

Planning a road trip in North America

Andrew Newman

I did my first trip to the US and Canada in the mid-seventies for six weeks. I was on my way home from exchange teaching in the UK.

Since then I have travelled extensively in the US and Canada and prefer to travel by road whenever possible as you see stunning scenery and meet wonderful friendly people. Our daughters have lived and worked in the US at different times and this also meant we visited them and combined that with seeing the country.

Driving in North America is easy and since GPS arrived on the navigation scene it makes it even better. The roads are generally stunning compared to our third world efforts at roads and are well signposted and generally well maintained.

I am not an expert on travelling in North America but am very happy to share my/our experiences when travelling in this fabulous continent. Please contact me if you'd like to know more.

Recent trips (i.e. in the last 15 years) have involved travelling up the West Coast, through the Rockies and across Middle America to the East Coast. We have also travelled up the centre by following the Mississippi River from New Orleans to the source north of Minneapolis. We have also travelled all around Florida, North and South Carolina, New Mexico, California, Nevada, Alaska and Canada.

1. Some tips that may be useful

Flights and stopovers

- We try to have a stop in California on the way over as the trip of some 14 hours, plus the additional time you have to be at the airport to check in, takes its toll on the body. We try to be active after arriving as this will generally be in the morning, and then we hit the bed after an early dinner. We find this assists with jet lag.
- On the return leg of the trip, we always plan to be in California at least one or two days before we fly home to ensure we connect with our flight. Snow and other issues can affect connections and the last thing we ever want is to miss the flight.
- When we are flying out the next day we select an airport hotel that has a shuttle service to the airport. This allows us to return the rental car the evening before and use the shuttle back to the airport.
- When flying between cities we try to fly with an airline such as Southwest which allows you two bags each. Some airlines charge for any bag and a few allow only one bag. Always check. Smaller airports are often much friendlier and easier to navigate, and Southwest uses some of these.

Hotels and accommodation

- When we have a car, we often stay out of the cities as the hotels are usually very good, parking is free and most include breakfast. Some even include manager's specials in the evening which mean free drinks and nibbles for an hour or two. You only have to tip the bartender.
- In addition, we often check to see what's the best means of travel from the hotel into the city. In New Jersey, for example, the hotel we stayed at last November had a shuttle that took us to the train station and collected us when we came back.
- Finally, in New York, our hotel was only three train stops from Penn station in Manhattan. You don't need a car in Manhattan, as having driven there it can be very SLOW and frustrating. The subway is excellent and safe.

- Some hotels have small kitchens included and this allows you to eat in if you so desire. After a few weeks of eating out it is often nice to make your own. We always carry a tube of vegemite and tea and coffee bags. Most American hotels have coffee making machines, but generally only give you enough for two cups of coffee. All hotels have ice machines, and if you want to carry a small esky you can fill it with ice for free.
- Where possible, book your hotels well in advance as you will be able to read reviews, and usually get a better deal in terms of cost. There are plenty of providers such as Expedia. Most are paid for in advance and you therefore do not get caught with increases or taxes.

Food

- American meals are often so large one helping is enough for two people. Look at what others have on their table and make a decision based on this.
- When travelling during the day, we often call in at Walmart or other supermarkets and get lunch there. Most supermarkets have very extensive takeout meals, such as wraps, sandwiches, salads, soups, drinks and so on. They are much more extensive than anything like this in Australia. It is often the healthiest option you will find.

Money

- Always take into account that the price of something does not include the tax. Most states have a tax of between 8% and 14% that is added after your purchase. An item for \$1.99 is more likely to be \$2.20 for example.
- In addition you are expected to tip. I hate the whole idea of tipping, but waiters get next to nothing per hourly rate and live off what you leave as a tip. Tips on meals are generally 15 -20%, but work it out after you have deducted the tax. If you want to avoid the tip, order take away and eat it in your hotel room.
- Carry as many \$1 notes as you can as tolls and tips will erode them quickly.

Rental cars

- We generally use *rentalcars.com* (previously *traveljigsaw*) to rent cars. We have used them around the world and have not had an issue and the rental includes insurance plus return with a full tank. If renting and returning to a different location check to see if there is a one way fee. The one way fee is usually US \$500 and applies, for example, when we drove from San Francisco to New York, and also on our trip last November/December when we drove from Salt Lake City to New York. Fuel is cheap in the US and Canada but keep an eye on what competing service stations are charging as it can vary enormously.
- Having TomTom or some other app of North America on your phone can save you paying for a GPS which used to be US \$10 a day. Just take your charger for the car and a holder and cable.
- The NRMA has reciprocal rights with the American Automobile Association. This can sometimes give you discounts and allows you to access their maps and services. We used them extensively before TomTom.

Shopping

- If you are into shopping, America has great factory outlets. We always leave this until we return to California and then visit the Citadel Outlets, a huge outlet establishment in Los Angeles. This means we have not had to carry the purchases around on our travels.

2. A few stunning places to consider visiting

North America has some stunningly beautiful geography and sites. Listed below are some of our favourites:

- **Glacier National Park** on the border with Canada – The Road to the Sun is simply breathtaking. Only open in summer months due to heavy snow falls but stunning.
- **The Canadian Rockies** – Across the border is the Icefields Parkway, Banff and stunning scenery of the Canadian Rockies.

- **The Columbia River Gorge** – This is located east of Portland and has some spectacular waterfalls and vistas.
- **Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons** – Yellowstone is the world's biggest volcano and the scenery is fabulous. The wildlife, waterfalls etc are breathtaking. We have stayed at West Yellowstone a couple of times at the Grey Wolf Inn. It was good value and well maintained. Eating in some of the local venues was a bit like you were in the Wild West saloons.
- **The Grand Canyon** – We have visited this a number of times and I rafted it with my son for a week covering 300km. Don't just go to the rim, travel along it and see how extensive it is. There are numerous places to get different perspectives. It is Grand.
- **Philadelphia** and the area around **Washington DC** – There is a great deal to see in this area and a drive across the Bay Bridge Tunnel is simply amazing. History buffs will enjoy **Williamsburg**, but stay a day or two and take in the history re-enactments as well as the tours at night, e.g. witches trial, ghost tour. Have a meal that replicates a meal from the early seventeen hundreds with a single candle for illumination on each table, e.g. rabbit pie, peanut soup. **Gettysburg** is not far from here and is definitely worth a visit.
- **Yosemite** – So well worth the drive to Yosemite. Stunning views and massive waterfalls.
- **Santa Fee** – If you are into art, Indian culture and Spanish influences in America then this is a place you must visit. Canal Road has over 400 art galleries. Then travel north to Taos and see the world heritage listed Indian pueblos. Santa Fee also has the oldest government building in the US.
- **Eastern Canada and North Eastern US in the Fall (Autumn)** – The colour is unbelievable and the small towns, covered bridges and history make for very memorable travelling.
- **Alaska** – Driving around Alaska we found stunning and more impressive than the Inside Passage. Off the beaten track is **Valdez** and it is really worth a visit especially if the salmon are returning to die. The bears stand near people and scoop fish out of the water without a care. There are so many glaciers and so many spectacular sites to see. Santa Claus has a full time home in North Pole, Fairbanks.



Victoria, British Columbia

3. Other places you will know about that are special

- **New York**
- **Washington DC** – especially the Smithsonian and monuments.
- **Niagara Falls** – Go to the Canadian side. The US side is nowhere near as spectacular and all the touristy things are on the Canadian side.
- Drive the Blue Ridge Parkway overlooking the **Shenandoah Valley**.
- **Las Vegas**
- **Seattle** – Great markets, Microsoft and Boeing factory tours.
- **Memphis** – Not to visit Gracelands but to experience Mud Island where there is an enormous replica of the entire Mississippi river system with



Sign in a car park in New York City taken from the Highline (a former railway line that is now a spectacular walk way)

information and history explained. (Did you know an earthquake in the early 1800's had the Mississippi flowing backwards for 4 days.)

- **Disney World Florida** and all the other resorts and theme parks. Much larger than Disneyland in California.
- **One not to bother with** – The Texas State Fair. Go to the Royal Easter Show in Sydney. It's much better.

Contributor details

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