

PARKS, PIT-STOPS AND BACKYARD AMERICA:
EXPLORING ROAD TRIP CULTURE IN 2017

HONORS THESIS

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the recent history and growing cultural trend of the American road trip. Defined as an extended trip or journey by car, road trips typically include roadside attractions, sight-seeing, embracing one's natural surroundings and a general openness to adventure or spontaneity. This thesis examines how road trips offer an escape from or way to connect differently with the world our typical lifestyles allow. With this definition in mind, this thesis recounts the author's own road trip, in which, traveling by car through the southwest United States, she documents her personal experience and findings through online posts and photography published on a website and written on these pages. This thesis seeks to identify and define this trend particularly among millennials and college students in 2017.

Website: <https://kathcoleman.wordpress.com/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Katherine Corinne Coleman, but everyone calls me “Katie.” I’m from San Antonio, Texas, and lived in the same house on the same cul-de-sac for 15 years. My brother is four and a half years older than I and was a senior at Texas State University when I was graduating from Ronald Reagan High School in the Stone Oak area. Over the years, and between the university’s seven name changes, my dad obtained his teacher’s certification at Southwest Texas State University; my grandparents earned their degrees at Southwest Texas State College, and my great-grandmother received her teacher’s certification back in the day at Southwest Texas State Teachers College. With my brother, already there, I would be the fifth Coleman in my family to attend the university. Before I knew it, I moved into Laurel Hall on campus that fall of 2013, following the footsteps of my ancestors and my namesake, my great-grandmother Corinne Coleman.

My sophomore year of high school, I began going on trips with my best friend, Callie, and her family. I would save Christmas, birthday and Easter money each year for these trips to pay my way. We went on five trips together: Florida (twice), New York, California and Washington. After the first trip, I’d caught the travel bug and couldn’t wait each summer for the next destination.

In October of 2015, I got news of a study abroad program to London and Paris with the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State. I was attending a graduate school informational session when I met Dr. Sandhya Rao, who invited me to an interest meeting for the trip. Before I knew it, my ticket was booked, it was July 2016 and I was across the world in Paris, France. I’d initially imagined I would enjoy London most,

as it was more familiar, but I was surprised to find that I liked Paris best, mostly because it wasn't so familiar. I spent two weeks in Europe, and returned with a greater wanderlust than ever. All I could think of was where I wanted my next trip to be.

Here we are now, my senior year, and writing my thesis. When the time came, I struggled to select a thesis topic, but ultimately came back to what I love most: travel. And thus, the adventure begin

THE BEGINNING

In typical American grade schools, a child is likely taught that beginning in the 1600s, Europeans moved West to make a better life for themselves, provide a greater opportunity for their children and their children's children, and to ultimately obtain what would become known as the "American Dream." While not on the same scale in today's culture, modern society still shows an interest in this type of western mobility – this search to find something for or within ourselves that will help life make sense. Often these tropes are found in the so-called road narrative, a term author Ann Brigham expands as the stories we seem to think are "foundational to an understanding of American identity," and that provide "freedom, rebellion, or reinvention." Perhaps, as Brigham notes, these road narratives capture us because they provide what Americans associate with the road – "a mythic space of possibility" where the traveler can use this mobility to break down cultural and social conflict in everyday life.

This idea has been translated across many mediums over the 20th and 21st centuries, and ultimately, it has become a tradition to pass on the notion that a road trip is something everyone should experience at least once. This uniquely American concept is prevalent among the young adult demographic, especially among college students. But, what about this concept of the road trip makes it so tempting to share with one another? What does it provide?

THE ROAD

Americans have always had a fascination with moving West. While we started traveling for survival, this later turned to an activity of leisure. Before the 1940s, no real network of roads existed. The creation of highways like the [Lincoln Highway](#), [Dixie Highway](#) and [U.S. Route 66](#) contributed to a desire to build more roads for leisure and traveling in the United States. According to John Jackle's novel [The Tourist](#), in the mid-to-late 1950s, these major highways began to reach their completion. As it became more common for households to own vehicles, Americans demanded new routes of transportation. President Dwight Eisenhower would go on to sign the [Highway Act of 1956](#), establishing a new 41,000-mile system of defense highways and limited-access interstate freeways to move military hardware. While federal agencies had the ability to move military equipment and personnel efficiently, this led to the growth of roadways that Americans craved. Eventually, the locally named highways would be renamed to the numbered road system and would go on to transform the road systems as we know them today.

The use of these roads, in road trips specifically, became more popular after wartime. Citizens were trying to return to the normality of life. Vacations were a way to ease the hardships and loss of war. But, because American citizens were still scared to travel abroad, local governments encouraged people to travel in their backyard. Novels like Julian Street's [Abroad at Home](#) suggest an alternative to European travel — a chance to get back to American roots and values. Brigham notes this behavior to be the source of skyrocketing RV sales after the 9/11 attacks — something that is “reminiscent of the [See America First campaign](#)” made popular in the early 20th century.

Just as the world is always changing, 2017 certainly changed from 2001. The rise of terrorist groups like [ISIS](#) have caused major hits to the travel industry, as in 2015, when it suffered a \$8.2 million loss, according to [Market Watch](#). Public attacks in popular tourist destinations like London, Paris, Brussels and Copenhagen significantly [reduced hotel revenue](#) as American tourists canceled their trips abroad. Now, the same post-war behaviors have begun to return, and with the rise of social media and online content, it's easier than ever to “travel abroad at home.”

Changing with the times

Before the internet, Americans relied on printed road maps for direction. Good planning was required to ensure enough gas, supplies and food to last until they reached their destination. Stray from the map or get lost, and you and your sense of direction were on your own. Of course, you could always ask a friendly stranger or call a taxi to come get you, but then that meant you'd not only found another human being in the middle of nowhere, but you'd also found a pay-phone. For those few who didn't own cars and needed to get across the country? They hitchhiked.

Today, travelers don't even need a road map. Cellphones have changed the way we do everything – especially travel. Need a ride? [Uber](#) or [Lyft](#) drivers are standing by to make a quick buck. Not sure where to go on your trip? Here are 15 social media enthusiast and online bloggers who've reviewed the destinations you're considering. Need more gasoline to continue your trip? Your Google Maps app will find the nearest gas station. Need to stop for some grub? TripAdvisor and Yelp will recommend the best place for dinner. How about a place to stay? [Kayak](#), [Travelocity](#) and [Booking.com](#) apps will help you find and reserve

rooms on a budget. In fact, what about an app that would do everything for you? [Roadtrippers](#) allows you to route your trip, book your hotel, find rest stops and restaurants and calculate your gas and mileage all within the app. Everything about the way we travel has changed.

INFLUENCES IN AMERICAN CULTURE

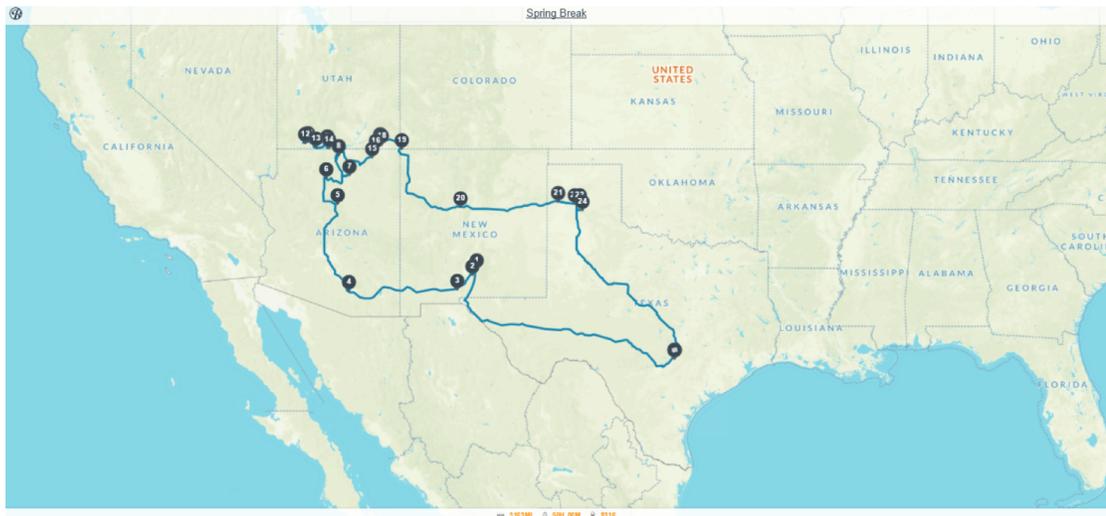
The concept of the road trip has been translated into works of film, literature, songs and other media. In the mid to late 1800s, writers and poets such as Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau dedicated poems and essays on the subject, and discussed the mysticism in the freedom that traveling provides. Jack Kerouac's "[On the Road](#)," would go on to epitomize the road trip novel, and result in a film adaptation of its own. Other films like [Easy Rider](#) (1969), [Thelma and Louise](#) (1991) and [Into the Wild](#) (2007) captured the ideas of freedom that Whitman and Thoreau suggested nearly a century before them. Even films like [National Lampoon's Vacation](#) (1983), [Almost Famous](#) (2000), [Little Miss Sunshine](#) (2006) and [Due Date](#) (2010), suggest the road is an unpredictable place where control is not something the journeyer should expect. Other adaptations, like the walking trips depicted in [Wild](#) (2014) and [A Walk in the Woods](#) (2015), aren't traditional road trips in the true sense of the word, but the idea behind the journeys are the same as the characters embrace the situations in which they're given, and develop a newfound freedom that comes with acceptance of opportunity.

- Songs
 - Bobby Troup "[Route 66](#)" (Popularized by Nat King Cole in 1961)
 - Willie Nelson "[On the Road Again](#)" (1980)
 - Tom Cochrane "[Life is a Highway](#)" (1991)
 - Johnny Cash "[I've Been Everywhere](#)" (1996)
- Poetry
 - Walt Whitman "[Song for the Open Road](#)" (1856)
 - Henry David Thoreau "[Walking](#)" (1862)

- Robert Louis Stevenson [“Travel”](#) (1850-1894)
- Novels/Memoirs
 - Jack Kerouac [On the Road](#) (1957)
 - Jon Krakauer [Into the Wild](#) (1995)
 - Bill Bryson [A Walk in the Woods](#) (1997)
 - Cheryl Strayed [Wild](#) (2012)
 - Gloria Steinem [My Life on the Road](#) (2015)
- Cinematic
 - [Easy Rider](#) (Dennis Hopper, 1969)
 - [National Lampoon’s Vacation](#) (Harold Ramis, 1983)
 - [Thelma & Louise](#) (Ridley Scott, 1991)
 - [RV](#) (Barry Sonnenfeld, 2006)
 - [Into the Wild](#) (Sean Penn, 2007)
 - [On the Road](#) (Walter Sille, 2010)
 - [Wild](#) (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2014)
 - [A Walk in the Woods](#) (Kevin Kwapis, 2015)
- Television
 - [Tiny House Movement](#):
 - [Tiny House, Big Living](#) (2014-)
 - [Tiny House Nation](#) (2014-)
 - [Tiny House Hunters](#) (2014-)



ITINERARY



Roadtripper App Map

Sunday 3/12

- Leave San Marcos, Texas in the early morning.
 - Drive 9 hours and 8 minutes
- Arrive to White Sand Dunes, New Mexico
 - Drive 56 minutes to hotel

Check into La Quinta Mesilla Valley (\$14 per person, overall \$70.49)

Monday 3/13

- Check out of Hotel
 - Drive 12 minutes to World's Largest Chili Pepper
 - Drive 4 hours and 11 minutes to Saguaro National Park in Arizona

- Go to Saguaro National Park, explore trails
 - Drive 3 hours and 49 minutes to Hotel
- Check into Route 66 - Days Inn Flagstaff (\$12.54 per person, \$62.70 overall)

Tuesday 3/14

- Checkout of Hotel
 - Drive 1 hour and 35 minutes to Grand Canyon National Park
- Go to Grand Canyon walking trails
 - Drive 1 hour and 8 minutes to Navajo Bridge
- Drive over Navajo Bridge
 - Drive 2 hours and 52 minutes to Watchman Campgrounds in Zion National Park, Utah
- Camping at Watchman Campgrounds (\$30 per vehicle, \$20 per campsite = \$50 so \$10 per person)
- Not a lot of options for food, so eat on the way or before getting to campgrounds

Wednesday 3/15

- Leave campgrounds by 11 am
 - Drive 2 minutes to Zion
- Go explore Zion National Park
 - Drive to Springdale for lunch
- Stay in Wetherill Inn in Kayenta, Arizona (\$100.57 overall and \$ 20.12 per person)
- For dinner eat fast food, or at Amigo Café: US Highway 163, Kayenta, AZ 86033

Thursday 3/16

- Leave Wetherill Inn in Kayenta
 - Drive 4 hours to the Four Corners Monument
- Go to Four Corners and take pictures
 - Drive 4 hours and 6 minutes to Albuquerque, New Mexico
- Stay in Albuquerque with family for the night

Friday 3/17

- Leave Albuquerque
 - Drive 4 hours to hotel in Amarillo
- Check into La Kiva Hotel and Conference Center in Amarillo (\$45.99 overall, \$9.20 per person)
- Visit the Big Texan Steak Ranch for dinner

Saturday 3/18

- Check out of hotel
 - Drive 8 hours and 3 minutes home
- Arrive home – San Marcos, Texas

<p>\$65.46 per person for room & board</p>
<p>\$63.20 per person approximately for gas</p>
<hr/> <p>Per person <u>\$128.66</u> (not including food, gifts or rental car)</p>
<p><i>Rental car: Enterprise = \$481.61</i></p>

Packing List

TO BUY

- Advil/Ibuprofen
- Any other daily meds
- Tums
- Vitamin C
- Echinacea
- Benadryl/allergy relief
- Tent tarps
- Travel size toiletries
- Extra tent stakes
- Paper plates
- Napkins/paper towels
- Flashlights
- Matches
- Lighter
- Bug spray
- Sunscreen
- All-purpose wipes
- Trash bags
- Tissues
- Hand sanitizer
- Shower caps (for dirty shoes)
- Gallons of water (3)
- Capri Sun
- Snacks (crackers, carrots, etc.)
- Loaf of bread
- Peanut butter/ jelly
- Assorted chips
- Cutlery

TO BRING

- Sydney's camera
- Rain jacket
- Sunglasses
- Chargers
- Extension cord
- Water bottle
- Notebook
- Itinerary
- Jumper cables
- Backpack/fanny pack
- Headphones
- Shampoo/conditioner/face wash
- Toothpaste/toothbrush
- First Aid Kit
- Tents (2)/ tarps (2)
- Sleeping bags (5)
- Pillow/blanket
- Gallon sized/sandwich baggies
- Cooler
- Tennis shoes
- Chaco's sandals
- Baseball cap
- Sunscreen
- Pajamas
- Clothes for seven days
- Eyeglasses
- Extra contacts/contact solution
- Hair products/ extra ponytail holders
- Wallets/cash/IDs/insurance cards

TRAVELERS

Katie Coleman



Katie is a senior journalism and mass communication major graduating in May 2017. Katie served as the chaplain for Sigma Phi Lambda, enjoys watching movies, and spending time with her family and friends.

Most excited for: The Grand Canyon

Best Road Trip Skill: Fits easily in small places (like the backseat of a minivan); writer

Sydney Allen



Sydney is a senior anthropology major at Texas State and will graduate in December 2017. Sydney can usually be found playing with her rescue dog, Sam; painting, playing video games and binge watching the latest TV show on Netflix.

Most excited for: Zion National Park

Best Road Trip Skill: Organizing in a pinch; photographer

Eric Bonnin



Eric is a senior elementary education major at the University of Texas at Austin graduating in May 2017. Originally from Beaumont, Texas, Eric hopes to one day teach in the hill country area of Austin. Aside from his passion for students, Eric enjoys hiking, playing the ukulele and watching ESPN.

Most excited for: The Four Corners Monument

Best Road Trip Skill: Frugal; Eagle Scout

Hannah Koether



Hannah is a senior elementary education major graduating in May 2017. Originally from the Cypress area of Houston, Hannah hopes to teach elementary in her old stomping grounds. Hannah served as the vice president of Sigma Phi Lambda at Texas State and enjoys watching shows like “The Office,” and spending her free time playing with her tabby cat, Beau.

Most excited for: Camping in Zion National Park

Best Road Trip Skill: Rolls with the punches; experienced camper

Karla Hall



Karla is a senior elementary education major graduating in May 2017. Karla plans to teach third grade in Crosby, Texas in August 2017. In addition to serving as president of Sigma Phi Lambda at Texas State, Karla spends her spare time trying out new recipes from the Pioneer Woman and playing with her two Chihuahuas.

Most excited for: Seeing new places

Best Road Trip Skill: Spontaneous; agrees to college road trips on a whim

DAY ONE: WHITE SANDS MONUMENT & LAS CRUCES, NM
Saturday, March 11, 2017 & Sunday, March 12, 2017



The sun reflects off the sand at the White Sands Monument in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Photo by Katie Coleman

It was March 11th – just one day away from our Southwest road trip. We made



several trips to Walmart to prep: travel size toiletries, deodorant, shampoo—the works. Of course, the necessary practical items were selected as well: flashlights, tent

Sydney checks off items to buy from the packing list. Photo by Katie Coleman

tarps, extra tent stakes, first-aid supplies and finally the food – nearly 20 pounds of snacks to be exact. I'd already brought back a tent and sleeping bags from my last trip home. We'd pitched the tents in the living room to make sure all the stakes were accounted for. On Saturday, I picked up our rental car at Enterprise. Despite being a 2016 Dodge Grand Caravan, it didn't look new on the inside – the previous renters left the car filthy; apparently only so much can be cleaned



Sydney's dog, Sam, helped us practice setting up the tent. Photo by Katie Coleman

before the car is given to the next renter in line. We didn't care. We had a car with four wheels, so that was all we needed as far as we were concerned.

A prior commitment to a bridal shower in Comfort, Texas, that afternoon gave Sydney and I the chance to take the minivan for a test drive. Little did we know we'd be coming back with another traveler to add to our journey; we convinced the bride-to-be, Karla, to tag along as our last hurrah before graduation. Since she's spontaneous at heart, it



Sydney pitched her tent in our apartment living room. On the couch: Sydney's mom, Dana Allen. Photo by Sydney Allen

were on our way back to San Marcos with our fifth and final road-tripper.

We checked off our lists. We had the food, the supplies, the van, and the adventurers — all that was left? *Packing*. Ugh. We planned to be driving away at 6 a.m., which meant



Everything but hiking boots fit in my suitcase. Photo by Katie Coleman

I was to be up and at ‘em at 5 a.m. Because I’m a procrastinator, and packing, particularly, has become the bane of my existence, I finished packing at 1 a.m. “Why am I like this?” I thought to myself as I delusionally shoved enough underwear to last a year in the wilderness into my blue, striped

suitcase. Not only did it take me an hour to fall asleep, but we sprang forward for daylight saving time. Typically, my body requires five hours just to function properly, but, after a mere two hours, I pulled myself out of bed at 5:20 a.m. to shower. Six trips between the five of us was all it took to load up the car, and somehow we managed to fit everything. Five college kids with Goldfish up to our noses in a minivan for a week to the national parks of the U.S. — quite the picture!

Sydney volunteered to drive first. We decided it made sense to rotate who pays for gas based on whoever was driving — just so it would be easier to spread the cost of gas evenly among us. After being on the road for a while, we noticed the back of the vehicle seemed to be vibrating more than we thought it should, no doubt something I would

become accustomed to as the seat farthest back would become mine for most the trip. It just made sense, as I was the only one under 5'9" and needed less legroom. Next, we realized none of the auxiliary charging ports in the front of the car were working, and the previous renters shoved what looked like peanut butter in the CD player. Thankfully one port, located in the back directly next to my nook, had a charge and became our universal life source. I used a plastic



Ready for the trip, the group packs up for a week on the road. From left to right: Karla, Sydney, Eric and Hannah. Photo by Katie Coleman

fork to clear the crusty path for music, and after setting up our charging station, I took a nap.

When I woke, we were seven hours out from [White Sands Monument](#) – our first destination. We turned off the GPS and decided to cruise the 400 miles before our next



Using pillow as a table, I make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch. Photo by Eric Bonnin.

turn. I woke up to the sun shining and the sounds of “All I Want” by Kodaline playing over the radio. I couldn’t help but smile, thinking of all that was to come that week. I hoped we would take advantage of the weirdest roadside

attractions, and I could let my guard down enough to not worry about the details. I tend to be a bit of a worry-wart, which sometimes causes me to focus more on getting to the destination, than enjoying the ride. But, I know that if I keep living the rest of my life like that, I'll end up being 70 years old, and I won't know where the time has gone. Road trips are about embracing the unknown, the unexpected. Much like life. Let's see what happens.

West Texas to New Mexico

At 12:50 p.m. we were just outside of El Paso. ETA to White Sands Monument: 3:37 p.m. New Mexico time. Only 216 miles to go.

In Van Horn, Texas, we made a quick a pit-stop at a gas station. The sun finally broke through the clouds, and the air was warm and breezy. The mountains were rocky and steep – quite beautiful compared to the wet swamp we'd left behind back home. Though the real mountains were still waiting for us in Zion and Albuquerque – this was a taste of what was to come.

As a natural-born Texan, you know the state is huge because of the sheer pride we're trained to exert all our lives, but I don't think you can *really* know how big Texas is until you realize how long it takes just to drive out of it. It started to seem as if we'd never make it out, as if we were eternally trapped in the tip of the western border in our own Texas version of "Hotel California." Thankfully, my hope was restored when we saw El Paso on the horizon. I perked up, anticipating the spot where we could take a photo (like

all tourists should) at the border between Texas and New Mexico. Suddenly, there it was: Welcome to New Mexico: The Land of Enchantment. Clearly we weren't the only ones who wanted to stop. We were greeted by at least four other carpools of families, all waiting to take photos before the others. I asked a member of the largest family if she would snap our photo.

About an hour left until Alamogordo – the town that claims the White Sands Monument. We had to stop for gas before we entered the park. The first gas



A fellow traveler takes our group photo at the border of Texas and New Mexico.

station nearest the monument according to Maps turned out to be on the White Sands Missile Range, so naturally we weren't allowed on base and sought our petroleum supply elsewhere before heading to the visitor's center. We finally made it! Nine hours, 683 miles and one U.S. Border Patrol stop later (don't worry, it was anticlimactic), we'd arrived at White Sands Monument.

The woman at the information desk gave us the rundown of where to go and park.

She said the whole drive throughout the park was about 16 miles in total, and after a few miles inside the Monument, we could park and explore on foot.



Entrance to the visitor center at White Sands National Monument in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Photo by Katie Coleman

We could have planned to take a trail, I suppose, but just squidding our toes in the sand and sledding for a few hours was good enough for us. We bought a used sled from the gift shop for \$10 – not a bad deal since they’ll buy the sled back for \$4 when you’re done. The front desk offered

cubes of wax for purchase, which we realized after declining the offer, would have helped our sleds pick up the speed we needed to properly ride the dunes. But, we didn’t mind going



Eric teaches me how to sled down the dunes. Photo by Sydney Allen

slow. We relaxed in the sand and watched the ripples roll down the hills like an avalanche. This sand was nice – not like the hot sand that sticks to your skin after you’ve been out at the beach all day long. I had imagined the sand to be burning hot – but it was surprisingly the opposite. This was because the sand dunes isn’t actually filled with sand – it’s largest gypsum crystal dunefield in the



Sydney walks along the sand dunes. Photo by Katie Coleman

world, a mineral left behind 250 million years ago by the Permian Sea, according to [NPR](#). I thought briefly that I should have brought a jar or something to take back a handful as a souvenir, but the removal of any of the monument's natural resources is [prohibited](#).

Besides, I knew it belonged there in the hills of its perfect gypsum paradise.

At sunset, we piled back into Walter (named because the van is white and it paid appropriate homage to the acclaimed character from AMC's "Breaking Bad") and drove to our hotel in Las Cruces – the [La Quinta at Mesilla Valley](#). Friends from San Marcos were also going to the sand dunes this week, so we could chat after we had dinner at a nearby Buffalo Wild Wings – perhaps not the more original choice, but a familiar comfort for our first night away from home. Turns out we had booked rooms right next to each other in the hotel.

The hotel was clean; we had no complaints other than the lack of an elevator since we were on the 2nd floor and had quite the luggage load. After almost 10 hours on the road, and a 17-hour day, the lights were out by 11 p.m.

DAY TWO: SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK & FLAGSTAFF, AZ
Monday, March 13, 2017



On day two, we stopped for a group photo at the New Mexico and Arizona border. Photo by Sydney Allen

Three words: free continental breakfast. We weren't on as tight of a schedule today, so we slept in until 8:30 a.m. We made our way down to the lobby in our pajamas where they were serving breakfast. While waiting in line for breakfast, I struck up a conversation with a fellow bagel lover. She was from Dallas and in town for a baseball tournament for a family member. Another gentleman from Dallas stopped by our table after noticing we were wearing Texas State and UT T-shirts. He was a Texas A&M University Aggie. "That's too bad!" he joked as he made his way to his table.



The world's largest Chili Pepper is located in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Photo by Katie Coleman

We finished our breakfast, packed up, checked out and drove 12 minutes to see the World's Largest Chili Pepper on our way out of Las Cruces. With Eric at the wheel, a more eclectic selection of tunes narrated our drive: Wham!'s "Wake end Me on My Way." The pepper was

directly in front of a small motel, no doubt a selling point for them. After a group photo, four hours and 11 minutes separated us from Saguaro National Park in Tucson, Arizona.

Another misconception of mine was dispelled as we drove across the border and took our generic tourist photo. Arizona, in fact, is not all dirt. I'd imagined the state as a dry, red desert kept company by tumbleweeds and sparse cactuses. It's likely I'd been confused by old back-country westerns watched with my dad growing up. *This* Arizona, much to my surprise, seemed even greener than parts of Texas. In true millennial fashion, Karla brainstormed captions in anticipation of the perfect Instagram photo in Arizona. I think the winner was, "Pretty fly for a cacti." Millennials and their social media personas! But I'll have you know that I've not looked at mine since yesterday. I may even be holding the world record.

On the way to Saguaro, we gave in to my childish ambition and pulled off to follow the signs for “The Thing.” Others who’d been before said it wasn’t worth the stop – that it literally measured up to the word “underwhelming.” Deciding not to heed their advice, it was only \$1 to see



The Thing is located just off I-10 in Dragoon, Arizona. Photo by Katie Coleman

the tiny structure off Interstate 10 with a blob of clay and sticks like I’d imagined. It was inside a real museum circled around a small mobile home park behind a large gift shop attached to a Dairy Queen. The cashier asked if I dared to go in to see it – the shtick they must use to promote the allusive creature. “I’ll take my chances,” I joked back.

Eric, Sydney and I embraced our impending doom while Karla and Hannah embraced the ice cream next door. We followed the bigfoot-like painted footprints around the museum, which exhibited old automobiles, carriages in their earliest forms and, for some reason, a lot of wooden statues depicting ancient forms of torture. My favorite of the memorabilia was the fringe top surrey, which



per the informational sign, claimed to have carried Abraham Lincoln through his inaugural parade in 1896. We walked through several covered areas displaying handmade trinkets, taxidermy and other peculiar artifacts. Eventually, the self-guided tour led to the unveiling



Sydney sees "The Thing" for the first time. Photo by Katie Coleman

of the famous "Thing." Sydney was ahead of us. Eric and I turned the corner to find her standing there, looking down at it with an emotionless expression. I couldn't help but laugh. "The Thing" finally came into view, well, I guess if you want to know,

you'll have to go see for yourself.



Hand carved trinkets were featured in glass display cases. Photos by Katie Coleman



The exhibit displayed many modes of transportation from American history. Photo by Katie Coleman



Early modes of American transportation on display. Photo by Katie Coleman



A metal display depicted sculptures of ancient forms of torture. Photo by Katie Coleman



Old automobiles from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Photo by Katie Coleman

Saguaro National Park

About an hour later, we were in Tucson. As I waited in line for 20 minutes in the visitor's center to pay the \$15 per-vehicle fee, a family ahead of me asked the ranger at the register about every single annual pass the National Park Service offered. I reminded myself to be patient and in the meantime started a conversation with a gentleman volunteer behind the counter. As a VIP, a Volunteer in Parks, John Rutherford was there



The group blends in to their surrounding posing as cactuses. Photo by Sydney Allen



Nearly 40-foot cactuses go for miles at the top of the Overlook Trail in Saguaro National Park. Photo by Katie Coleman

to direct guests and answer questions about the park until a staff member was available. John asked politely about my travels and where my group was headed next. When I mentioned we'd be stopping in Albuquerque on Thursday he said he and his wife were headed there next month for the [Gathering of the Nations](#) to see an Native American [Pow Wow](#). His wife, John said, likes to participate in the friendship dance, but he prefers to watch from

the sidelines. Following the road signs and our map, we drove into the park to hike the Overlook trail – a short .08-mile trip as we still needed to drive up about 250 to Flagstaff for the night. When some people think of Texas, I supposed, they envision cowboys, horses and cactus in the hot sun. But, I'd never seen cactuses like these. A man and his daughter followed behind us on the trail. Politely, I asked where they were from. “We’re from Fort Collins,” he answered quickly, with a bit of an accent, as they made their way past us on the trail. I pretended to know where that was, and nodded in response. I learned later Fort Collins is in Colorado. Further into the park we walked the Signal Hill trail because I wanted to see the petroglyphs, the drawings on ancient rocks made by native tribes over 800 years ago. They were scattered along the .25-mile-trail – a nice way to end our Saguaro travels.



On the left: The trailhead for Signal Hill trail at Saguaro National Park. On the right: a petroglyph at the peak of Signal Hill. Photo by Katie Coleman

Walter waited where we'd left him, and onward we drove toward [Days Inn Flagstaff – West Route 66](#), our motel for the evening. With our trusty Google Reviews in hand, we decided to stop and eat at Pizza a Metro, a local pizza joint in Phoenix where we ordered a [39"](#) pepperoni brick-oven pizza the size of our



The mural in Pizza a Metro restaurant in Phoenix, Arizona. Photo by Katie Coleman

table for \$27. A hand-painted mural of the Italian coast and soft music set the mood of the bistro. Through the window into the kitchen, we watched the chef roll and toss the dough. He slid in our pizza in the pizza using a pizza peel, the large wooden paddle used to place the pies directly in the oven. We split the pizza between the 5 of us and split the bill using [Venmo](#).



Pizza a Metro is located off West Thomas Road in Phoenix. Photo by Katie Coleman

We were about 2 hours from the motel. Hannah was recovering from acute bronchitis, so we stopped at a CVS Pharmacy on the way to pick her up an antihistamine. It was in the parking lot we realized one of Walter's sliding doors hadn't been locking the entire trip – the automatic lock was jammed in place. I managed to pull on it hard enough to manually lock it, but we made sure to triple-check the minivan was locked each time we left the rest of the trip. I added it to the list of things to tell Enterprise when we got home.

About 10:30 p.m. we finally checked into our motel, which was nicer than the La Quinta in Las Cruces.

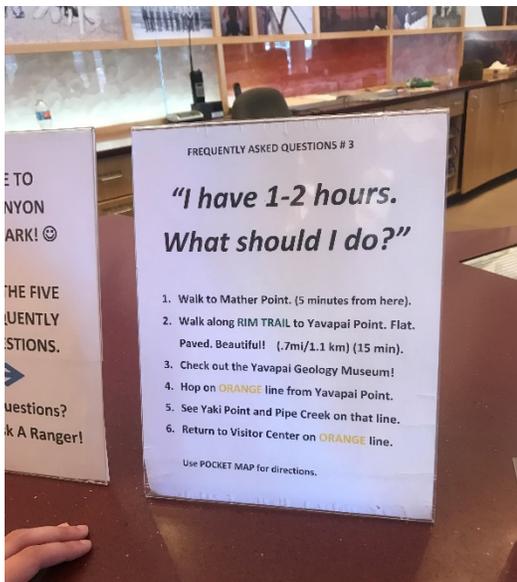
DAY THREE: GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK & SPRINGDALE, UT
Tuesday, March 14, 2017



Standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon. Photo by Katie Coleman

We awoke ready for our second free breakfast, but at 8:30 a.m., all that was left were four pieces of toast, cereal, a few apples, one English muffin and over 20 hungry guests waiting in line. Instead we decided on a nearby Dunkin Donuts and Chick-fil-A off Route 66 for breakfast. Only an hour and 30 minutes separated us from today's destination: Grand Canyon National Park. I offered to drive us into the park, as this was one of our shorter drives of the trip and the other can only sit in the back for so long. We had to fill up on gas by the time we arrived, which was a whopping \$50 at over \$3 a gallon. In retrospect, we should have filled up before entering the resort area.

Soon we were at the information desk. It had pamphlets ready for visitors who had as



The information desk offered suggestions for park activities. Photo by Katie Coleman

Mather Point and follow the Rim Trail (12.8 mi in total), of which we walked about two

miles. A couple from Montreal,

Canada, who I noticed were fluent in

French and English talked with us

while we stopped for a few photos.

They said they'd driven to visit family

in Phoenix and stopped at the Grand

Canyon on the way. They were nice

enough to let me take their photo before we parted ways.

little as one to two hours or those who had all day to hike the trails. My old roommate, and her family hiked the Grand Canyon the summer before, approximately an 18-hour hike round trip by the time they'd gotten to the bottom, camped and hiked back out the next day. Since we knew we'd be doing most of our hiking in Zion, we settled for a two-hour hiking trail in Grand Canyon. We were instructed to go to



A couple pose for a portrait at the Grand Canyon. Photo by Katie Coleman



The group sits at the edge of the Grand Canyon. Photo by Sydney Allen



Miles of canyons fill the national park. Photo by Sydney Allen



The Grand Canyon National Park sign at the Visitor's Center. Photo by Katie Coleman



Sydney and I pose at the Grand Canyon. Photo by Eric Bonnin

Because road trips never stay on schedule, we were forced to cut out our next roadside attraction: The Moenkopi Dinosaur Tracks in Tuba City, Arizona. We would have had to take a guided tour out to the tracks, so for the sake of time we decided to visit the Navajo Bridge in Marble Canyon, Arizona, instead. The bridge was gorgeous, only appearing after a long and winding road through the back canyons of the state. It stood 467 feet above the Colorado River. It turned out to be a fun pit stop for a photoshoot.



The Navajo Bridge was built in 1927 in Kanab, Arizona. Photo by Katie Coleman



The bridge connects the land bordering the Colorado River. Photo by Katie Coleman

One hour and 27 minutes until the Utah border at Kanab. We stopped, per tradition, to take our group photo at the border. As we pulled up we noticed tables set up near the stateline sign, with hand-made paperweights, arches, business card holders, hot plates, pendants, dice, geodes and soap dishes. There was no attendant, but instead we were met

with a rock with a written note indicating where we could direct our payment for the goods. A simple instruction, “Pay,” was written in sharpie with an arrow pointing to a nearby metal box. “What an honor system!” Eric proclaimed. No kidding! Out of curiosity, we peeked



A written note on a rock directs customers to pay. Photo by Katie Coleman

into the box, wondering if anyone had paid. The edge of a crisp \$50 bill hid in the shadows of the box. I shrugged in disbelief. People never cease to surprise me.



Top left: Karla, Sydney and Eric browse the handmade goods for sale. Top right: Dino dice, petrified marshmallows and other trinkets were divided on the table. Bottom: Handmade soap dishes, arches, hot plates, paperweights and business card holders were displayed across the table. Photos by Katie Coleman

Sydney and Karla dropped what they owed in the box. Sydney bought what the anonymous craftsman called a “petrified marshmallow” and “dino dice,” while Karla bought petrified wood for her fiancé back home.



*We snapped a group photo at the Utah border before heading to Zion National Park.
Photo by Sydney Allen*

Onward to the Watchman Campground in Zion where we’d reserved a non-electric campsite for the evening for \$20. As we drove further into Utah, our food options became limited. We passed through the little town of Mt. Carmel, Utah, and ate at [Golden Hills Motel & Restaurant](#) per the recommendation of the gas station attendant across the way.



Golden Hills Motel and Restaurant is in Mt. Carmel, just outside of Zion National Park. Photo by Eric Bonnin

While we waited for our food, Eric thought he’d stop to pick up some firewood for our campsite, but by the time he returned to the station, it seemed everything in town but our little diner had closed by 7 p.m. I became stressed thinking we wouldn’t be able to get into the park in time to set up camp. As the sun

set, we sped into Zion National Park. We could see the shadows around us grow taller and darker as we drove deeper through the twisting roads of Zion's iconic mountains. It took 40 minutes before we were finally at the ranger's kiosk. A sign for late arrivals indicated campsite numbers. At the top of the list: "Coleman – C-20." I sighed with relief as we parked and unloaded our gear. Sydney and I had never camped before, and though this wasn't as rugged as some prefer, it was still camping; I was satisfied! After a false alarm in which I thought I'd left my tent stakes back in Texas, a generous neighbor offered us extra logs of firewood for our site. By the time our Eagle Scout (that's Eric) finally got it lit, we were exhausted. To his credit, the wind was unforgiving and, unbeknownst to us, would later revisit with a vengeance. Karla, Hannah and I stayed up late laughing at how we squeezed into our little pup tent and reviewed the day's adventures. I'd never seen so many stars in all my life, no doubt the result of growing up in a suburb of San Antonio for 18 years. The sounds of nearby crackling fires, distant laughter and music began to lull me asleep. Soon, the temperature dropped, and the gust of all gusts rolled through the campgrounds that night. Even Hannah, a well-versed camper in her own right, said it was the windiest she'd ever experienced. We huddled deep in our sleeping bags and didn't catch a wink of sleep.



Left: Sydney and Eric start the fire with dry grass and Fritos. Right: Karla provides light for Eric as he lights the fire. Photos by Katie Coleman



Each campsite was identified by a campsite number. Photo by Katie Coleman



The sun peaks over the Watchman Campgrounds the morning of March 15. Photo by Katie Coleman



Campsites were provided a table, and space for two tents. Photo by Katie Coleman

DAY FOUR: ZION NATIONAL PARK & KAYENTA, AZ

Wednesday, March 15, 2017

At 8:45 a.m., I went out scouting for the tent and sleeping bag covers I realized I'd left on our metal table to be stolen by the wind. They'd not gone far, just in the grassy bushes a few campsites down, and everything was, thankfully, accounted for. We were in the mountains. I walked down to the ranger's kiosk to check in and pay for our park pass. Once back, I noticed our friendly neighbor from the night before was up already. "Were you the one that gave us firewood last night?" I asked as I walked across the road. They were already loading their car, preparing for their day ahead in the mountains. Andrew and Lindsay were both alumni from the University of Minnesota and had a small husky puppy with them. They'd been planning since December to visit Zion. They said they'd come because they love to travel to national parks. They seemed to be in a hurry, so I thanked them again, and let them get on their way.



Lindsay and Andrew pose for a photo in the Watchman Campgrounds. Photo by Katie Coleman

As soon as the others were up, another group approached us, asking for a jump for their SUV. Sarah Renslow, Carissa Jahnz White, Kelsey Wright, Lane Lindstrom, Jacob White and Jedediah Johnson had come from Minneapolis,

Minnesota, to spend the entire week of spring break in Zion. While Karla poured a can of



*With the aid of Karla, Eric and Sydney, Jacob White jumps the groups car.
Photo by Katie Coleman*

Dr. Thunder on their corroded battery and taught Jacob and Lane not to put the cables on the bolts of the battery, I chatted with the women. Sarah and Carissa attended the University of Minnesota and Kelsey was an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin

– River Falls. I found a sense of comradery with the women as they discussed their spring break plans. “I like national parks because they make me feel small,” said Kelsey, explaining her love for the park community’s appreciation for experiences and nature. The same group visited Zion last year but found themselves wishing they’d had more time to explore on their road trip. Thus, this year they centered their whole week on camping in the park. “Driving from Minnesota allowed for more opportunities, which makes the trip more fun,” she said. Her favorite roadside attraction thus far? [Lee’s Legendary Marbles](#)



*Sarah, Carissa, Kelsey and Jed (inside the tent) at their campsite.
Photo by Katie Coleman*

[& Collectibles](#) – the world’s largest collection of collectible marbles. According to Kelsey,

Lee has been collecting for 65 years, opening a museum in York, Nebraska. “He was just sitting in his shop with all his marbles,” she laughed. On their last visit, they’d completed the Angels Landing trail, rated strenuous at four hours and 5.4 miles round trip with long, icy drop-offs. (Up until this point I’d tried to convince my group to consider Angel’s Landing for the reward of a waterfall and priceless view, but we’d later learn that several people had died attempting this trail. Not surprisingly, in light of our newfound knowledge, the others weren’t as keen as I to test our chances at survival, given their fear of heights and aversion to the possibility of death.) On this day, Kelsey and her friends had set their sights on the Kolob Arch via La Verkin Creek Trail (approximately eight hours), and suggested we try the two-and-a-half-hour Hidden Canyon Trail. We wished them luck, Kelsey gave me her email to keep in touch, and off they went.

Before setting off on a hike, we packed up camp and drove to the Zion Canyon Visitor Center to catch a shuttle bus. The bus arrives approximately every 15 minutes, and



Hikers and tourists wait in line to board the shuttle. Photo by Katie Coleman

travels the same road to nine stops throughout the park. We planned on exploring the Emerald Pools, but the lower pools had been closed due to rockfall, so it looked like the gang would be walking through the upper pools that day. To get to the upper pools through the



Left: The bus was lined with windows for optimum viewing experience. Right: Eric, Sydney, Hannah and Karla enjoy the bus ride to the Grotto. Photos by Katie Coleman

Kayenta Trail, we needed to get off at stop six – The Grotto. The Kayenta Trail was on the moderate scale: about one-and-a-half-hours or 2 miles round trip per our trusty map. The view was amazing. I suddenly felt like Ansel Adams, taking photos of the canyon made by the Virgin River and the pools that seemed to appear out of thin air. I scouted for college students to talk to about my thesis. Occasionally there was a young adult couple, moving



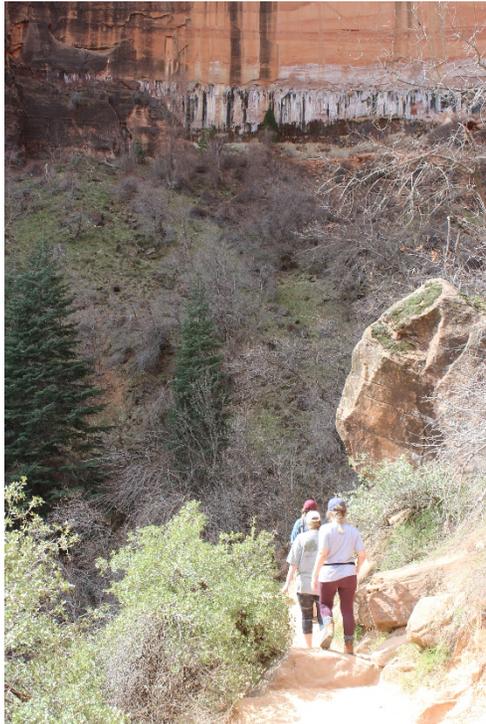
Signs throughout the trails help guide hikers through the mountains of Zion. Photo by Sydney Allen

too quickly to stop and talk to. Several older men in loafers and cardigans passed us on the trail. I stared in disbelief as I stopped frequently to catch my breath and gulp down my water, sweating like a pig while they went on their way in their knit clothing. The trail

wasn't strenuous, but perhaps I was just out of shape. They climbed the trail with ease.



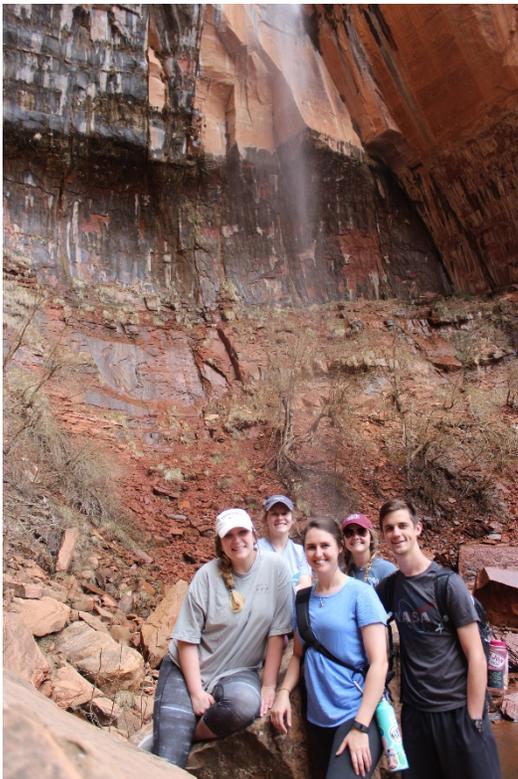
The sun shines high on the mountains in Zion. Photo by Sydney Allen



Left: Karla, Hannah and I hike the Kayenta trail. Right: I stop to stretch before continuing with the hike. Photos by Sydney Allen



Eric, Sydney, Karla and I climb a nearby boulder to get a better look at the canyon below. Photo by Hannah Koether



Left: Balancing the camera on a rock, the group takes a photo with the waterfall above the pool. Right: tourists admire the waterfall above the Upper Emerald Pools. Photos by Sydney Allen



The Virgin River below is responsible for the creation of the park. Photo by Katie Coleman



The mountains vary in color due to years of water erosion. Photo by Sydney Allen

About halfway through our trek to the pools, I heard Karla call out up ahead. She had run into women she knew from her hometown of Comfort, Texas. Sisters Haley and Ciara Butler along with Ashley Deleon attended Texas A&M and planned a similar trip to



Haley, Ashley and Ciara pose with Karla on the Kayenta Trail. Photo by Katie Coleman

ours. In true road trip fashion, they'd made no finite plan, and had already visited the Grand Canyon, Antelope Canyon and Horseshoe Canyon. Today they just so happened to be camping in Zion. Ashley said this was their first time

hiking and camping like this, but they preferred outdoor activities to that of the stereotypical college spring break on the beach. "Driving and camping brings us together," she said, "We've just really enjoyed getting to experience something different like this." I couldn't disagree.

Soon we were at the upper pools. A thin waterfall spilled from the top of one of the surrounding walls of rock, and hikers climbed up the rocks to take photos. We followed their lead and propped the camera on a boulder to snap a group photo. About midway back, I spoke with two more women resting near the blocked-off entrance to the lower pools. One wore a Florida State University T-shirt, while the other had on an Indiana University T-shirt. Originally from the Sunshine State, Lauren and Gabi said



Lauren (left) and Gabi (right) stop for a break while hiking to the Upper Emerald Pools. Photo by Katie Coleman

they'd been friends since high school. Gabi's family owned a house in Utah, so the girls

decided to road trip for a day to Zion during Lauren's visit over their spring break. "I'm all about the outdoors and love national parks because it's so different from what's available back home," said Lauren. While it seems many college students make their way to the Florida coast for spring break, Lauren and Gabi said they preferred Utah and being in nature. "It gives us a chance to be a part of something bigger than us," Lauren said. "I just think it's a really cool alternative."

Lauren and Gabi continued their hike, and we made our way back down to the road. We crossed a bridge over the Virgin River to catch the shuttle back to the visitor center where our car was parked. An older woman was asleep and seated in a foldable lawn chair by the edge of the river. She had a blanket and a book in hand. We wondered if she might be waiting for her family to finish our hike, or if she always came to the park on Wednesdays, perhaps to listen to the sounds of the water or to meet the visitors there. I smiled at her as we crossed the street, arriving at the stop just as the bus pulled up. We were fatigued from our hike, and gladly boarded the shuttle back down the mountains. Left with extra time before we needed to be on our way to the hotel in Kayenta, Arizona, we drove through the nearby town of Springdale. The town was filled with condos and cottages for tourists to rent, and Zion Park Boulevard was lined with locally owned shops and colorful restaurants. We stopped for lunch at [Casa de Amigos](#) on Zion Park Boulevard, and with a full belly and a four-hour drive ahead of us, I settled in my nook in the backseat for a nap. We picked up fast food for dinner before getting into Kayenta and eventually to the [Wetherill Inn](#) where we had our reservation.

DAY FIVE: GRANDMA BONNIE, FOUR CORNERS & ALBUQUERQUE, NM
Thursday, March 16, 2017

Free continental breakfast was alive and well again. I had my 3rd bagel this week and headed back to the room to load up. Today's first stop: Four Corners Monument. An hour and 15 minutes stood between our ability to be in four states at once. If you've seen the recent National Lampoon's Family Vacation reboot, aptly named, "[Vacation](#)," you'll remember the eventful evening with Ed Helms and Christina Applegate at the monument.

Not a pretty picture. When we arrived, we waited in a small line to stand on the crest representing the intersection between Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. The monument charges \$5 per person to enter, and they only take cash. Thankfully Sydney was prepared. Everything we read online recommende



*Tourists wait in line to take their picture on the crest.
Photo by Katie Coleman*

arrived. There was supposed to be over an hour wait to pose for a photograph on the crest



A fellow tourist offers to take our group photo.

of the four states, and nobody wanted to be *that* person that takes eight shots with eight different poses. We were lucky; we only waited 10 minutes to take our pictures, and a mother of four behind us in line volunteered to take our group photo. Once

Navajo shops around the perimeter of the monument offering turquoise, sterling silver and trinkets galore. Many of the shop owners

make most of their products by hand – crushing corals and turquoise for jewelry, bending metals to make charms or chains and melting horse hair for pottery. According to Etched Water Pottery owner Marilyn Hadley, each day, every vendor resets his or her spread of goods at their spot. Most work year-round, but take occasional breaks depending on the tourist season. Today there was booth after booth of vendors. Karla carefully selected a necklace for her mom, earrings for her herself and soon-to-be sister-in-law and a money clip for Anthony, while Sydney and I bought Four Corners stickers for our Nalgene bottles.



Left: Marilyn explains how she makes her jewelry. Right: Karla purchased earrings, a necklace and a money clip from Marilyn's shop. Photos by Katie Coleman

While we split up to explore different vendors, Eric recognized a group from the Catholic Center at the University of Texas at Austin waiting in line to take their picture. Ryan Bullard, Shannon Parks, Victoria Young and Kathryn Lewis had already seen the Marfa lights in Texas, the White Sands in New Mexico, hiked in Red Rock State Park for two days in Sedona, climbed the South Kaibab Trail in the Grand Canyon and stopped by Horseshoe Bend. After today, they'd head to Sante Fe and stay with friends from Texas Tech in Lubbock. This was also their first time taking a road trip. Like the others I'd spoken to, the idea of a college road trip with friends celebrated the idea of making your own way in life. "Well, for one, the cost is much less when you drive," said Kathryn. "You're more

mobile on the road and can stop to actually look at what's around you. There are more opportunities." For them, this trip was a bonding experience – something they could embrace outside of the world of "social media nostalgia" that we normally live in. "We are building solid friendships, and we'll remember this trip for the rest of our days," said Ryan.

He felt the road trip especially evoked independence and problem-solving dynamics. "You have to work with every single person in your group, and obviously, everyone has a different personality. It's been really rewarding," he said.



Shannon, Kathryn, Ryan and Victoria pose for a portrait at Four Corners Monument. Photo by Katie Coleman

We discussed the age of technology we've grown accustomed to – how we spend most of our time looking at what other people are doing, rather than experiencing anything real on our own. We agreed that our age group is often stereotyped – that we glorify the people we see on our social media over our own experience. We think they must have the perfect life: sharing their images as they travel to far off places, posing outside of well-known restaurants or tourist attractions. There's a reason people only post the good pictures. I started to think about all the time we spent stopped on our trip to get the right photo or the right angle. And how we all helped each other brainstorm for the right Instagram or Facebook caption. We were consumed by it, too. Even though we know we recognize this, it keeps happening. And, the most ironic part of it all? How do we know if the ones we're idolizing aren't doing the exact same thing as we are?

Albuquerque

When we wrapped up our visit to the Four Corners, we had about a four-hour drive to our next stop: Albuquerque, New Mexico. My mom's side of the family is from Albuquerque, so my great aunt and uncle were nice enough to house five college students for the night at their home. Larry Clevenger, my grandmother's younger brother, is a retired doctor and began his career as physician at the Sandia National Laboratories. His wife, Lynne, is a retired teacher. Aunt Lynne had already prepared the extra rooms in the house for us; three would share the king, one on the air mattress in the first spare bedroom, and Eric would take the second spare room with the full-size bed. We settled in and changed clothes before we drove to see my great-grandmother, Bonnie Griffin, who lives in a senior



GG has us gather for a photo in her apartment. Photo by Lynne Clevenger

independent living facility down the road from their house. I wondered if, at 95-years-old, whether GG (great-grandmother) had ever taken a road trip like ours. My great-grandfather, Woody Clevenger, died when my mom was a teenager. GG said they had plans of buying an RV and traveling the United States after her grandkids had grown, but when Woody died of a heart attack, she never saw those dreams come to life. When we left, an overwhelming sadness came over me. It was a sadness about leaving her, about maybe never seeing her again, and a sadness about the heartbreak she'd lived through. We can go most of our lives, observing other people, wishing we had what they had, thinking

independent living facility down the road from their house. I wondered if, at 95-years-old, whether GG (great-grandmother) had ever taken a road trip like ours. My great-grandfather, Woody Clevenger, died when my mom was a teenager. GG said they had

that what we've got isn't good enough to make us happy. Freshman year I heard a quote and wrote it on my bulletin board as a reminder. "The happiest people don't necessarily have the best of everything, they just make the most of everything they have." I'm not sure how I came across it, or even who said it, but I could tell my GG lived it.

Uncle Larry and Aunt Lynne took us to [Bravo](#), an Italian restaurant for dinner. Aunt Lynne had already asked us beforehand our preference for food, and since four out of five aren't keen on



Aunt Lynne, Uncle Larry and I with Walter. Photo by Karla Hall

spicy cuisine, she ruled out authentic New Mexican and settled for one of her favorites. Aunt Lynne had us go around the table, taking turns explaining our majors, career aspirations and interests. We ordered appetizers and ate till we couldn't anymore. It felt like a while since we'd had real food other than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or drive-thru cuisine. I wanted to freeze the moment – me sitting at the head of my table with my family and friends. When we got back to the house, we pulled out Uncle Larry's acoustic guitar from his office and Eric's ukulele and, like campers around a fire we sang old classics until bedtime.

DAY SIX: CADILLAC RANCH, THE BIG TEXAN & AMARILLO, TX
Friday, March 17, 2017

In the morning, Aunt Lynne said she knew a great place down the road for breakfast. We walked a few miles from the house to an [Einstein's Bros Bagels](#). I laughed. More bagels. *Jackpot!* As usual, Aunt Lynne made sure the conversation never ran dry. We discussed our favorite moments thus far on our trip and admitted missing home.

Back at the house we packed up Walter, Uncle Larry confirmed that our auxiliary port fuses in the car were burnt out, and then we said our goodbyes. I waved as we backed out of the driveway. As I said before, my mom's side of the family lives in Albuquerque. This also meant my Grandpa Carol – my mom's father, and my grandmother's ex-husband. Initially I hadn't anticipated having time to see him. We had planned to take the tram up the Sandia Mountains, but ultimately, we were ready to relax in our hotel in Amarillo. With the extra time in our schedule I surprised my grandfather and we stopped by to chat for an hour on our way back to Texas. My grandfather, Carol Noble, lived in New Mexico my whole life, and rarely made it down to see me, my brother or my cousin during our childhood. We only talked on the phone around the holidays or birthdays. My grandpa hadn't been on a plane since 9/11, and his work experience made him especially wary of technology involving the internet, so he couldn't see the pictures of us my mom posted throughout the years on Facebook or even through email. My late Granny Kate (my mom's step-mother) passed away about a year ago, so now Grandpa Carol lived alone. I had an overwhelming gut-feeling that I'd regret it if I didn't try to see him. Even though we only occasionally spoke, he was still my grandpa, and I love him.

I explained about the trip we were taking, and how we were headed to Amarillo for the night. When we got to talking, I realized even after all the times I've asked my mom about him, I didn't know very much about my Grandpa Carol's life before he was married to my Granny Kate. I knew he and my Grandma Sharon (my mom's mother) divorced when my mom was a teenager. He was an engineer who worked hard with his hands, and at one point, monitored and set up explosive tests to measure air pressure change and shock waves through the soil at the White Sands Missile Range. He told us stories of English, Swedish, Danish and Russian engineers and scientists coming to Las Cruces to watch a test program that would take two years to set up, and only 10 seconds to destroy. When he wasn't working, he and Kathy took trips to Yellowstone National Park and to Jackson, Wyoming. They spent their weekend getaways in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota. Kathy liked the city, but he preferred the country and the open road. He never did make it to the East Coast, but then he didn't care to go there anyway. Now he spent his days mostly alone, leaving the house for errands or to go to church. I sat in awe listening to his life. I was sorry that I'd never asked before – that I'd never cared enough to ask before. He was brilliant. He did real work – work I'd never thought about let alone done myself. I thanked my



Grandpa Carol and I take a photo together inside his home in Albuquerque. Photo by Sydney Allen

grandpa for the stories, and smiled as he promised, yet again, to make it out to Texas to see us soon. I just hugged him and waved, knowing his promise probably wouldn't hold true. For now, anyway, this was enough.

Amarillo



Commissioned as an art piece in 1974, Cadillac Ranch features 10 Cadillacs buried in the ground. Photo by Katie Coleman

In four hours, we were in Amarillo. Right as we pulled in we spotted our roadside attraction: the [Cadillac Ranch](#). It looked like a lot of families had the same idea. We followed the fence to the entrance, something easy to miss as the art piece was in the middle of a field alongside a speeding highway. Visitors can bring their own spray paint to add to the masterpiece. And, *boy*, did people participate. There were hundreds of empty paint cans scattered everywhere. Even the gate was spray painted. Uncle Larry (because he knows something about everything) told us that Cadillac Ranch was funded by a local millionaire,

Stanley Marsh III, who collaborated with artists to create the sculpture, and now sits as a community art piece off Interstate 40. We took turns taking photos and avoided accidentally rubbing against wet spray paint.



Visitors leave empty spray paint cans at the exhibit. Photo by Katie Coleman

That night we stayed at La Kiva Hotel and Conference Center and arrived

by about 5 p.m. after our stop at Cadillac Ranch. When I checked us in, instantly I could



No part of this Cadillac was left without paint. Photo by Katie Coleman

hear kids playfully shouting. It was noticeably loud, so I figured there must be an arcade or kids area nearby the lobby. This was a good sign, I thought to myself, as it must have meant multiple families had chosen to stay here, too. The others waited in the car with the luggage while I finished up so we could head straight to [The Big Texan Steak House](#) to grab a table before the Friday night rush.

When we pulled up, we realized the restaurant shared the same lot as a hotel with the same name, no doubt all a part of the same company. Not only was it Friday, but it was Saint Patrick's Day, so the restaurant was packed and the wait staff decked out in green. Every inch of wall was covered with Texas memorabilia. There were multiple dining rooms

and bars to choose from. Our hunger was stronger than our desire to wait for a table in the popular main dining room, so we settled on a smaller version near the bar. Live musicians serpentine between the tables for tips while we waited to be served. The meal wasn't cheap, but it was satisfying. We decided against ordering their legendary 72 oz. steak (that's four and half pounds), but my 8-oz.



The Big Texan Steak Ranch & Brewery is off I-40 in Amarillo. Photo by Katie Coleman

served me just fine. After we paid for the bill, we stopped at the gift shop near the bar where I bought a vinyl Route 66 sticker for my Nalgene.



Sydney and I sit in a rocking chair fit for Texas. Photo by Karla Hall

When we returned to the hotel, I realized why I felt like the kid's voices had been so loud when we checked in. There was a pool in the second half of the lobby. Our room looked directly over the balcony to the pool area, where they were also preparing to put in a hot tub. There was a window on the back wall of our room, and a part of the wall looked like a door had removed. It seemed this hotel used to be an outdoor motel, one they'd decided to with pieces of mismatched furniture looking like they

were borrowed from someone's home. The ceiling in the bathroom looked like they might need to attend to some minor areas of loose drywall and potential mold, but at \$46 a night, we weren't complaining. It's supposed to be an adventure, right?



Children played in the pool inside the lobby. Photo by Katie Coleman



We had a view of the pool from the balcony outside our room. Photo by Katie Coleman

DAY SEVEN: SAN MARCOS, TEXAS

Saturday, March 18, 2017

In the morning, Karla and I walked down to get breakfast in the lobby on the other side of the pool area while the others slept in. An employee was making eggs and sausage to order on what looked like used to be the outdoor grill. I took a few bites before I decided it might be best to get breakfast on the road. Nine hours and counting till we'd be in Bobcat country again. Today we had no pit stops planned. We only had one goal: home. We were ready. Hannah took the wheel, and I settled in the back, processing my thoughts of the trip.

Back to reality

Well, we'd done it. We'd survived a week-long road trip. We'd touched the sands in New Mexico, seen 40-foot cactuses in Saguaro, attempted to count the endless levels of the Grand Canyon and hiked the steep mountains of Zion. We'd witnessed first-hand the mystery of "The Thing" and explored unique shops on the Utah border. We'd walked 834 feet across the Navajo Bridge and camped under the stars. We stopped for gas 10 times in total, consumed our weight in snacks, and played every road trip ditty you could think of. My best friends met my great-grandmother, and I got to know my grandfather.

Everyone I'd talked to found a deeper meaning in nature, society or their friendships through their road trip. Each were about the same age – in or just out of college. They left behind similar environments, traveled to the same places and ached for the same stories. They'd taken a chance on the road, where it's been, where it's always going and gave up control. I, too, found synergy in my trip. We grew closer, bonded over shared memories and found ourselves learning something new together. Above all, our road trip

provided connection. Much like American citizens back in the day, we went out searching – to see what was in our own backyard, to search for that experience or that feeling. We went to connect. And in today’s world, maybe a little more connection isn’t such a bad idea.



We take one last border photo, and then head home to San Marcos. Photo by Sydney Allen