anyone wants to do that I can't say. To me its unfathomable.

After having a late lunch in an Italian "Restaurant" we headed home back to our RV. The next weekend was spent at parks and with Renée and the kids at home.



Then, on Monday with Joe (our Son-in-law) being off, we all went to Pasadena to a park and to a nice restaurant where the chef was a friend of Joe's.



I'm not sure why Nora is not in color.



One day Nora and I drove west to the Pacific stopping first in Santa Monica.



Then we continued on the Pacific Coast Highway to Malibu.



The dark blue is the Pacific.

We are looking down onto Malibu from above.



Later in the day Renée, the kids, and us went into Glendale and took in the sights.

We saw the dancing waters of the dual fountains in the Americana Mall.



Later we stopped past Bourbon Steak where Joe is the Executive Chef.



But soon Friday came and we were ready to head home. But first Renée and the kids came to visit us at the RV park so she could see The Beast.



So eventually we said our goodbyes and hit the road heading north on Route I-5 in the glaring sun until we hit Santa Nella, California and the cleverly named Santa Nella RV Park. As Nora was born in Holland, the first thing we noticed from the highway was Pea Soup Andersen's Windmill.



We didn't eat there preferring to stay in our nice cool motorhome. Apparently its part of a chain.

### **Homeward Bound**

During our stay in Van Nuys, Nora and I discussed our trip home and she had expressed a strong desire to see Mount Rushmore and I had a desire to see Yellowstone National Park which accounts for our heading north. While driving the southern route to California meant traveling relatively flat ground, the northern route meant many mountains which was to prove to be a problem. But more on that later.

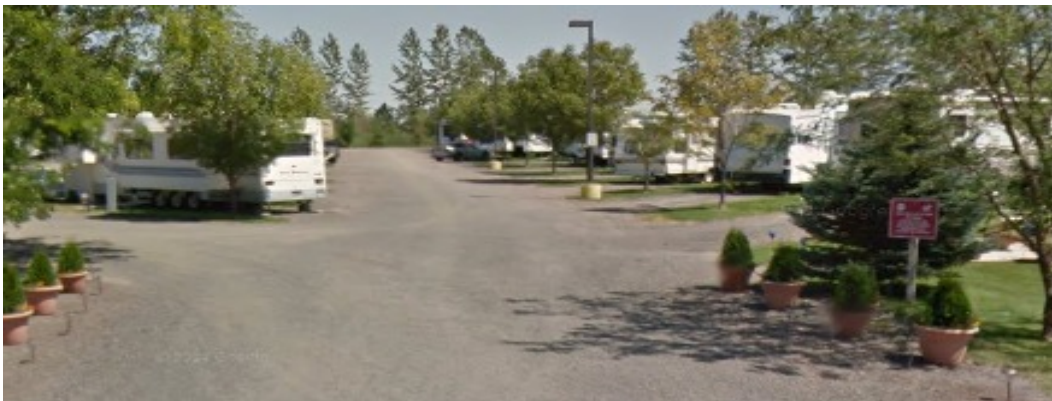
The next morning we left Santa Nella behind. We eventually hit Route 80 and headed west into Nevada crossing over the Donner Pass. Yes, that Donner Pass. Not sure what I'm referring to? Google it.

Whereas the southern route west of Arkansas was miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles, the route we were now on were miles and miles of something... mountains.



We spent Saturday night just southwest of Winnemucca, Nevada in Imlay in what was the strangest place we had stayed in up to that point. I can't tell you its name... I saw no name. I've not been able to find any guide listing the park. The "park" was filled with RVs all of which seemed to have been there for years and most of which I doubted could ever be moved again. When we pulled in, we drove around and a woman came out of a very parked RV and said the campground office was closed so that we should just pull into a spot and then in the morning go down to the office. That seemed reasonable so the next morning I headed down to the "office" which turned out to be a bar/restaurant just outside the park only to be confronted with the unexpected. A sign saying "Closed Sunday."

With no way to pay, we were back on the road again heading east for a bit until we hit Route 93 and headed north eventually into Idaho where we spent the night at the 93 RV Park in Twin Falls.



From there we took Route 86 heading northeast towards Idaho Falls and towards Yellowstone. That part of the trip proved to be the most terrifying. There was a lot of road construction and they were doing it in a way I've never seen before. They would remove miles and miles of a lane. And I mean remove it. This meant that the remaining lane became narrower than usual as the cement dividers were now placed on our side of the dotted-line. So the first terror was to not have one side or the other drift into a divider and damage the motorhome. But that was the easier of the problems.

The second was when the lane on the left was removed and we were driving on the right with often no shoulder and a long way down. But that still wasn't the worst. The worst was a section, again of many miles, where the lane on the right had been removed but there was no cement barrier. There was a cement barrier on the left preventing us from going into on-coming traffic but nothing on the right to prevent us from falling off the edge of the lane into the lane that was being reconstructed and was currently about a foot lower down. I had visions of the motorhome slipping off the edge and rolling over on its side. By the time we got through that white-knuckled section my hands were spasming from having gripped the wheel so tightly. That was the worst.

That night we spent at the Buffalo Run Campground RV Park.



The place is run by a lovely couple and offered various services including pizza which we decided would be ideal for dinner.

In the morning Drew made his first newbie mistake. We got ready to leave and left. Unfortunately we were still connected to the electricity. A fellow camper noticed the problem and flagged us down. Luckily no damage was done except to our plug which had a slightly bent pin which was easily straightened.



Then it was on to Yellowstone where we purchased our Senior lifetime pass for the grand total of \$10.



Yellowstone was a disappointment. Shortly after entering the park we had to slow down to a crawl because there was one lumbering bison walking down the side of the road. That was really comical. It was also the only bison we saw. I seem to remember being in the Grand Canyon park and there being one bison walking down the road. Perhaps there are trained bison. After that we went past many areas of steam rising from the ground on the way to Old Faithful. However, once we got there we found no parking and never got to see the spectacle. We saw a few elk during our journey through the park but that was it.

In the morning when we were leaving I made a wrong turn and the owner hustled over and helped us turn around and head in the right direction.



As we drove, there were tons of motorcycles on the road and I wondered why until I saw on a sign that said we were 17 miles from Sturgis SD where there is a big motorcycle rally every August. Here is a picture from this year's rally just to give you an idea.



Tomorrow its on to Mount Rushmore and from there down to route 80 where we will press on towards New York... or so we thought.

Mount Rushmore was amazing



Nora said she thought it would be bigger which says something about how far away you are from the carvings when you are at the visitor's center.

The plan was that after that we wanted to see the Crazy Horse sculpture and headed there. However, we didn't get too far when suddenly our transmission decided to die... spectacularly!

Eventually we were towed to Rapid City where we were deposited in the parking lot of a transmission repair company. Friday morning we discovered that while they could do the repair and would be happy to do so, they were backlogged and it would be about a week before they could start work. They recommended another transmission repair company and we were towed there— Aamco of Rapid City.

Wayne Kummer (the owner) greeted us and told us what to expect.



They started work almost immediately and by the end of Friday they had removed the transmission and prepared to start analysis the next day. They made arrangements for our being able to stay in our rig by providing us with an extension cord so we could plug in.

However, over night we popped their circuit breaker and so in the morning I told them and they reset it. They continued some work on the transmission Saturday disassembling it and they said Monday they would either begin repair (most likely) or order a replacement transmission. And so we were visiting lovely Rapid City, SD on my birthday August 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Since we had blown the circuit breaker and continued to do so during the morning and early afternoon they suggested we rent a car (we did) and get a room in a local motel but since it was Sturgis week room prices were sky high. We found a room at only \$150/night at the Gold Star motel. The first night we were reasonably happy with the room. We each had a queen size bed and I had gotten in my bed on the right side just pulling the covers back enough to get in. The next night I did the same but realized I had not gone to the bathroom. So now I pulled the covers back from the left-hand side and that when I discovered a huge blood stain (perhaps 8 inches in diameter) left of center on the bottom sheet. The rest of the night was spent hugging the right side of the bed. In the morning I reported the problem to the person on duty and she said, "Oh well, you can't catch everything." Perhaps not but this was disgusting.

Back at the RV Monday we spent another night but by Tuesday they were ready to test drive the rebuilt transmission. But I get ahead of myself.



Since we were in Rapid City and we would be here for days we decided to do some sight-seeing. For many days as we had been driving we had been seeing signs for Wall Drug. It happens that Wall Drug is in the town of Wall about 45 minutes from Rapid City so we went to take a look. Its a fun giant tourist trap. The following photo should give you a clue.



That's the Wall Drug dinosaur!

They have a massive number of rooms over seeming acres that house everything from ice cream parlors to a piano-playing Gorilla.

In the same area are the Bad Lands of South Dakota which we also went to.



It takes a few hours to travel through stopping at various spots to view the scenery.

We also ate in a couple of great restaurants. One was a Vietnamese restaurant Saigon.



And another restaurant featuring Nepalese, Indian and Tibetan food. Kathmandu Bistro

And for breakfast we ate several times at Morningside Café



### **Homeward bound... at last**

So its Tuesday August 5th, and the motorhome having passed its tests in early afternoon we headed out going south on Route 20 to Nebraska. We still had one more adventure in South Dakota to deal with. We had been driving south for awhile and we really needed to stop for gas so I pulled into a little gas station and went to put gas in the RV but after about ½ gallon the pump shut off. Start again and almost immediately there was a problem. The gas would not go into the tank. Between me and a fellow working there we figured out that there was something blocking the air vent for the gas tank. He got out his air hose which just reached to the gas tank I by pushing air into the tank it suddenly was unblocked. We had no more gas problems the rest of the trip.

Finally we hit the Nebraska border. Right near the northern border of Nebraska with South Dakota is the town of Alliance and we stayed in the J&C Lawn Services & RV Park.



That's the name. Apparently its busy during harvest season but virtually no one was there when we were. Mr. Jensen is a retired railroad engineer and the park is attached to his home. The services are minimal (full hookup plus wifi) but the place is quite clean and when we were there quite quiet.

In the morning we got on Route 2 and took it across the length of the state stopping for the evening at the Prairie Oasis Campground/ RV Park 60 miles east of Lincoln. This was a lovely spot with a little pond with paddle boats.



We met a couple there from Canada. He was a former school teacher like my wife. He taught math my wife, foreign languages (French, German). They had an interesting motorhome perhaps a Class B or maybe Class C. It had a Mercedes logo but he said it was essentially a Chrysler vehicle.

In the morning we headed towards Lincoln. Scratch that. It actually took until just after noon before we were back on the road. During WW II my father was stationed there for a bit and my mother went out there. So in Lincoln we took a photo that we were sure she would recognize.



We traveled past Lincoln; past Omaha; and finally into Iowa. We traveled just past Des Moines and stopped for the night in Polk County at the Thomas Mitchell Park. Our favorite overnight on the trip was either Bean Pot Campground or this.



It was chuck full of people— I think we got the last spot. They have a deal for older people of just \$10 per night during the week. Its inexpensive the rest of the time too.

Why our favorite? Definitely not the price. Perhaps it was the setting. It was beautiful. Perhaps it was that we had been starved for trees and we were nestled in a woods. Perhaps it was the people we met who were extremely friendly.

I can't tell you why exactly but if we're in the area again and we expect to be (because its near to Des Moines) we'll stay there. An explanation. Renée's mother-in-law (Joe's mother), Maggie, lives in Des Moines and while we couldn't arrange a get together this trip we will in the future.

We had hoped to see Maggie in Des Moines but her schedule and our's couldn't be matched so the next day after staying at that marvelous park we finished with Iowa and drove into Illinois and drove... and drove... and when we had passed Chicago we started looking for campgrounds but none were to be found so we continued on into Indiana. When we saw an exit for Indiana Dunes State and Federal Parks we headed there (Drew spent a day or two there in the 1950s and remembered it fondly).

As darkness descended we finally found the park (we got lost a bit) but the state park was full and we were told the federal park was also full. But good news-- they gave us a list of seven campgrounds in the area. After more than an hour looking for any of them we gave up and got back onto Route 80 heading east. Eventually we saw another campground sign for a KOA camp and we headed to it arriving at the South Bend Indiana KOA at around 11pm.



We were beat!



The people were quite nice - a Swiss-German couple and the campground as with all KOA campgrounds had lots of facilities. So instead of checking out Saturday morning we continued our stay; did laundry; went out to a nice fancy Italian restaurant; and checked out Sunday late morning.

We were rested after the extra day and thought we were prepared for anything. Little did we know what lay in store.

After getting back on 80 and leaving the KOA campground we drove through Indiana into Ohio. In Ohio Route 80 becomes a toll road and since we were now paying customers the signs for campgrounds disappeared. We saw one sign after an extremely long day and we exited Route 80 for the campground looking forward to a nice rest but it wasn't to be.

Once off the highway there were no more signs. We drove for a while until Montezuma attacked... over and over again. After changing clothes multiple times and giving up our search for the non-existent campground we got back on Route 80 and headed east. Ohio came to an end and we were now in Pennsylvania still heading east. After more driving we finally saw another sign for another KOA.

Exhausted we exited Route 80. The KOA sign said make a left and it's 7-miles to the campground. Soon the narrow road got even narrower. Then we came to a narrow one-lane bridge with a sign saying 10-ton limit (we were just under 8-tons... I think). We continued on. After more turns in the dark and passing no cars we suddenly saw another sign for the KOA campground. Hah, we were still on track. Then the road narrowed more.

Soon we came to another narrow one-lane bridge. This one said 16,000 pound limit. Doing massive calculations in my head ( $2000 \times 8$ ) with trepidation we crossed the bridge. Eventually we came to the Mercer / Grove City KOA campground and pulled in and after some difficult finding a place to park for the night we called it a day at about 12:30AM.



We woke Monday morning and had trouble getting moving. Traveling was wearing thin. In speaking with the KOA office it turns out that had we stayed on Route 80 for one more exit we would have been within 3 miles of the campground coming in from the other direction. Who knew? We decided not to even hang around for breakfast but get on the road. So we were now in very western Pennsylvania and realized that we could go crazy and we'd be able to get home in the wee hours of Tuesday morning or we could drive and in later afternoon find a place for our final night.

After driving for awhile we stopped for breakfast and then went back on the road finally stopping for the night at the Fort Boone campground in Milton, Pennsylvania. This was the strangest place we've ever stayed. Some sights were disturbing and some charming. Our first reaction was that this was an old dying campground but I might be wrong. I found a few reviews. One said it was "a dump" and that was my feeling as there were many dead and dying trailers. Trailers that looked like they had not been lived in for years. But then someone else wrote, "I was helped when I lost my house. Its not a welfare place. I got a full time job and live there. It's a fresh start area for some."



While we were there we walked down to the water and then strolled across the grass. We saw many rabbits playing. They seemed to be pets. Some children were around and we saw a few adults. But we also saw many RVs in disrepair.

In the morning after spending our last night on the road we headed home. Soon we were in New Jersey and by later afternoon we had pulled through the New York City area and were pulling into our driveway by 7pm.

We were home!



