

Rogers' Family Vacation Blog - 2016

From July 9 through July 31, my family and I took our first cross country vacation. I'm hoping this is the first of several, because I enjoyed myself so much, and there is so much more yet to see. When I was about my daughter Allison's age, my parents took me on a trip from our home in Perkasie, Pennsylvania, to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Although that wasn't completely across the country and a much shorter trip in terms of time, I still consider that trip one of the highlights of my childhood and I still have many vivid memories of that trip – riding to the top of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, taking a tour of Busch Stadium in St. Louis, meeting a family of Native Americans at a campground in Oklahoma, staying with my sister Donna at her home in Tulsa where my dad fed my sister's dachshund puppy from the table, corrupting the dog forever. While at my sister's, I also remember watching the Washington Capitals battle the New York Islanders in a Stanley Cup Playoffs Game 7 which went 4 overtimes and ended well after 1 AM central time. Those are memories I'll have forever. I wanted to give my kids some of those types of memories and have some more for myself as well which is one of my big reasons for wanting to take this trip.

I had been thinking about a trip like this for several years, but it was cemented in my mind in the summer of 2014 when I made a work trip to Flagstaff, Arizona, and took the opportunity to see the Grand Canyon, and the scenery of Sedona. I came back from that trip knowing I needed to convince Cindy that we all needed to make a similar trip so they could take in those sights as well, and let the kids experience a part of our country and a culture they haven't yet experienced. I'm so grateful that Cindy was willing to make this trip and do more than her share of the planning. I used my obsession for optimization to put together a skeleton plan for our travel, then Cindy took over getting hotels and cabins booked for each night. We tuned up our mini van and set off on an adventure of a lifetime for all of us. As a family, we started blogging about the trip a few days in advance of leaving. We made an entry each day and those blog entries can be found in chronological order below. I hope you enjoy reading the accounts of our trip, and if you haven't already, consider making a trip like ours yourself.

Date: 5-July-2016 (4 days until departure)

Blogger: Jeff

Today we created this vacation blog as a way to share our trip with friends, family, and whomever might be interested in reading about the many adventures, explorations, and mishaps we experience over 23 days of travelling cross country. The start of the trip is still 4 days away (we leave on Saturday the 9th), but preparations for the journey are already underway. One of the seats has been removed from our Dodge Caravan to open up more leg room for the kids and more storage room for our gear. Cindy has begun packing her clothes, using that as an opportunity to clean her closet in the process. Konnie will meet her babysitter tomorrow, and I'm planning to review the budget for the trip with Cindy this evening (I'll let you know how that goes tomorrow...).

Date: 6-July-2016 (3 days until departure)

Blogger: Danielle

Today mom went to work and me and my sisters stayed home. When I was home I finished my coloring page with my gel pens. I fell so proud of myself because I never finish my pictures!!!! Also when I was home I found out that the iCloud on my IPod 4 and the iCloud on my IPod 6 was the same so when I get a text or when I text it is the same on both devices. Cool Right??? So when mom came home the babysitter (Alex) came and I gave him a tour of the house, the property, Konnie's stuff, and more.

Date: 6-July-2016 (3 days until departure)

Blogger: Jeff

Last evening's budget review of the trip went pretty well. The only sticking point between Cindy and me was the amount she is planning to spend on American Indian jewelry. In the end we compromised, and finalized our budget for the trip. I'm proud to say that this trip will be almost fully funded with money we saved over the past few years. Our debt to equity ratio should be relatively unchanged by the time we get home. Tomorrow will be a busy day as I try to mow the lawn one last time before leaving, and begin to think about packing.

Date: 7-July-2016 (2 days until departure)

Blogger: Jeff

Preparations for the trip are still ongoing. I mowed the lawn tonight for one last time and Cindy did some grocery shopping so we will have food and drink for the car. As of 8 PM my bed is completely covered in piles of clothes which I assume Cindy will be packing into suitcases when she gets home. I'm a last minute packer myself and will take care of my clothes tomorrow night. I just checked the weather forecast for our first stop which is Nashville, Tennessee. The predicted high temperature is only 90 F. That's down from predictions earlier in the week of over 100. It will actually be cooler in Nashville on Saturday than it will be in Elkton. Bonus.

Date: 8-July-2016 (1 day until departure)

Blogger: Jeff

Packing and all other remaining preparations are nearly complete. It felt good to leave work today and know I won't be back for 3+ weeks. I love my job, but I really need a break, and looking forward to this trip has made it tough to focus on my work the past few weeks. I'm really excited. I just hope I can sleep tonight so I'm in good shape to drive the 750 miles we have planned to drive tomorrow.

Date: 9-July-2016 (Vacation Day #1 – Elkton, MD to Nashville, TN)

Blogger: Jeff

We left Elkton this morning at 6:03 PM, pulling out of the driveway under mostly cloudy skies. It was a bit foggy early in the morning, but the sun came out later in the morning and shone on us throughout most of the day. Despite the forecast for potential thunderstorms, we didn't see any rain at any point during the day. The first 3 or so hours of the drive went well. Normal traffic through Baltimore and on the Washington, D.C. beltway but no major delays. The first test of our patience came shortly after turning onto Route 81 just west of Front Royal, VA. There was a major slowdown on a two mile stretch of I 81 which lost us about 45 minutes. As we waited in traffic we figured it was a bad accident, but in the end it was just a lane reduction with construction vehicles periodically stopping traffic to trek back and forth across the roadway. That minor mishap notwithstanding, today's voyage to Nashville was rather uneventful. We gained an hour as we crossed into the central time zone late in the afternoon, reaching Music City just after 6 PM local time. After checking into our hotel and taking a few minutes to freshen up, we headed to downtown Nashville to take in the sights. We looked for a place to dine on local cuisine but were disheartened by hour and a half wait times. We ultimately settled for a Panera Bread on the campus of Vanderbilt University. Courtney and I were disappointed by the fact they were sold out of bread bowls, but we were able to substitute more expensive meals at the same price, and those meals were quite delicious in their own right, Courtney sipping on gourmet mac and cheese and me on a Cobb salad. After refilling our bellies, it was on to downtown where we experienced the bright lights and bar scene. On our way we were nearly involved in an accident as a car cut me off trying to reach an exit ramp. If it weren't for my cat-like reflexes and superior driving skills we would probably have a big dent in the side of our car right now. Fortunately we reached the downtown area unscathed if not a bit distressed. Once there, the kids got their pictures taken by the Elvis statue and we got to witness a bar fight complete with a domestic dispute that included bottles being thrown, and bouncers tackling unruly hooligans. All of this at approximately 9 PM. I wonder what it was like after midnight passed... After completing our walk of the downtown area, we returned to the hotel and called it a night. All in all it was a good first day!

Date: 10-July-2016 (Vacation Day #2 – Nashville, TN to Oklahoma City, OK)

Blogger: Jeff

Today we had our first bout of automotive anxiety. After eating a hearty breakfast at the Best Western we piled into the van only to find out that it wouldn't start. We have had issues with the ignition module not working correctly but we thought it was fixed a couple weeks ago at the dealer. It had been working fine for a several days, so initially when the car didn't start I feared that something was left plugged in overnight and had drained the battery. Panic set in quickly. We continued trying to start the car for several minutes. I was just about ready to call Triple A when finally Cindy got the engine to turn over. This ignition issue has never let us stranded, but it has caused us our fair share of fear over the last few months. We pulled out of the Best Western parking lot at 7:30 AM local time and began the drive to Oklahoma City. We weren't on the road for more than a half hour when the next round of automotive anxiety kicked in. The check tire inflation light came on. I figured it was due to temperature swings, but we pulled into the first truck stop we found to check pressure levels nonetheless. All the

tires were between 38 and 39 psi. My expertise in automobiles is quite limited, but allowing for a few pounds increase due to recent use, these pressures seemed fine to me. We returned to the road and the light eventually went out. It came back on and off several times throughout the day, perhaps due to extended use. Despite our car issues we reached Memphis by 10:45 AM. Since we didn't have quite as far to travel today we decided to stop in Memphis to see the Mississippi River up close. We parked downtown and walked over a pedestrian bridge to Mud Island Park, which is actually a small peninsula in the Mississippi River. On the peninsula there is a scaled model replica of the river. It contains flowing water which you can walk through and trace the path of our country's largest river from its headwaters in the northern plains to its delta in Southern Louisiana. The kids took off their flip flops to walk through the river model, and it was pretty cool except for the fact that Courtney broke her shoe in the process. Cindy checked the gift store to see if they sold flip flops, but the best she could find was a stapler to staple her shoe back together. It was good enough to get us across the bridge and back to the car where we had extra shoes easily accessible.

We had a nice view of the pyramid in Memphis from where we were parked. The pyramid was built in the early 1990's and originally served as a sports and entertainment venue. In 2015 it was converted into a Bass Pro Shops megastore. In addition to shopping, the store includes a hotel, restaurants, a bowling alley, and an observation deck at its apex. We could see people on the observation deck as we left the parking lot. We didn't have time to go inside the pyramid today, but if I ever make it back to Memphis in the future that will be on my list of things to see.

We left Memphis just before noon. We crossed the Mississippi into Arkansas. For the kids, it was their first time they have been west of the Mississippi. For Cindy and me, it wasn't the first time, but the first time in a long time. Shortly after passing through Little Rock, we ran into some rain. There were some big storms travelling through Arkansas, but fortunately we were on the northern edge of the storms and only ran into a few short bursts of rain. By the time we crossed into Oklahoma the skies were clear once again and temperatures had climbed into the high 90s. We arrived in Oklahoma City just before 7:30 PM. Once again we are staying at a Best Western. This time however we had an issue checking in at the front desk as they did not have our name on record. Fortunately Cindy had a confirmation number and after giving it to them we realized that our travel agent booked our room under someone else's name (and no, it's wasn't "Shultz"). After hauling our bags to the room, we walked to "Louie's Sports Bar" for dinner. It was just a few blocks from the hotel. The portions were large and the food was excellent. Five thumbs up for dinner. After our meal Allison and Courtney went swimming in the hotel pool while I watched the end of today's Tour de France stage on my computer.

Date: 11-July-2016 (Vacation Day #3 – Oklahoma City, OK to Farmington, NM)

Blogger: Danielle

Today we started driving. We went to Walmart to get Courtney some new shoes because the ones she had were broken. Courtney got these nice and pretty flip flops. I wish I had them. After that we walked to McDonalds. Me and Courtney got Mcflurries and mom and Allison got iced coffee. But Dad got nothing! After that we went back on the road and we were driving again. After a couple hours we entered New Mexico. When we got to New Mexico it was 104 degrees outside. It was hot!!! A few hours later when we were in the middle of nowhere and there was not that many cars so Dad decided

to let Allison drive for a little while. Allison drove for 1 hour and 40 minutes! WOW!!! About 20 minutes later Courtney had to use the bathroom so we could not find one so after 10 minutes we found a gas station. A couple minutes later we headed for the hotel and we finally got to the hotel. For dinner we went to Buffalo Wild Wings. I ordered Mac and Cheese and they got wings. That was our day and I hoped you enjoyed my post!!! Thanks for reading. Bye JJJ

Date: 12-July-2016 (Vacation Day #4 – Farmington, NM to Flagstaff, AZ)

Blogger: Danielle

Today we got up and we left the hotel at 8:15 to get gas and after that we left for the Four Corners Monument. We arrived at Four Corners at 9:25. When we got there Dad, Allison, and Courtney took pictures in all four states at once. They did it in a cool way!!! Once we were done we hiked up the Horse Trail and we were so high. I took some photos of us and the rocks and stuff. At 10:55 we left Four Corners and we were back on the road. Me, Courtney, and Allison watched the movie Polly World in the car and the movie was good. At 12:20 we stopped for lunch and Mom bought some more pringles. Pringles are so good!!! After lunch Allison started driving us and it was fun. At 2:05 Dad took over the driving and Allison drove for 1 hour and 15 minutes. WOW!!! Also at 1:40 we had a traffic jam and at 2:20 it was over. That was a long time!!! At 3:30 we arrived at the cabin and the cabin is awesome. I have my own room with a queen bed and a little closet and a sink and Mom and Dad have the same thing. Upstairs Allison and Courtney have twin beds with a half bathroom with a sink and toilet and me, mom, and dad have a bathroom with a shower and toilet. We will share the shower with them. So now Allison and Courtney are doing something and I am in my room. Mom and dad are at the store buying stuff and we might have pizza for my birthday dinner. Also Dad is doing a blog after dinner too. So I hope you enjoyed my blog and I will talk to you later!!! Bye JJJ

Date: 12-July-2016 (Vacation Day #4 – Farmington, NM to Flagstaff, AZ)

Blogger: Jeff

My favorite part of the day was visiting the Four Corners Monument. This was one of the major attractions that prompted me to want to make this trip. There is only one spot in our country where you can reside in four states at once. There is something about doing that which has always seemed really cool to me. Five years ago I put that on my decade list, and today I was able to scratch it off. In addition to seeing the monument we did a little bit of hiking in the park and took some really good pictures. You can probably see some of these pictures on Cindy's Facebook page. I plan to link some of the pictures to this blog in the near future...

The girls were anxious to reach our cabin in Flagstaff, so we passed over a few other attractions such as "Dinosaur Tracks" in order to get there sooner. You can tell from Danielle's entry below that they weren't disappointed. It's a really nice setup, and the weather here is just awesome – low 80's and low humidity. Shortly after arriving Cindy and I made a trip to the local Walmart to stock up on food for the next few days. Today is Danielle's birthday, so we also bought her a cake and ice cream when we were out. While Cindy was shopping, I took the car for an oil change. We have already put 2,483 miles on the

car, many of which were in a dusty environment, and we needed a blinker bulb replaced, so we figured it was a good time for some vehicular maintenance. While I was waiting at Jiffy Lube, I got a good recommendation for dinner. Danielle wanted to have pizza on her birthday and John the manager endorsed Fratelli's. And he was spot on. We dined there and the pizza was both good and affordable. After dinner we returned to the cabin where Danielle opened her birthday presents and we shared cake and ice cream. Tomorrow I'm looking forward to an early morning run with Allison & Courtney followed by a day at the Grand Canyon.

Date: 13-July-2016 (Vacation Day #5 – Flagstaff, AZ – Day trip to the Grand Canyon)

Blogger: Jeff

Today was a long day of sightseeing at the Grand Canyon. But before leaving, I pried Allison and Courtney out of bed at 6:15 to go for a run with me. Those two will begin soccer camp shortly after we get back from vacation and there is nothing like a little altitude training to help get them in shape. For me, I could use a little extra conditioning as well for the Gore Volleyball League stretch run and playoffs coming up in late August and early September. Allison ran a mile and a half at a pace very close to what she needs to run to be eligible to make the varsity team. Courtney was a bit off pace but she ran in excess of 2 miles. I ran a total of 4 miles but I won't be reporting my statistics out of the shame caused by not having run for the past 19 days and the effects of the altitude on my performance. Regardless, it was great to get in some early morning exercise.

After showers and breakfast we headed out for the day. Our first stop on the way to the Grand Canyon was at a Native American Trading Post where Cindy and the girls shopped for inexpensive jewelry and I surfed the internet via my phone to get caught up on the day's stage at the Tour de France. Cindy and Allison made a few purchases and then we were off to the big ditch. We experienced many interesting views of the canyon and walked several miles. There was no parking available at the Visitor's Center so we parked in a satellite lot and rode the bus to several of the canyon's viewing locations. Danielle enjoyed the bus ride and we stopped at several locations where she could get her National Parks Passport stamped. We walked the rim trail for about half a mile and checked out the Bright Angel trail to the bottom of the canyon but decided against walking part way down. For me it's either all or nothing and we weren't prepared to go all the way down today, so I'm saving that activity for my next visit. We finally made it to the Visitor's Center late in the afternoon where we happened to meet up with Chris and Jen Michalak. We knew they were going to be at the canyon today from reading Facebook posts, but we did not plan on meeting up. We simply ran into each other by random chance. Chris also works for Gore, and was there on vacation with his wife Jen and their two boys for a few days of sight-seeing following his work trip. I've never worked with Chris but we have played volleyball with and against each other going back about 15 years now. After chatting with them for several minutes we went our separate ways. We left the park at about 5:30, and returned to Flagstaff where we dined at Kachina's Mexican Restaurant. I had a hankering for Tex-Mex and my meal was superb. If only I hadn't eaten so much...

Date: 14-July-2016 (Vacation Day #6 – Flagstaff, AZ – Rest Day, sort of...)

Blogger: Jeff

For this being a planned rest day, we were still pretty active. Allison, Courtney, and I began the day with a run once again, duplicating our mileage from yesterday. Cindy spent the morning catching up on laundry, three full loads worth. Danielle spent much of the morning playing with the 3D pen she received for her birthday two days ago. For lunch we had leftover pizza from Fratelli's of two nights ago which was still very good. Afterward we headed into downtown Flagstaff for some shopping. Danielle purchased a do it yourself necklace which consisted of an opalite stone placed in a spiral setting. The rest of us forewent any additional souvenirs for the moment. Later we explored more of Flagstaff, finding the Gore Woody Mountain campus of plants. We found it on our way to the arboretum which we never reached due to the 3 mile stretch of dirt road we would have needed to drive on to get there. The road was too bumpy and I didn't want the dust to plug up the car's air filter or AC filter with a lot of driving on this trip still to come. We returned to the cabin in mid-afternoon, dropped the kids off and went back out to do some grocery shopping. Following the grocery store, Cindy and I took a ride to see Lake Mary which is about five or so miles southeast of our cabin. Allison has been asking to go kayaking, so we explored the potential for renting kayaks this weekend. We found a place that would rent us kayaks for a reasonable price but the logistics of the rental were not favorable. We would have had to transport the kayaks to the boat launch ourselves which was a five mile trek, and we would have had to make 2 trips which wasn't to our liking. We decided to forgo kayaking for now, putting it on the back burner until later this summer when we are back home surrounding by many bodies of water, not just one singular tiny lake.

For dinner my friend Justin Skaife, who is currently working at the Gore plants in Flagstaff, and his wife Julie and two-year old daughter Amelia came to the cabin for a cookout. We grilled hamburgers and hot dogs on the charcoal grill at our cabin site. This was only the second time in the last 20 years I grilled over charcoal and I was pretty proud of myself for getting the standard (non-match lite) briquettes lit without using liter fluid. Dinner was good, and we enjoyed hearing Justin and Julie's recommendations for sights to see over our final two days in Flagstaff. We also enjoyed reminiscing on times when our kids were in their terrible twos like Amelia is now. We are planning a big day in Sedona tomorrow so we all turned in early for the evening.

Date: 15-July-2016 (Vacation Day #7 – Flagstaff, AZ – Day trip to Sedona, AZ)

Blogger: Jeff

We got up early this morning to beat the crowds at Slide Rock State Park which is about 10 miles north of Sedona, AZ. We did exactly that as there were only about 25 cars in the parking lot when we arrived at about 8:15 AM. By the time we left shortly before Noon, the parking lot was completely full and a line of 10-15 cars were waiting to get in. In between we had a good time swimming in Oak Creek and sliding down the natural water slide. We swam and climbed on and around big rocks for the better part of an hour and a half, after which we visited the souvenir stand and had a picnic lunch at the park. After lunch we drove the rest of the way to Sedona. We spent the early afternoon checking out the shops along the main drag in town. Cindy bought more jewelry, Dani more gems, and Allison and

Courtney both purchased cactuses. By late afternoon we were hot and tired from walking around town in temperatures in excess of 95 F. We decided to go for a short drive south on Route 89A, looping back via Route 260 East and I-17 North. During our drive the car thermometer (verified accurate to -/+ 1 degree) reached as high as 108 F. Needless to say we didn't get back out of the car until we returned to Sedona, but it was still near 100 F there. The drive to Sedona from the south is even more picturesque and we stopped a few times at pull-offs to take photos. For dinner we forewent the overpriced restaurants in the shopping area in favor of the more reasonable Wildflower Bread Company. The food was good at this Panera Bread knockoff, and Courtney was able to get a bread bowl this time to go with her cheddar broccoli soup. I decided against soup due to the heat, opting instead for a chicken Caesar salad. Allison had the same thing as me, while Cindy and Danielle both had pasta. After dinner Cindy and Allison went back to shopping while Courtney, Danielle, and I hung out on the bridge to photograph the late day, low angle, sunshine on the red rocks. I had a slight mishap while putting away the video camera, as I dropped the spare battery down the ravine, far enough that it was just out of reach. I couldn't climb down the ravine because of how steep it was, and I didn't have anything long enough to reach down and grab it. Courtney put her thinking cap on and found a branch long enough to reach the battery, but I wasn't skilled enough to retrieve it without getting the branch caught up in the small plants surrounding the battery. After about 15 minutes we gave up trying to reach it and started researching where to buy a new one on our phones. We are going to look at Wal-Mart tomorrow to look for a new one. In the meantime I'll just have to keep the primary battery charged up at all times...

We left Sedona in the twilight hoping to spot an elk or two on the ride home, but riding slowly on the ride home and keeping our eyes peeled proved fruitless. Still no elk sightings since we've been here. The closest thing we saw on the way home was a kid riding a four wheeler ATV which I mistakenly identified as an elk from a distance. Once again we were wiped from our day out, and opted for an early bed time.

Date: 16-July-2016 (Vacation Day #8 – Flagstaff, AZ – Day trip to Williams, AZ)

Blogger: Jeff

Our last full day at the cabin in Flagstaff began with a short trek to the town of Williams, which lies just 30 miles west of Flagstaff. We visited "Bearizona" which is a Wildlife park that you can both drive through and walk through to see all kinds of animals, mostly those local to the area. We started with the driving portion, getting up close and personal with bison, big horn sheep, deer, and of course bears. The bears were especially playful, several of them came right up to the car as if they were greeting us. We captured some good close-up photos of the animals. In addition to those I already mentioned, we also saw wolves, and burros, and finally we saw a few elk. After experiencing the drive through portion of the park, we walked around the rest of Bearizona seeing animals such as otters, porcupines, otters, beaver, more bears, and of course my personal favorite, foxes. We also caught a portion of their "Birds of Prey" show which featured owls and hawks taking flight between the zoo keepers. We cut the bird show short so we could catch the bus for a second tour through the park. There were several advantages to taking the bus through the park. For one the bus's windows could be left open since it was high enough off the ground to avoid any potential animal attacks. Also, the bus driver had food that she gave to several of the animals that drew them closer to us. Some of the animals such as the deer and the sheep would even chase after the bus knowing they would be getting a

treat. All of us enjoyed our day at Bearizona. Afterward we drove into the town of Williams to fill up with gas. Williams is located on old Route 66, and evidently it was the last of the Route 66 towns to be bypassed when Interstate 40 was built. I guess the town is pretty proud of that because it was plastered all over the wall of one of the buildings in town, and there was a plethora of gift shops with Route 66 themed paraphernalia. One of the shops was aptly named, "Get your Gifts on Route 66."

We returned to the cabin for dinner, finishing up the leftover hot dogs, hamburgers, and salads from our cookout Thursday night. After dinner we took a ride to Lake Mary which is about 5 miles south of where our cabin is located. I figured the lake would be a good spot for one last chance to spot an elk in the wild before leaving the area since the lake would be one of the few places where they could find water. Boy was I right. We first spotted a gang of about 12 elk only about 3-4 miles from the cabin. We stopped took pictures and watched them graze for a while. We got back in the car and drove another few miles to the "high end" of the lake. I think they call it the high end because it dries up during the summer. There was very little water there, but many elk. We saw many more elk, probably at least 50, a combination of doe, buck, and fawn. There was a fence a few feet from the road so we weren't able to get very close to them, but used our digital zoom to take pictures anyway. After trying several times before to spot elk, we finally hit the mother lode on our final night. It was a great day of observing animals, both in captivity and in the wild.

Date: 17-July-2016 (Vacation Day #9 – Flagstaff, AZ to Las Vegas, NV)

Blogger: Jeff

We departed Flagstaff this morning shortly after 7 AM, leaving the cabin behind. We arrived at the Hoover Dam at 11 AM. We parked in the Visitor's Center parking garage and took a walk out onto the Dam, taking in the views and getting some pictures. It was an oppressive 102 F, so we made the visit a short one. On the way out we stopped at a scenic overlook which provided a picturesque view of Lake Meade. We took a few more pictures then headed out for Las Vegas. We arrived in Sin City at 12:30 PM. Our room wasn't yet ready when we arrived, so we hung out in the hotel lobby and ate our lunch while waiting for our room. In about an hour our room was ready so we went up to it for a quick rest before heading to the strip. It was 110 F by the time we arrived in downtown Vegas, and we walked almost the entire strip. We stopped in some of the more famous stores such as the Coca Cola Store and the M&M's Store. We strolled through several of the casinos and stopped for dinner at Chili's. The sun was almost down by the time we finished dinner, making it slightly more bearable outside. We continued walking the strip and eventually made it to the Bellagio where we watched the famous fountain show. By the time we made it back to the car we were parched. Fortunately we had some cold drinks in a cooler in the car to quench our collective thirsts on the ride back to our hotel. The temperature had dropped to 95F by the time we got back to the hotel. The visit to Vegas was fun, but next time I think I'll come during winter.

Date: 18-July-2016 (Vacation Day #10 – Las Vegas, NV to Los Angeles, CA)

Blogger: Jeff

After a great night's sleep and a hearty hotel breakfast, we took a drive to Fremont Street in Vegas to see Container Park, a shopping and dining area made entirely from shipping containers. Unfortunately the park didn't open until 11 AM, and we were there more than an hour early. Rather than wait around we decided to head out for Los Angeles. During my entire time in Vegas I didn't drop even as much as a dime in the casinos. About the only casino game I enjoy is tournament poker, and buying into a tournament would have taken too much time so I opted against that. I'm not a fan of games based solely on chance, so of course I avoided the slot machines. So it was back on the road with all of our discretionary cash still intact. We stopped in Yermo, California, for lunch, which is about the midway point between Las Vegas and Los Angeles. We saw a sign there for the ghost town of Calico. It was only a three mile drive from where we were, so we decided to check it out. As we drove into town we saw a sign indicating it was \$8 per person to drive into the town. If people were there collecting money, then to me that's not a ghost town, so we decided against going into town and we resumed our drive to LA. We made it to our hotel in Downey at about 3 PM. There was a decent amount of traffic, but all in all it wasn't too bad. We are staying at an Embassy Suites in Downy which is really nice. It reminds me of the year (2007) I spent working in Oak Ridge, NJ, when I was staying at the Embassy Suites in Parsippany almost every other week. The staff is helpful and friendly and the nightly happy hour is the bomb. We ate so many appetizers at happy hour, we considered skipping dinner. Ultimately we decided to walk to the In-N-Out Burger which is a half mile from the hotel. After walking around Las Vegas yesterday in 100+ degree heat, it was nice taking a stroll with temperatures only in the upper 70s. Once there, our appetites quickly returned. This was only the second time I've been to an In-N-Out Burger (I have only been in LA one other time on a work trip), and it was the first ever time for the girls. The burgers and fries were both delicious, and the prices were very reasonable. I'll still like Five Guys Burgers and Fries slightly better in terms of overall quality, but in terms of value, i.e. quality to cost ratio, I think I have to give In-N-Out the nod. Following dinner the kids went for a swim in the hotel pool while Cindy and I researched activities for later in the week. It looks like we are going to start with a trip to Hollywood tomorrow, followed by some beach time later in the week.

Date: 19-July-2016 (Vacation Day #11 – Los Angeles, CA – Day Trip to Hollywood)

Blogger: Jeff

Our first full day in Los Angeles began with a drive to Hollywood. This was my first time driving in LA traffic and it actually wasn't too bad. It was stop and go, and it took us about an hour to go 20 miles, but all in all it wasn't any worse than I expected. After reaching Hollywood we were immediately approached about taking a tour. It was what we were planning to do, and it seemed like a pretty good deal, so we went for it. I'm glad we did. It was fun and informative. They took us up Mulholland drive where we got a really good view of the Hollywood sign. We stopped to enjoy the view and take pictures. I was surprised by how picturesque it was. After re-boarding the tour van we were taken on a tour through the Hollywood Hills seeing the houses of Matthew Perry, Danny Glover, Drew Carey, Bruno Mars, Gwen Stefani, and Quentin Tarantino to name a few. We also saw the house of Katy Perry (who of course shares that house with her cat, Kitty Purry). From there the drive took us through Beverly Hills

where we saw even more celebrity homes including the former home of Michael Jackson, the Aaron Spelling Mansion, and the Playboy Mansion. We also saw several areas that were used in movies. Areas such as the Wilshire Hotel from the movie "Pretty Woman." Danielle was especially excited when we passed Chin Chin, the favorite restaurant of the Kardashians. My kids have been on a "Keeping up with the Kardashians" kick since school ended, so later on we fulfilled their request to find the store "Dash" which is co-owned by the Kardashian daughters. The least expensive items in the store were autographed pencils for \$4, so each of the girls bought one as a souvenir, and of course we took plenty of pictures of them in front of the store holding their "Dash" bags.

After getting back from the Hollywood/Beverly Hills tour, we walked the Hollywood Walk of Fame, checking out the stars on the sidewalk and the souvenir shops. Courtney bought a t-shirt, Danielle a purse, and Allison bought gifts for the Fab Four (get well soon Elena!). The girls were consistently on the lookout for Kardashians and other celebrities, but the only actual celebrity we saw was Pat O'Brien, the former host of "Access Hollywood," among other jobs. While on the Walk of Fame, we picked up tickets to see a taping of the game show Jeopardy on Wednesday. It looks like that will be on our agenda for tomorrow. In between our touring and souvenir shopping we stopped for dinner at the Kino Sushi Asian Fusion Restaurant. Only Cindy and Allison actually had sushi, but everything everyone ordered was really good. The drive back to the hotel was about the same as in the morning, about an hour to drive 20 miles.

Today we had our first medical incident. For the past few days Courtney has been complaining about pain in her toe. Up to this point we've just been prescribing ice before bedtime, but today it appeared as if it were infected. After gutting it out for the day, Cindy took her to a walk in clinic this evening. They gave her an antibiotic which should hopefully clears things up, but it looks like she'll be out of commission for swimming for the next few days. My guess is that suffered a small cut on her toe on Day #7 at Slide Rock State Park, but we really don't know for sure how she got this infection. It looks like just a minor issue so for now we are just going to limit the amount of walking a bit and of course avoid activities like swimming which could lead to additional exposure to bacteria.

Date: 20-July-2016 (Vacation Day #12 – Los Angeles, CA – Sony Studios to watch "Jeopardy!" Recording & the Beaches)

Blogger: Jeff

Today began with a trip to Sony studios to be part of the studio audience for the television game show "Jeopardy!" Being part of the studio audience for the recording of a television show was something I had wanted to do on this trip, but our initial research before we left on the trip made us think we wouldn't be able to do it. Most shows don't allow children to attend. I guess Jeopardy! is one of the few that do because we were given tickets yesterday while in Hollywood. It was a cool experience to be a part of the show, and the entire process was an interesting learning experience. First as newbies, we made the mistake of leaving our cell phones in the car. It says right on the tickets to do that, but no one else paid attention to that, and no one at the studio enforced it. They just insisted you turn them completely off at the beginning of filming. So unfortunately we weren't able to get any pictures at the studio, a minor inconvenience to an otherwise very interesting experience. Pretty much from the time you exit your vehicle in the parking garage until you re-enter your vehicle to leave, you

are under the supervision of a studio employee. If you need to use the bathroom, they escort you to it. When it's time to wait in line at the studio entrance, they walk you across the lot to get there. The studio lot is like a small city within itself. People riding bicycles and golf carts pass you by and it's not hard to catch glimpses of people building sets and painting props. By the time we reached the studio we had been there for about an hour, waiting in lines, passing through metal detectors, etc. The studio held about 100-150 people and was full. We were in the middle of the stage but in the last row. Still, the seats were very good. After watching the pre-production process for a few minutes we were greeted by the show's announcer, Johnny Gilbert. He explained what would be happening and gave us a little background on the show. This was only the second day of filming for the new season. It's the 33rd season of Jeopardy! and he and Alex Trebek were the only crew members with the show for all 33 seasons. They were filming 5 episodes today, of which we were in the audience for 3. A second separate audience would be there for the last 2 episodes which would be filmed in the afternoon. Our episodes will air September 19 through 21 (so tune in for them!). They are episodes 7,361 through 7,363 of Jeopardy!!! I was surprised at how many mistakes were made during the taping. On the very first question the contestant chose a \$400 question and Alex read the \$200 dollar question by mistake, so they had to start the game over. Also, at almost every commercial break they had to re-record Alex reading one or more of the questions because of a mispronunciation. Midway through the second game they stopped the show for more than 10 minutes while the judges debated whether or not "Elvan" was an acceptable question to the answer, "the fictional language created by J.R.R. Tolkien for his novel, 'The Hobbit.'" The question they were looking for was, "what is Elvish." Check out the September 20th show and that 10 minute stop will take 10 seconds in Hollywood time I'm sure.

After our Jeopardy! experience we left to explore a couple of the Los Angeles beaches. Our first stop was Venice Beach. We walked at least 10 or so blocks down the asphalt walk (the West Coast's version of a boardwalk) and took in all of the sights. First we passed Muscle Beach where a television crew was filming football players working out for the upcoming television show, "Hollywood & Football." This will be a 6 part reality show which will air on E! Channel this fall. I didn't recognize any of the players so I'm guessing they were either linemen or rookies. Shortly after passing Muscle Beach we came upon a skate park which was packed with skateboarders. We hung out there for close to an hour watching the various skaters. My favorite was a teenager named Matt who made at least 25 unsuccessful attempts at a kickflip down a stairwell. By the time we left he had built a following of at least two dozen people who, after every unsuccessful attempt, egged him into having another try. I got some of this failed attempts on video. By the time we left he still hadn't landed a successful attempt. Danielle's favorite skater was a pretty boy with long blonde hair who she affectionately referred to as "Blondie." I thought the girls were going to pass out when he took off his shirt. Danielle's iPod is now completely full with pictures of Blondie.

After a couple of hours at Venice Beach we drove a few miles north to Santa Monica. The beach there was a little more upscale and a little more crowded. We made our way out onto the Santa Monica Pier, where we admired the views and took more pictures. There were several musical artists on the Pier and a couple of them were quite good. We had dinner at The Albright on the Pier which was a seafood shack similar to what you'd find in and around Boston. It was good, but probably not in the Top half of restaurants at which we have eaten thus far. Following dinner we walked some more, this time into the downtown area. After that, we headed to the arcade where Danielle played a few games. Later we watched the sunset before heading back to the hotel and calling it an evening.

Date: 21-July-2016 (Vacation Day #13 – Los Angeles, CA – Golf 'N Stuff in Norwalk, CA)

Blogger: Jeff

Today was a bit of a rest day for us. We did a few fun things, but we certainly took a rest from driving as everything we did today was within a few miles of our hotel. My day started early with a trip to the laundromat to launder our dirty clothes since this was our last full day in Los Angeles and we wanted clean clothes for the drive to San Francisco. We gave the girls a chance to sleep in for the first time in several days and I think they appreciated it. Once everyone got moving we drove a short distance to the Golf 'N Stuff family fun center in Norwalk. This is the same Golf 'N Stuff that was featured in my third favorite movie of all time, *The Karate Kid* ([click here to see my Top 50 movies of all-time list](#)). It was the site of Daniel LaRusso's and Ali Mills' first date. I rode on the same bumper boats they did, and saw the photo machine where they first had their picture first taken. It was pretty cool and fun for me to be there. The kids, who were all born at least 15 years after that movie was made, had a good time as well. There weren't many people there since it was the middle of the day on a weekday, so we got extra time on the rides. Our favorite ride was the go-karts, and I was surprise at the girls' driving skills. After a few turns on the go-karts and a round of mini-golf we played arcade games and collected prize tickets. Allison was playing the "Quick Drop" game and doing quite well. In this game a lazy susan type carousel with buckets spins below a dispensing tube which drops balls above the spinning buckets. The player has to push a button when each bucket is positioned correctly to receive the balls. All 50 balls have to be collected within about 30 seconds time. The progressive jackpot had reached its maximum of 1,000 tickets, so the payoff was significant. As Allison was playing I noticed she wasn't using all of her allotted time, and each game she was missing at least a few balls. She was trying to get 5 or 6 balls in per bucket. During one of her failed tries I timed the game to see how many total buckets there were for the allotted time. There were 14. We divided that into the total number of 50 balls and found she needed to score just over 3.5 balls per bucket. She then focused on trying to get just 4 balls in per bucket. After just another 2 or 3 tries she got the full 50 balls in and won the 1,000 ticket jackpot. Just another way mathematics relates to our everyday life. Allison used her tickets to buy us both souvenir Golf 'N Stuff t-shirts which I greatly appreciated.

Following our day of mini-golf and arcade games we headed to Olive Garden for all you can eat salad and breadsticks. For the Olive Garden haters I know it's not real Italian, but it sure hit the spot. After dinner Cindy and I took a drive to our favorite grocery store, Aldi's Food Market. The Aldi's here in Downey is brand new and much larger than our Aldi's in Elkton, yet the prices were just as good if not better than the one in Elkton. A pint of strawberries was just \$0.85. You can't beat that (unless you could find them for \$0.84 or less...). On the ride back from Aldi's we noticed a frozen yogurt place just a block and a half from our hotel, so we saddled up the kids and headed out for a walk. The yogurt place was in a courtyard plaza which had fountains and was very nice. We ate our yogurt there, enjoying the twilight of Southern California. I have been having a great time on this trip thus far. I expected our previous stops at Four Corners, in Flagstaff, and in Las Vegas to be fun, but the fun we had here was a bit unexpected for me. LA is definitely a place I want to come back to someday, but for tomorrow we move on to Northern California.

Date: 22-July-2016 (Vacation Day #14 – Los Angeles, CA to San Francisco, CA)

Blogger: Jeff

The drive from Downey to San Francisco was a long but scenic one. We rode the Pacific Coastal Highway (Route 1) for a portion of the drive and US Route 101 for a portion. On the PCH we had magnificent views of the ocean and coastline. On Route 101 we had views of the mountains and local farming communities. As we approached San Francisco, we drove through the scenic forested mountains along Route 280. After arriving at our hotel and unpacking the car, we took a walk to the Fisherman's Wharf area. Our hotel is only two blocks from the historic Lombard Street and only about six blocks from the Wharf. We had dinner at The Buena Vista, a small tavern famous for their Irish coffee (although we didn't try it). Dinner was good, and afterward we walked more of the Wharf to scout other possible restaurants and shops for tomorrow night. The best thing about today was the weather. We donned long sleeves for the first time. After temps in the 90s in Flagstaff and Los Angeles, and temperatures reaching 110 in Las Vegas, the high 60s in San Francisco were quite welcome.

Date: 23-July-2016 (Vacation Day #15 – San Francisco, CA – Day Trip to Muir Woods)

Blogger: Jeff

Our first full day in San Francisco began with a bus tour to Muir Woods which is a Redwood forest just north of San Francisco. A bus picked us up at our hotel and took us to Tour Office where we caught a second bus that took us to the forest. On our way we passed over the Golden Gate Bridge. It was predictably foggy but we still got some good views, both of the bridge and of the bay. From there it was up and down a windy road to get to Muir Woods. Once there we had about 2 hours to walk through the woods, take pictures, and visit the gift shop and visitor center. Danielle was able to stamp her National Parks Passport with the Muir Woods stamp which they had at the Visitor's Center. The walk through the low section of the woods was very nice, and it was great not having to drive there, but I wish we would have had just a bit more time to hike deeper into the forest. This was my second time to Muir Woods (the first time for Cindy and the kids). My recollection from the first time I visited about 20 years ago was that the best views came after hiking into the woods about a mile or so. Regardless, there was still plenty to see. Following Muir Woods, the bus took us to Sausalito. We had the option to exit the bus there and take a ferry back to San Francisco, but we opted for the bus ride back knowing we were planning a boat ride for tomorrow. After a short stop back to the hotel for lunch, we took a walk down Polk Street and Union Street to check out the shopping district near where we are staying. There wasn't as much as we thought there would be in that area, but we did find a couple of pet stores and we purchased a few dog treats to take home to Konnie.

Today was once again another awesome weather day. Temperatures tickled the low 70s, and the sun was out all day. In the evening we took a walk onto Municipal Pier, where we got some great views and pictures of both the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz. While on the pier we also saw a seal swimming through the bay feasting on the bait fish swimming close to the pier. We found a National Parks Visitor's Center in the wharf area and Danielle was able to get her passport stamped there as well. We had dinner at Lou's Fish Shack. We all ordered soup in bread bowls. Danielle had clam chowder, and the rest of us had Dungeness crab bisque. We did a bit more walking and souvenir

shopping following dinner. We returned to the beach area near the Municipal Pier area to watch the sunset. The sun went down over the Golden Gate Bridge giving us another great opportunity for photos. After sundown we walked to the Ben & Jerry's ice cream shop for a late evening treat. It was a nice way to end another fun day.

Date: 23-July-2016 (Vacation Day #15 – San Francisco, CA – Day Trip to Muir Woods)

Blogger: Cindy (Special Addendum)

As we were walking to get our ice cream, an older gentleman in a wheel chair was approaching our direction and as we looked at him we noticed he was completely naked, and talking to himself. He continued along the sidewalk. I laughed a bit and spoke to the people walking behind us, asking them if I had just seen what I thought I had just seen. The girls said they had seen him earlier in the day but he was wearing his underwear or something. We proceeded to Ben & Jerry's for ice cream even though we lost our appetites at that dreadful sight. We saw him again as we began our walk back to the hotel, sitting along the beach. We saw other people laughing in disbelief.

Date: 24-July-2016 (Vacation Day #16 – San Francisco, CA – Day Trip to Alcatraz)

Blogger: Jeff

Our hotel is only a block away from Lombard Street. We are about three steep blocks from the top of the famous street, and before this morning none of us were up to the task of climbing all the way up to the top, but today Courtney and I felt up to it so we began our day with a trek to the top of Lombard Street. Once there we took pictures, ventured to a dog park, and to a playground with basketball and tennis courts in that general area, and took more pictures of the view of the north side of San Francisco. To the south side, Lombard street serpentine back and forth down the steep hill through a sea of flower beds. We took more pictures on that side as well, and we had a good view of the Bay Bridge. After we finished taking our pictures and videos we headed to the Wharf area where we met Cindy, Allison, and Danielle at In-N-Out Burger for one last meal at the fast food chain that can only be found on the West Coast. The place was swarmed and we had about a 30 minute wait before we could even order our food. Why In-N-Out doesn't expand past the West Coast I'll never know. They have McDonald's beat by a mile.

After lunch we had some time to kill before our tour to Alcatraz so we stopped at Pier 39 for some more shopping. I found the NFL store but there wasn't much in there other than hats and t-shirts. We also found an Alcatraz gift shop where I was able to do a little reading on Alcatraz from one of the many books they had for sale. Ultimately we walked on to Pier 33 where we queued up to board our boat to the Alcatraz Island. We rode on the top deck of the boat to get the best views of the bay, but it was a bitterly cold ride with the wind. In about 15 minutes we were on the island that was once home to some of our country's most infamous criminals. Once there we had another steep walk to reach the top of the island where the actual prison building stood. We took an audio tour of the prison which was really cool. The tour was narrated by both former guards and former inmates. They told stories of the living conditions, the prison riots, and the escape attempts. It was both interesting and educational. A

lot of the island was inaccessible for safety reasons, but we explored the areas that we could. I was surprised by how many birds there were on the island. They nest in the areas inaccessible to the humans and their populations are certainly thriving. It hasn't rained on the island for some time and therefore there was more bird crap on the island than I had ever seen before in my life. It wasn't a deterrent though, and the experiencing of going to the island and taking the tour was one of my favorite experiences on the trip thus far. I definitely recommend the boat ride to Alcatraz and the narrated tour of the prison to anyone who ever travels to the Bay area. It was a great experience.

On the boat ride back to the city we sat on the lower section of the boat to stay protected from the cold breeze. It was a less scenic but more pleasant ride back to San Francisco. Once back on the mainland we walked back to the northern side of the wharf area looking for a pizza restaurant. We ended up eating at Cioppino's Italian restaurant, but it wasn't the restaurant we were originally targeting, and we didn't realize that until we were already seated and had ordered drinks and eaten their bread. The only pizzas on the menu were personal pizzas and they were way overpriced. Regardless, we ordered a couple of different ones to share as well as a salad. At least the pizzas were good, making their high price somewhat tolerable. Following dinner, we found a place for ice cream before walking back to the hotel for one last night in the city by the Bay.

Date: 25-July-2016 (Vacation Day #17 – San Francisco, CA to Sonora, CA)

Blogger: Jeff

Since we arrived in San Francisco we did not use the car at all. We either walked, took a bus, or took a boat for our travels in the Bay area. It was a nice two full day break from driving, but it all resumed today as we began heading eastward to our home with a relatively short drive to Sonora, CA, which sits just outside of Yosemite National Park. But before we left San Francisco, we made one last stop at a vista point, on the south side of the Golden Gate Bridge. It was one last chance for pictures of the bridge in the fog before we drove over it and said goodbye to San Francisco. From there it was over the Richmond Bridge, through Oakland, and into central California. It didn't take long for the temperature to rise from the high 50s into the low 100s. We arrived in Sonora shortly before Noon. Our hotel room wasn't quite ready so we had a quick bite to eat in Sonora and headed out for Yosemite. The drive from Sonora to the park was a long and winding one that included a five-mile ascent into the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The elevation in Sonora is less than 2,000 feet, and by the time we reached Yosemite, we were close to 7,000 feet. At least that led to slightly lower temperatures in the park.

Our friends Melissa and Kyle Jordan were in Yosemite last week, and posted pictures of themselves standing in the Giant Sequoia "tunnel tree." That's the one large enough to drive a car through. We were a bit jealous of that, so our first mission was to find that tree. It's located in the Tuolumne Grove which we found about 10 or so miles into the park. It was a mile long hike to find the tree. The hike there wasn't too bad because it was all downhill. The hike back was a bit tougher since it was all uphill and we were in 90+ degree heat. The trees in the grove were awesome. They were much bigger in diameter than the trees we saw in Muir Woods. We saw several large Giant Sequoias on the hike and stopped for photo ops before eventually finding the tunnel tree. We all had our picture taken inside the tree. I estimate that the tunnel inside the tree was at least 7 feet wide and 11 feet tall. My estimates are based on the fact I could stand inside the tree with my arms outstretched and not touch the sides by

a good half foot on either side. I also couldn't jump and touch the top by a good foot. At one of the information boards we learned that the tree was carved way back in 1878. It was a pretty amazing site. Also while driving to and through Yosemite, it was amazing to see the amount of forest land that was recently burned in wildfires.

After hiking back to our car, we drove further into the park, eventually reaching what they call "Yosemite Valley." Along the way we stopped at several viewpoints, including one where we could clearly see the "Half Dome" granite rock formation. One side of the formation is a sheer face while the other three sides are smooth and round, making it appear like a dome cut in half. We also saw several picturesque water falls. Once in the valley we stopped at the Visitor's Center and the Village General Store. Danielle was able to get her passport stamped and I purchased a key chain for my collection. On the drive out of the park we were treated to one last special sight. Just off the side of the road, grazing within a few feet of us, we saw three young elk, all bucks. We were much closer to these elk than the ones we saw in Flagstaff, and Cindy was able to get some really good pictures.

We forewent eating dinner in the park so we could get through the curvy mountain roads before dark. Shortly after exiting the park we stopped at a fruit and vegetable stand in the small town of Buck Meadows. Cindy picked up some strawberries and plums which made for a nice snack. She also bought and consumed an avocado. Once over the mountain, we saw a billboard for McDonald's which prompted Danielle to generate a craving for chicken McNuggets. The McDonald's was just a mile or two from our hotel, and it was getting late, so we deferred to Danielle's hankering and stopped there for dinner. In addition to her McNuggets, Danielle also got a stuffed wiener dog in her happy meal which she named Jesminder. She is now Puppy's friend. We made it 16 days before we succumbed and ate at McDonald's, so I guess that's not too bad.

Date: 26-July-2016 (Vacation Day #18 – Sonora, CA to Salt Lake City, UT)

Blogger: Jeff

We had a slow start to the day, as we overslept our alarm by 45 minutes. Then we had to wait abnormally long at breakfast. The complimentary breakfast was a sit down affair, and the restaurant was understaffed. The food was good which was their saving grace. We were on the road by 8:20 AM, but it was slow going as we had to cross the Sierra Nevada mountain range via the Sonora Pass. This was the quickest route to Salt Lake City per Google Maps, but evidently their algorithms didn't factor in my fear of heights and how slowly I would take it through the mountain passes. The steep ascents, frequent switchbacks, and snowcapped mountaintops made me feel like I was in the Tour de France. I'd really love to attempt these climbs on my bike someday, but for today it was just slow going in the car. The first 75 miles of the day took us about two and a half hours, and at that point we still weren't back on interstate roads. It wasn't until about 2 PM that we finally picked up Interstate 80 and could begin cruising at speeds above 60 mph.

Just before reaching I-80, we stopped in Fallon, Nevada for lunch. We ate at a Jack in the Box which is another Western only fast food chain. Cindy wanted to eat in one before we left the West, so we took this opportunity. Knowing we were running late, we quickly got back on the road and ate while in the car. Our next stop was for gas in Battle Mountain, Nevada. We also switched drivers at that point as

Cindy took over to give me some respite and of course some time to blog... After about three more hours we reached West Wendover, Nevada, which is just a mile west of the Utah border. We had dinner at a Pizza Hut there. The Nevada/Utah border was also the time zone border, so we lost an hour at that point and by the time we finished our dinner it was 9 PM in the Mountain Time Zone. We still had 120 miles to go to Salt Lake City. I resumed driving, and by the time we left West Wendover, it was beginning to get dark. This was the first time in our 18 days thus far that we were driving in the dark. It was unfortunate too, because we missed seeing the sand flats of Western Utah, and we also missed seeing the Great Salt Lake as we approached the city, although it was neat seeing the lights of Salt Lake City as we drove in. Those final two hours of driving in the dark were the toughest so far. I was tired of listening to music, and Cindy was tired of me listening to the Fantasy Sports station on Sirius, so we passed the time by listening to a few [ESFFL Podcasts](#). That was good for a few laughs at least. We reached the hotel at 11 PM and were in bed by midnight. Not bad considering our early day delays and the terrain we traversed today.

Date: 27-July-2016 (Vacation Day #19 – Salt Lake City, UT to Hill City, SD)

Blogger: Jeff

We had another sit down breakfast this morning, but the service was a little quicker today and the food was also very good. Not wanting to leave Salt Lake City without seeing at least a little something of interest, we acted on Courtney's suggestion to drive past East High School which was the setting for the movie, "High School Musical." The school was also the alma mater for actors Roseanne Barr and Richard Moll. We took a few pictures there before heading back out on the road. It only took about an hour before we reached the Wyoming border. It was a long drive through Wyoming however, as we did not reach South Dakota until about 6 PM. In route we suffered two more automobile calamities. First, a stone or something fell off a tractor trailer which was passing us in the opposite direction and cracked our windshield. It looks like the crack is small enough it won't pose a problem such that we can wait and fix it when we get home, but shortly after that happened our left rear blinker went out. We lost the right blinker earlier in the trip so I guess we were due to lose this one as well. We will look for another Jiffy Lube to replace the blinker and get another oil change which we are almost due for anyway.

On our travels today we passed through several more scenic areas including mountains, lakes, rock formations, and more canyons. We also passed through a spot just south of Casper, Wyoming, which featured red rock formations similar to those we saw in Sedona, Arizona two weeks ago. We saw deer crossing the road one car in front of us just a few miles prior to arriving at our hotel in Hill City, South Dakota. We got to the hotel at about 7:30, and checked in before heading out for dinner. We noticed a warning sign for big horn sheep on the road leading to the hotel, so we took a quick drive before dinner to see if we could spot any big horns in the twilight hours. After a drive of about two miles we gave up on looking for sheep and went back to downtown Hill City area to find a spot for dinner. We ate at the Hub Cap Diner, a 50's joint on the south end of town. I had my first ever bison burger, and I have to admit that it was pretty good, although if someone had told me it was a beef burger, I would have never known the difference. After dinner we returned to the hotel and the girls went for a quick swim before the pool closed at 10.

Date: 28-July-2016 (Vacation Day #20 – Hill City, SD – Day Trip to Mount Rushmore)

Blogger: Courtney

We started off our day with a hot breakfast buffet at the Best Western Plus hotel. The original plan was to head out to Mount Rushmore following breakfast, but due to precipitation, we decided to put it off until later in the morning. After breakfast, we drove up to Rapid City, where Dad could get the car worked on by getting an oil change, left blinker repair, and temporary fix to our cracked windshield. While Dad was at Super Lube, the rest of us hit up the local Wal-Mart to stock up on snacks, drinks, and entertainment. We decided to purchase some salads and drinks from Wal-Mart for lunch. Dad met us at Wal-Mart following our transaction. We left Rapid City and went to Mount Rushmore. Arriving at the National Monument, we paid the \$11 entrance fee (which is good until 2017) parked, and entered the park area. We got to see the monument and walk around a trail to see it from different angles. We also went to the gift shops. We left the park about 2 hours later, and headed to the town of Keystone to eat our lunch and to do some more shopping. After not finding much there, we went to the Crazy Horse monument to get a sneak peak of the construction of the monument. Then we headed back to Hill City to do some more shopping.

Date: 29-July-2016 (Vacation Day #21 – Hill City, SD to Bloomington, MN)

Blogger: Jeff

With three long days of driving ahead of us, we decided to get an early start this morning, eating breakfast right when the hotel restaurant opened at 6:30 AM. We thought we would have the restaurant to ourselves, but there was a tour bus of retired people already there who were tying up the buffet lines. It didn't delay us too much, but we departed the hotel at about the same time the bus did and we ended up following them for the first hour of our drive. The trip across South Dakota was a long one. Cindy assisted with some of the driving which was a big help. We arrived at the hotel in Bloomington, Minnesota, at about 6:30 PM. Bloomington is a suburb of Minneapolis and home to the Mall of America, the United States' largest shopping mall based on total number of stores. The King of Prussia Mall (which is two separate malls, The Court and The Plaza) is considered the largest mall in the U.S. based on total square footage, but the Mall of America has more stores, and also has more Roller Coasters and Ferris Wheels. I've been to The Court and The Plaza many times, and they are not in the same class as the Mall of America. The layout of this mall is much better and contains a full amusement park. It's a three story square building with an anchor store on each corner, Sears, Nordstrom's, Macy's, and Crayola Experience. Along the periphery of each floor there are the standard shoe stores, jewelry stores, and other typical mall stores. In the middle of the mall is the amusement park, and also an 18-hole miniature golf course, and a zip line. There are two food courts, one on the third floor which overlooks the amusement park. There are also a lot of standalone restaurants. We wanted to eat at Rainforest Café, but the wait there was pretty long so we settled for the Cadillac Ranch. The food there was good, but the service left a little to be desired. Another thing I noticed about this mall is how much it catered to parents. Older kids could certainly be left at the amusement park, and there was a daycare there right in the mall for younger kids. That certainly helps support sales at Christmas times I'm sure. Following our trip to the mall we returned to the hotel so we could get a good night's sleep before another long day of driving. On our way to the elevator we passed by the pool area where a bunch of

kids were exiting the pool to get back to their rooms. They were getting water on the floor, and as we passed by Danielle slipped and fell onto the floor, ending up with a nice size brush burn on her arm. Just when we thought our uneventful day was over, we had that little mishap right before bed. Danielle was okay, but it did give us a bit of a scare.

Date: 30-July-2016 (Vacation Day #22 – Bloomington, MN to Toledo, OH)

Blogger: Jeff

The Courtyard by Marriott we stayed at last night didn't include breakfast so we made an early morning stop at McDonald's. I love sausage biscuits, but not having a complimentary breakfast was a big strike against the Courtyard Chain. Regardless, having a few sausage biscuits in my belly was necessary for another long day of driving. Our first stop after breakfast was at a cheese store just north of Madison, Wisconsin. Ehlenbach's Cheese Chalet in DeForest, Wisconsin had a nice sign and a huge Cow statue in the parking lot but not the huge selection of cheeses I was expecting. We did pick up a few packs of curds and whips, and they were good, but I was hoping to show the girls a true Wisconsin cheese supermarket like I've seen on past trips to Milwaukee, but this store wasn't it. Still, it was a nice break from the road.

We ended our day's journey at another Courtyard by Marriott, this one just outside of Toledo, Ohio. After 22 days on the road we were ready for some good home cooking so we settled for the next best thing, Cracker Barrel. The meal was good, but the service was even worse than last night. Overall however, our track record of hotels and restaurants has been pretty good on this trip.

Date: 31-July-2016 (Vacation Day #23 – Toledo, OH to Elkton, MD)

Blogger: Jeff

Our vacation came to an end today with an 8 hour or so drive over familiar roads. I'm am both happy to be home and a bit sad that the fun of new experiences had to come to an end. We hit a few patches of rain on the ride home, but other than that the drive was rather uneventful. We took the more northern route through Pennsylvania (Route 76 vs. Route 70) thinking that would be the quicker way to get home, but we forgot about the Amish Mafia and how they tie up Route 896 on Sunday afternoons. Despite the slowdowns so close to home, we pulled into our driveway at 4:42 PM. Our dog Konnie was certainly happy to see us. It will be nice sleeping in my own bed tonight, but I will miss those breakfast buffets and sight-seeing trips.

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