

## **Touring the Hetero Zoo**

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and  
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This book is dedicated to our friends and families.  
Wherever you are is where we call "home."



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## Let's Buy an RV

"You live where?"

That's a question we heard a lot in the two and a half years we lived in an RV. Two thirtysomething guys aren't the most obvious candidates for becoming "full-timers," as the RV world calls it. Everyone was surprised that we were not only in a forty-foot trailer, but that we'd moved out of our apartment, sold or given away most of what we owned, were managing to *work* on the road, and were *happy* doing so. It wasn't a decision we made overnight. Well, come to think of it, it was.

### The Slow, Sure Path

We started simply enough, with an eight-foot pop-up trailer that we took camping on weekends. *Real* camping, mind you; the pop-up didn't have a shower, bathroom, or much of a kitchen. We hitched it to Don's Wrangler and went to nearby Rehoboth Beach, Northern Pennsylvania, and as far as Virginia Beach. We'd actually started with a large tent, but after just two trips—the first of which was in early April and saw frost form on the tent overnight, and the second of which was to Williamsburg, Virginia, where we were caught in a near-hurricane—we decided that a somewhat more stable structure, with a bit of a bed, would be more fun. We bought the second-smallest pop-

up that Coleman offered, which was the largest one's Don's Jeep could tow. Our apartment complex offered garages, providing a convenient space to store the pop-up. We kept it fully stocked and ready to go, meaning we could take a long weekend with very little notice just by hitching up. We always got a few sideways looks when we went camping; two guys sharing a pop-up can only mean one thing, right? Rehoboth Beach, of course, was no issue; we were far from the only gay men there.

We bought the pop-up in the Spring and used it for the entire season. Early the next season, we took it out to a local KOA Kampground to clean it out and get it ready for the year's camping trips. We drove down to the dealer to pick up a few supplies, and noticed that they had all the pop-ups set up on display in their showroom. After looking around for a bit, we started talking to our salesperson. Turns out that a garage-kept pop-up is a rare thing, and he offered us a bit more in trade than we'd actually paid (you know how salespeople muddle with numbers). So we bought the second-*biggest* pop-up they offered, and drove off to unload our stuff from our smaller unit. Chris had recently bought a Dodge Dakota, and it would have no problem hauling the bigger trailer.

That Fall's big trip was a two-day drive to Disney World, where we stayed at their Fort Wilderness campground for a week. We had a *great* time; Don's always been a huge Disney fan and Chris has always been tolerant of it. One evening, we were talking about how much fun we were having in our little portable hotel room (which now offered an abbreviated bathroom, shower, full kitchen, and color TV), and

decided that, if we just had a *much* larger unit, living in one wouldn't be so bad. At the time, Don was working as a software developer for a dot-com; we figured that he'd do that for a few years and then become an independent writer and trainer, at which time working from the road wouldn't be impossible. Chris could get odd jobs wherever we decided to drive to. Don was already speaking at technical conferences, so now we could just take the RV instead of flying. Two, maybe three years down the line seemed like the right timeframe.

That December—at Christmastime, in fact—the dot com went dot bomb and Don was laid off. At right about the same time, Don got his first book contract with a publisher, to write *Microsoft .NET E-Commerce Bible*. We decided that Don could play the starving artist for a while and that Chris' salary could suffice. A month later, Don was asked to write a textbook for software development, got a second and third book deal, several training engagements, and some consulting work from Microsoft Corporation. In January, we traded in Chris' Dakota for a Chevy Silverado—a truck big enough to tow the fifth wheel RV we'd decided to buy.

### **What To Buy?**

And we *agonized* over the fifth wheel decision. In fact, we'd had a motorhome picked out. It was one of those bus-sized things with slide-out sections and everything. We had to make a lot of compromises, though; motorhomes aren't tricked out with computer desks for two people, there's not much room for a ferret cage—and the four ferrets were absolutely going with us. Our eventual choice was a major compromise, and we'd be making modifications to it to fit

everything. One benefit was that we'd keep Don's Jeep, towing it behind the RV. Jeeps make great "toads," as they're called, and it'd give us something to drive around town in when the RV was parked.

All that changed when we went to yet another RV show—we'd been to nearly a dozen since October—and walked into a fifth wheel. We'd pretty much ignored them, concentrating as we were on motorhomes. When we walked into the first large fifth wheel, Chris nearly cried. Honestly. Everything we wanted was there: A big kitchen, a full computer workstation, a big TV, plenty of room for a cage, and more. The crying was because we'd have to start the RV search all over, considering and discarding dozens of models in the search for "just right." We'd also have to buy a truck to haul the RV with, since the 30- to 40-foot ones we were looking at weighed up to seven tons or more when fully loaded. The price was right, though: A 40-foot fifth wheel runs about \$60,000, and a truck to tow it about \$40,000. Compare that to \$150,000 and up for a diesel motorhome of similar size and with similar features.

A *fifth wheel*, by the way, is different from a *travel trailer*. Travel trailers are like the famous toaster-like Airstream: A regular trailer that hitches to a truck somewhere near the truck's bumper, often using complex weight-distributing hitches. A fifth wheel's hitch is in the bed of the truck, and the trailer's forward portion sits over the truck bed. This setup provides better weight distribution and not only allows you to haul more weight, but also to control it more easily on the road. The truck we selected had dual rear wheels (a *dually*, in the vernacular), providing even better weight distribution and stability on

the road. The raised part of the RV that sits over the truck bed contains the bedroom, and when the RV is parked you unhitch the truck and use it to drive around town or whatever. All this talk of hitches and trucks, by the way, will make you welcome in nearly any truck stop in America.

We finally decided on a Cedar Creek 37RLTS, a nearly 40-foot-long fifth wheel with three slide-out sections that made it very roomy inside. We bought it pretty much fully-loaded: Dual air conditioners, wired for phone and cable hookups (which many RV parks offer), and so on. We made our decision right around Chris' birthday in mid-February; delivery was scheduled for mid-May.

### **Time to Decongest**

We had a lot of *stuff* in our apartment in Exton, Pennsylvania. It was a three-bedroom, almost 1,500-square foot apartment. We had two sets of living room furniture, a full bedroom suite, tons of kitchen crap, one bedroom filled with ferret stuff (toys, their cage, boxes for them to play in, and so on), lots of computer equipment, and the usual amount of clothes. "Usual" for two gay men, that is, with plenty of shoes. Some of it—*most* of it—had to go.

Don's parents bought one living room set. Chris' oldest sister, who was starting to build a new house, bought the other, the bedroom, and the chest freezer. The 32" television, entertainment center, receiver, DVD player, and VCR were wedding presents to the same sister. Clothes went to Goodwill. Most of the kitchen stuff was given away to friends, sold at a family yard sale by our good friends George and

Spencer, or given to Goodwill. We had a party and drank or gave away almost all of our 80+ bottles of wine we'd collected over the years. Computers were stripped for parts and trashed. *Nothing* was put into storage: We knew we wouldn't be coming back to Pennsylvania, and we didn't want stuff to rot in storage only to have to pay to have it hauled cross-country to wherever we decided to settle down. We were planning on a three-year stay in the RV, and would use the time looking for a new home.

As the apartment emptied out, we started to feel both apprehensive and excited. We planned to live in the RV right next door in Downingtown for five or six months, to work out the kinks. Chris would keep his job at a local credit union until we finally pulled up and left the state.

### **Were We Crazy?**

Possibly. Certainly, as you'll read, we felt that way from time to time. In the end, though, it all just seemed to happen without planning. Don was a Navy brat, so the idea of leaving his friends behind wasn't anything new, and he'd already lived in Pennsylvania for six years—longer than almost anyplace else he'd ever lived. Chris had been born and raised in the area, and was looking forward to seeing more of the country. We knew we wanted to experience more of the US, but that we didn't want to wait until we were old and infirm to do so. We knew that, if worst came to worse, we could take the RV to any major metro and get decent jobs. We *really* wanted to pull ourselves out of a rut we seemed to be in, and with all that had been happening in Don's career, living on the road seemed like a good idea at the time.

Our biggest concern was acceptance. While most major metropolitan areas are pretty accepting of gays, we weren't planning to spend our time moving between gay ghettos. It would have been impossible; RV parks and campgrounds tend to be on the outskirts of town, anyway, which is where we were more likely to encounter problems with the locals. We decided to play it safe: No rainbow stickers on the truck or RV, for starters. We put American flag decals on, instead, knowing we could always play up the patriotism angle, especially in middle America. We also made a big decision: To carry a weapon. If someone tried to break into the RV when we were camping in the middle of bumfuck, we'd at least be able to defend ourselves. A shotgun is about the only firearm you can legally carry in all fifty states without a license, so we decided on a black Mossberg "Persuader" model—basically the same thing most cops carry. Friends Sunny and Chris—both police officers—recommended it to us. Our plan was to keep the chamber empty and the magazine full, so that we could get the extra psychological benefit of chambering a shell if necessary. That loud "ka-chunk" noise shotguns make is a clear warning that the *next* noise will be a lot louder and more dangerous, serving to direct an intruder's attention to the proper place.

Connectivity—both through traditional mail as well as telephones and e-mail—was a concern, too, and something we'd researched extensively before making the decision to become full-timers. While you do have to make a few trade-offs to live the RV lifestyle, it's becoming amazingly easy to do so without giving up mail, phones, or the Internet. In the last chapter of this book, in fact, we'll tell you how

we did it, and how things are changing even now to make it easier on full-timers to connect.

### **A Word of Caution**

Our journey technically begins in the next chapter, as we move into the RV and start settling into our new lifestyle. But before you start in earnest, we want to tell you a bit about how we wrote this book.

Each chapter represents one major trip or stop on our journey through the hetero-dominated zoo we call the USA. In each, we'll tell you about the native life we encountered, the good times we had, and the hurdles we encountered. We hope to give you a fun, informative look at how gay men are treated throughout the country, and at the exciting, interesting, and weird stuff those straight people do throughout the land. At times, we may seem to come off as superior ("look at these lowly straight people and their strange ways!") or dishy; we claim gay poetic license and a desire to make our tale entertaining as well as informative. We didn't set out to write an accurate travel guide; we set out to present a highly biased view of the many places we visited. Understand that it's all in good fun; with the single exception of our California Adventure—which you'll read about—our overall experience was pretty fantastic. Very few people our age get to do what we did and see what we saw, and we're forever grateful for the experience. We were often surprised at how willing the other 90% of the population is to live and let live, and we're pleased to say that the shotgun was never, ever fired, or even ka-chunked.



We do, however, reserve the right to be a couple of bitchy queens if it'll get us a laugh, and, particularly in the case of California, to feel a thousand percent smarter than the people we encountered. We hope you'll take it all in the spirit in which it's intended.

*Note:* Throughout our journey, our friends and families had access to a Web site called ferrettracks.com. On it, we posted photos and descriptions of our journey, allowing them to experience it with us. Now that we've settled down, the Web site is gone, although many of those descriptions have helped us relive the moment while writing this more extended version of our tale. While we've written this book in the past tense, we did so while re-experiencing our entire trip through the vehicle of that on-the-spot journal.

Why a zoo? Rolling through the US, we often felt as if we were outsiders looking in. We had a few things going on there: We were gay, which meant we were always a little reserved in new towns, and we were young, which meant we didn't really fit the full-time RVer profile, which is typically a retired couple. Checking out the local tourist attractions or whatever weirdness the town had in store, we often had a sort of "holy straight people, Batman" feeling running in the backs of our heads. We often commented to one another that it was like touring a zoo, and we were the only people on the right side of the fence. We also started to realize that a *lot* of gay people live that way. "This is our world, that's their world, and we'll laugh at them if they come over here." That's a part of why so-called "gay ghettos" exist. The reality, however, is that we're all living in this country together. If we'd mingle a bit more instead of looking at each other

through a fence, we'd probably be better off. Do you think real lions live at all like the ones in the zoo? Of course not. The zoo shows us what the creatures look like, but nothing about how they really live. We think many of the misconceptions straights have about days—and vice-versa—comes from too much looking through the fence, and not enough time on safari checking out the actual living conditions.

Wow, that's a lot of philosophy for the first chapter. On with the show.

## **Downingtown, PA**

We began our travels without much traveling at all, parking our RV in Downingtown, PA. The RV park we chose isn't open anymore, but it was a lovely little spot right along the Brandywine River. In fact, when it rained, it became one and the same as the Brandywine, which led to no little excitement once or twice during our stay. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Downingtown's primary advantage was its proximity—right next door—to Exton, which is where we lived in an apartment at the time. The campground also offered phone lines, which was a big deal, as both of us needed Internet connectivity and Don literally couldn't work as a computer author without it. We spent several weeks wrapping up our affairs, emptying the apartment (unless you knew us at the time, you missed some seriously good deals on unopened bottles of wine), and moving our few remaining possessions into the RV.

First, of course, we had to park the RV. We picked up the trailer around 4pm on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001, which meant we didn't have a lot of light left to work with in the day. To make matters worse, the park only offered back-in spaces and a narrow access road, which is hardly the ideal set of conditions under which to park your first 40-foot

trailer. Chris totally nailed it, though, placing the RV exactly where we wanted. It was placed so that one set of tires were on the grass to the side of the asphalt pad provided, leaving room for our awning to come down on the other side. Unfortunately, we were told, it'd sink there, because the ground got too soft when it was wet (remember what we said about the Brandywine?). We'd have to move the RV over about a foot. Let us tell you, nothing is more difficult than moving an RV over a foot when you've only got about four feet to pull back and forth to get it moved. Chris wound up having to pull it completely off the site, around the park, and back at it for another try—by which time he was so rattled that he couldn't have hit his own face, let along the narrow campsite. Fortunately, an Elder Straight stepped in. Seems he'd been driving big rigs for forty years and offered to help show Chris what to do. Hell with that, Chris said—park the damn thing for me and I'll buy you a beer. Within seconds the RV was perfectly aligned on the asphalt pad. Elder Straight didn't even look at the stupid mirrors, he just worked on psychic intuition or something. We suppose it's a fair tradeoff, really: We get fashion, interior design, and Broadway; they get *American Pie* movies and parking trailers.

So, the park itself. Where do we begin? Let's start with the good, two fellow Family members of the female persuasion named Pam and Margie. A former sports merchandise exec, Pam decided to call corporate life quits and hit the road with her partner, Margie. They bought a 20-some foot trailer, hitched it to their SUV, and pulled into Downingtown's campground. Like us, it was a first, local stop before they completely pulled up their roots and took off. Pam and Margie were great fun, and we'd sit out almost every night enjoying a beer by

the campfire with them. Not *their* campfire; none of us started campfires. That was Tina's job.

Tina was what we refer to as a Maysbian, which means there were no men in her life, other than her aging English bulldog, and no women, either. But she worked at a steel mill, had a curly version of a mullet, drank beer like a champ, and could take any two of us in a fair fight. Tina lived in a house down the road, but kept a trailer in the park for her dog. She was there almost every day, and was kind of a combination watchperson, maintenance worker, and groundskeeper. By day, she worked at the nearby steel factory. Her bonfires—what she called a "little campfire"—were near-legendary and probably contravened most strategic arms agreements in effect at the time. She built them near her trailer, under a tree with an enormous canopy. The tree limbs had been trimmed back and formed a neat, organic dome over the fire area. She used those metal fire rings that you see in almost every campground. Three of them, to be exact, stacked on top of one another. They were sitting on a 4-foot diameter steel plate that was an inch thick and weighed about four million tons—Don helped pull the thing off of Tina's pickup when she brought it home from the factory. The fire would heat up the giant steel disc and help spread the warmth, and was great for cooking baked potatoes.

And then there was Bob, whose name we've changed to protect what little privacy he has remaining. Bob lived in a motorhome up the road from us a bit. His wife lived in their house further away in town. No idea what the deal was there, other than that she came for monthly conjugal visits in the trailer. Those were the only nights Bob would

open the slideouts on his RV, in fact; the rest of the time he's stay cooped up inside so that the leaves wouldn't get on the slideout awnings. You know, the awnings that keep leaves off the roof of the slideouts. Bob would take a daily drive around the park in his pickup truck. Now, when we say "around," understand that the park would fit inside the oval track at most high schools, so driving wasn't strictly mandatory. But drive he did, like a demented security guard, and if your RV's window shades were open he'd slam on the brakes and peer right in to see what you were up to. We called him Staring Old Man. He pretty much never spoke a word to anyone else in the park, he just kept to himself. We kept our shotgun loaded, just incase he ever decided to drop by in the evening and make friends. Tina'd told us that, while cleaning the campground' restrooms on several occasions, she'd caught him having a personal conjugal visit by himself in there. Needless to say, we pretty much kept to our RV's onboard shower.

And let us not forget Marlin. Marlin was a friendly enough old guy. Quiet, like. He and his wife would come down almost every weekend and stay in their Terry brand fifth wheel, which was brand new and parked right next to us. Marlin hated us because we had bought the Cedar Creek model he'd really wanted when he settled for the somewhat smaller Terry. Understand that the Terry was just a weekend home for them, not a trailer per se; it never moved. He'd come down every weekend, and while the wife entertained the kids and grandkids, he'd putter around cleaning and polishing the damn trailer until Sunday afternoon, when they'd pack it all in and head home. We worry, now, that when we're old we'll turn into Marlin's. Don will putter around the house polishing LCD screens, while Chris

plays bridge with the other old fags in town, complaining about how they don't build casinos the way they did when we were all young. If you should happen to visit us and find that our nightmare has come true, please call the police and have them shoot us.

Bob and Carol—this is a different Bob than the one above, and this Bob is really named Bob—were some of the friendliest folks we met on the road. An older couple, they were originally from Pennsylvania, and were spending some time at home. They'd planned to leave again and resume their wandering ways, but Carol was diagnosed with cancer, and they decided to stay in Pennsylvania where quality health care was more readily accessible than it was on the road. They owned a house there, and were planning to move back into it and sell the RV. They were always up for a cold beer on a hot evening, and spent many nights with us over at Tina's space roasting marshmallows. We were big s'mores fans and insisted on making them for everyone else who attended bonfire nights.

And then there were Colleen and Charlie. Lord, where do we begin? These two were Carolina race fans, and toured their aging Dolphin motorhome up and down the east coast following Nascar. Charlie was nearly a good 'ol boy, and they both drank. We mean *they drank*. Like nobody you've seen could drink without being in the morgue. And Colleen grew tomatoes. And *drank*. Seriously, these were some cocktail- and beer-swilling straight people. Charlie was a pleasant enough drunk, but when Colleen had a firm buzz on she was a terror, roaming all over the campground telling everyone exactly what she thought about everyone else. She particularly had it in for the young

woman who managed the campground, and would get into all sorts of spats with her over the stupidest things. We loved watching them and have some lovely videotape that we may compile into a commercial DVD one day. It's all just too priceless.

You know the saying that straight men buy expensive sports cars to compensate for a small penis? There was one fellow in the park, then, who had no penis. None at all. In fact, he may have had a *negative* penis if you can picture such a thing. We can't, and don't ask us to try, by the way. He had a fifth wheel trailer about as long as ours, which is to say it was freaking huge. The difference is we pulled out trailer with a readily-available, perfectly common Chevy pickup truck. A *big* Chevy, but perfectly normal, like the kind you might see a foreman driving to a construction site or something. Very, very butch, but not small-penis material, especially when it was pulling such a large RV. This other guy, though, drove what's called a medium-duty truck. Even a big-ass Chevy Silverado 3500, or a similar Ford 350, is considered light-duty; big 16-wheeler semitrucks are considered heavy-duty. If you can picture a sort of miniature semi, with an RV in place of the usual trailer full o' whatever, you'll have the perfect image of a medium-duty truck. Why do you buy one of these? First, you need one if your trailer weighs in at over eight tons, and pretty much no RV trailer does. You also need one if you have absolutely no penis and just need a bigger truck than anybody else on the road in order to compensate.

In addition to not having a penis, he was some sort of mix between a truck-drivin' redneck and an Amish elder. His wife wasn't allowed out



of the RV without an escort. Not *ever*. So she compensated by baking, and that woman baked like baking was going to be outlawed at any minute. Just *tons* of food. Much of which we got to try, because Colleen would spirit it away, and much of which was quite good.

Redneck Man also liked to point his satellite dish. Now, if you've ever done this, you've probably only done it once, so you won't remember. When you put your satellite receiver into "point dish" mode, it beeps. The beeping is intended to help you point the dish: The closer you get to having the dish on-target, the faster and more high-pitched the beeps would get. In an RV, you do this every time you set up camp at a new site, unless you have a fancy motorized dish that just shuts the hell up and points itself without all the fuss. Redneck Man did not have a fancy dish, and we swear to God that he pointed his dish *every single day*. For a freaking *hour*, he would try to fine-tune the dish, with the television volume turned 'way up so that he could hear the beeping while he was on the roof pointing. Hell, the people on the other side of the park could hear it. *We* could have pointed his dish, we could hear the stupid beeping so well. Don wanted to take our shotgun and blow the dish right off the RV, except that we knew the sonuvabitch would have been up there the next day pointing a new one.

We'd planned to stay in Downingtown until October, which was about six months' total. In early July, however, the park sprung a leak. Literally: The fresh water line was broken and the water had to be turned off so the line could be dug up and repaired. Now, understand, utilities at this park were an ongoing joke. Twice a day, at 7am and

4pm, the electricity would cut out for one second as the steel factory across the road powered up and down for the day's work. The DirecTV system that distributed the only usable television channel to the park only received a half-dozen channels, and none of them made it clearly to the actual spaces, what with the park's buried coaxial lines being so old Ben Franklin would have recognized them. So when we were told to fill up our water tank because we might not have running water for a few days, we decided to bug out early. July in the Philadelphia metro area is no picnic, and temperatures and humidity honestly aren't relatively much worse further South—so we decided to leave early. Chris got on the phone and began the first of what was to become almost regularly-scheduled schedule changes: Letting the next campgrounds along the way know that our dates were changing and that we'd be there shortly. Next stop: Virginia Beach, Virginia.

## Heading South for the Summer

Americans build crap. Here we gays are, working our asses off in whatever careers were in just to get ahead. Sure, we have a stereotype of having a lot of disposable income just because of the aforementioned ass-working-off, and because we aren't saving for junior's college education. But most gay people we know *are* dedicated to what they do. They want to do a good job. We don't think straight people do. At least, not all of them. At least, not the ones that built our RV, the sons of bitches.

### Virginia Beach, Virginia

We packed up our things and are headed South, to Don's home town of Virginia Beach, Virginia. Well, not *exactly* home town; he's a Navy brat and moved all up and down the East coast. But he graduated from high school in Virginia Beach and spent over ten years there, so close enough.

We pulled into the Virginia Beach KOA, which isn't too far from the beach itself, and only about 30 minutes from where Don's parents lived at the time. We settled in and began putting the RV's slideouts out. We were planning to spend a couple of days goofing off on the beach, and felt relaxed about how our first day of towing the RV had gone. And then Chris opened the wardrobe closet.

The wardrobe ran across the front of the RV, and was accessed through two mirrored sliding doors in the bedroom, much like a closet you might see in a house. It had a shelf running across the entire top for sweaters and whatnot, and hanging space underneath the shelf. A stack of corner shelves provided additional space for shirts and jeans. At least, that was the intent: A day of jouncing down the highway pretty much wrecked it. The upper shelf pulled almost completely free, and the hanger rack underneath the shelf had also ripped free. Our clothes were crammed everywhere inside the wardrobe, and there was no hope at fixing it.

Here's where the anger set in: It didn't rip apart because we'd gone offroading or something. It ripped apart because it was built like *crap*. Picture this: Imagine you're building a house. Now imagine that some smart-aleck carpenter comes along and only installs every third wall stud. Now what do you suppose will happen eventually? That's right, the wall's going to collapse. With any luck it'll collapse on the idiot who left two-thirds of the studs out, thus preventing him from breeding and proving that Darwin had a point.

The hanging bar in our RV was screwed into the bottom of that upper shelf in the wardrobe, but there was only a screw in every third screw hole. That's a problem, see, because the shelf was just made of particle board, and it couldn't support a lot of weight in any one spot. Having a lot of screws would distribute the weight of the hanging clothes so that the shelf could handle it; with only every third screw in place, it ripped right out. Now, why would you suppose that two-

thirds of the screws would be missing? *That's* right, the stupid-ass idiot who was assembling it was trying to knock off early so he could go home and screw his girlfriend, said screwing to be immediately followed by a nice, cold brewskie. We know this, because had he been gay, not only would *all* of the screws have been in place, they'd have been screwed in nice and straight. And likely he'd have had great arm muscles and looked extremely hot in a tight shirt. And who doesn't like having their closet assembled by a man who looks great in a tight shirt?

So instead of spending the next couple of days lounging at the beach, we spent them reassembling the closet. Don cut two-by-fours into braces that carried the weight of the shelf down to the floor of the closet, and reinstalled the hanger bars with the *proper* number of screws. The braces were then screwed into the floor so they wouldn't shift around. This extra work would have required ten dollars and thirty minutes at the factory; because we were working with our portable (read, "very small and underpowered") tools, it cost twice as much and took the better part of a day. And the closet would *remain* an issue until Wisconsin, where we finally decided to rip it all the hell out and install those plastic Rubbermaid drawer units to hold everything. Bastards.

Everything looked sturdy and ready to pull out, so a couple of days after arriving, we got back on the road and headed for North Carolina.

## **North Carolina**

*Bastards.* You know, it isn't fair. Plenty of gay men and women out there would make wonderful, intelligent parents. They can manage simple manual labor tasks like installing a *screw*, for God's sake, along with the usual tasks of cooking gourmet meals, selecting appropriate paints and wallpaper, and coming up with dressy outfits to wear out to dinner. Yet if a gay man or woman wants to adopt an infant, they have to go through an inquisition that would make a medieval Catholic smile in respect. They have to prove they'd be suitable parents, fight public perceptions that the infant would be "doomed" to be gay (yeah, that's what we lay awake at night worrying about), and so on. A straight couple, on the other hand, doesn't need permission: They can just fuck like bunnies until a kid pops out, and then raise it to be a happy little clone of mommy and daddy with all the right prejudices and everything. And not only does that straight couple not need permission to have the kid, the freaking husband can go to work and do a half-assed job of assembling *every goddamn component in our RV*.

Not the closet, this time. No, two concerned gay men took care of that problem and it wasn't coming apart. This time it was the pantry. See, the RV was equipped with a slide-out pantry. It was basically a metal frame with wire baskets attached to hold spices, canned goods, and what have you. It was attached to a sliding mechanism, much like a kitchen drawer turned on its side, and the slides were screwed into the wood at the top and bottom of the pantry cabinet. A nice door closed over the whole affair. A little latch prevented the pantry from sliding out when the RV was in motion, bashing the door open and

spilling groceries all over. Now, how many screws do you suppose held the latch in? That's right, one-third the correct number. And how many screws would you suppose held the sliding mechanism to the bottom of the cabinet? Front of the class if you said *one-third the proper number*. Now, here's the trick question: Where do you suppose our bottle of extra virgin olive oil was when we got to North Carolina? *All over the goddamn carpet!!*

Along with everything else in the pantry, of course, but the olive oil was the only thing that broke open and stained the carpet forever. Don went ballistic. Chris cleaned up, rented a carpet cleaner, and did the best he could. Don reinstalled the pantry sliding mechanisms and latch with the *correct number of screws*, and we both spent a miserable evening staring at the dark spot that refused to come out of our practically-new RV carpet. And you can't just replace that carpet—the way it's installed, you'd have to disassemble most of the RV to get at the carpet's edges. It'd be easier, probably, to just build a naval destroyer or something rather than changing that carpet once it was in. See, this is why we don't build many things in America anymore. Can you imagine if some horny idiot over here was building a DVD player? Hell, the laser would probably swing over to the side—installed as it was with only one of its three mounting screws—and burn your eyeballs out over there on the sofa. Small wonder the Japanese are going to rule us one day. *Domo aragato*, as far as we're concerned, especially if they get into building RVs.

By the way, a lot later we discovered Clorox Oxygen. Took the olive oil stain right out, even though by then it was over a year old and had

probably started having its own little civil elections and whatnot right there in the carpet. We assume Clorox Oxygen was invented by a good-looking gay man who wasn't distracted by trying to raise a family and just wanted to get some Cabernet out of his favorite white blouse.

### **Savannah, Georgia**

As we sat down to write this chapter, we wanted to tell you all about how we'd read *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, which of course is set in Savannah, and how we spent a day exploring the sights mentioned in the book, meeting the real-life inspirations for its characters, and so on. We'd planned some witty observations about how the folks in Savannah seem to either be gay, fabulous, or both, and that nobody was really un-fabulous enough to want to be "just straight."

All of that would be a lie, though, so we've decided to leave it out. The fact is, when we pulled into Savannah—actually, a KOA just outside Savannah—we were exhausted. We spent an hour looking for broken cabinetry and more time looking for screws that hadn't been installed. We took a shower, and we have a vague recollection of heading to the local mall for dinner at Piccadilly Express, which is precisely the kind of gourmet dining that the name suggests. Don remembers having something involving salmon that he probably shouldn't have. We remember the campground being very easy to pull into and out of, and we remember that humans were working in the office. We weren't much on details at that point—Tampa was only one stop away and we just wanted to put our feet down for a little bit and



recover. Our nice, slow trip South—we didn't drive for more than five hours in any one day—had turned out to be a series of sprints, punctuated by lengthy and complicated repair efforts.

By the way, we feel it worth mentioning that our Cedar Creek fifth wheel was manufactured by Forest River, Inc. They make several other brands of RV. We've seen models of many of them, and they're all the same quality of construction as ours. Warranty was never really an issue, because they insisted that we (a) not repair the damage ourselves, and (b) bring the RV to the nearest authorized repair facility, which was usually two or three states away. When we eventually sold the RV we were still trying to get them to *sell* us a replacement finger latch for the sofa bed, and we never did get it. *Bastards.*



## **Tampa, Florida**

Tampa is not the wettest place on Earth. That place is on Kaua'i, one of the oldest of the islands in Hawai'i. Tampa is, however, the lightning-strike capital of the United States. Every day at around 3pm or so in the summertime there's a major thunderstorm, lasting anywhere from a few minutes to the better part of the afternoon and evening. Fun stuff, great place to live.

### **First Stop**

We regard Tampa as our first official stop on the RV adventure, because it was the first major campground where we stayed for longer than a night or two, excepting Downingtown, which is where we started. We were exhausted by the time we got to the campground, but happy to be there. And the park was mostly empty, since we'd arrived well in advance of the usual snowbird season. Just as we pulled in, the daily rainstorm was starting, so Don had the honor of standing out in the rain—under trees—while Chris backed the RV into its assigned space. Don also had the frustration, two days later, of hitching the RV back up when we couldn't get our satellite dish to lock on through all of the trees, and when the phone line running to the site turned out to be bad. Gloria, the helpful woman at the office, assigned us to a pull-through spot that was mostly devoid of satellite-blocking trees, and helped us work with the phone company to ensure

the site we'd picked had a good line. It was all kind of a shame; just like in Downingtown, Chris nailed the dismount, pushing the RV back into the original spot like he was a pro.

The park we'd selected was an Encore RV park. It was a big, big park, and was actually part of an even larger three-park complex. One of the adjacent two parks was given over entirely to modular homes and permanent trailers, and older folks from the North filled these during the winter months. That park was the only one with a hot tub by the pool, although we only used it once. The temperature was set to something around 220 degrees, and by the time we got out we had a much stronger empathy for lobsters.

### **Nun to the Rescue**

Don spent a few weeks away from Tampa on business, generally up in Seattle. On one of those occasions, Chris was walking back to the RV from the pool, making a few phone calls along the way. Nearing the RV, he spotted a bedsheet crossing over the bridge into that section of the park. As he got closer, he realized that the bedsheet was being worn by a woman. She was carrying a stick with things hanging off of it, and speaking in what sounded like a *very* foreign language. Chris greeted her, and made the cardinal mistake: He asked what she was doing. She replied, in perfect English, that her dog had detected a gatekeeper (would that be Gatekeeper?) on the bridge, a malevolent force that she was trying to handle. Her mission, it seemed, was to deal with these malevolent forces throughout the land, either driving them out or transforming them. Into what, we're not sure and Chris

didn't ask. Ants, maybe, in which case she was incredibly successful. But more on that later.

She went on to explain that her dog was incredibly sensitive to these malevolent forces, although it was unclear at the time whether all of them were gatekeepers (Gate keepers?), or if they had some diversity in their job roles. The dog, a big German shepherd mix, apparently made all the decisions about where they traveled in their RV, seeking out the aforementioned malevolent forces and performing the aforementioned eviction-or-transformation routine. She said her secondary mission—never send the troops out without a secondary objective, we guess—was to bring the Word of God to the People. It seemed clear that this was a *very* secondary mission, and that she was comfortable with the other Outlets of the Word that God had provided, and was mainly content to concentrate on the malevolent thing. We swear, we could not make this shit up.

She came and went several times, with her dog and RV. Chris learned to stay away and to keep shells in the shotgun's magazine. For the malevolent forces, of course.

### **Ant Wars**

If those mal forces (you have no idea how tedious it is to type "malevolent" over and over) were, in fact, being transformed, then it was almost definitely into ants. These ants were no less mal than the original forces, and although they were presumably a lot smaller, they made up for it in numbers.

Understand that Don does not like bugs, unless they are dead, and is extremely creative in the various ways to make them that way. When we started seeing ants in the RV, he not only put down the little plastic ant trap things, but also went on a personal mission to evict all ants from our RV site. Transformation back into a more generic mal force wasn't considered an option. Don started with ant powder purchased at the local Home Depot. They sold several types of ant powder, in fact, and, unsure which type of ant we actually had, Don just bought them all and started scattering them like manna on the ground under and around the RV, forming a white-powder shield of ant destruction. This was mainly effective, but the little buggers kept migrating in from offsite. As we walked around the park, we started noticing an alarming number of ant mounds, and Don redoubled his efforts to not only kill the ones on our site, but to hopefully provide some sort of deterrent to the incoming reinforcements.

We had a bike rack that mounted to the ladder on the back of the RV, and a big, black nylon cover that we used to cover the bikes up while on the road. You know, so they wouldn't get all grimy. While in Tampa, we had just tossed the cover under the front of the RV to keep it out of the rain. Don went to move the cover as a part of Operation Ant, to see if there were any ant hills underneath. There weren't—the ants had taken up residence *inside* the folds of the cover. It was disgusting. When Don exposed their little colony, the ants started grabbing up the eggs their queen had laid and making for the hills. Or, more accurately, for the roots of the one tree on our RV site. Stupid move. Don took the garden hose to them like an Alabama police officer hosing down peaceful protestors. The ants went everywhere, their

eggs destroyed. Next, Don heated up a big pot of boiling water and poured it over the tree's roots, right near the trunk where the ants had been running. The ants, in turn, came boiling out—literally—looking for someplace cooler. Don was there with the hose, blasting them left and right. Then it was in with the ant powder mix, truly the napalm of the ant world: Pour the mix down the ant holes, wet it with the hose to wash the deadly mixture deep into the hive. An hour later, it was over. Ant carcasses were scattered across the ground, serving as a grim warning to incoming troops who thought they'd have an easy occupation. Right before the next rainstorm, Don scattered salt pellets—purchased to use in our water softener—around the ground. The rain soaked the salt into the earth, making it inimical for nearly all life and incidentally helping to control the weeds that kept cropping up around the RV.

Once a week, Don would refresh the ant poison, for nearly the entire two months we were in Tampa. But after the fateful Battle of the Tree, the ants were never to return to our RV site, and they gave us wide berth as we walked around the park.

### **Ybor City**

One of the coolest things to do in Tampa is to head downtown into Ybor City where, in an age past, most of America's fine cigars were manufactured. Dominated now by Centro Ybor, a shopping strip-slash-entertainment district, Ybor offered the best recreational opportunities for bored residents who didn't want to pay for Busch Gardens admission or drive over to Orlando.

One of our favorite spots in Ybor was the Muvico, a multi-screen Cineplex with over-the-top themed interior design. More specifically, we liked The Premier, a separate four-screen cinema-within-a-cinema. The Premier showed first-run movies, many of which were also playing on other screens at Muvico. But The Premier was open only to adults, and you could enjoy a personal pizza, or even a beer, with your movie. It was almost heaven, being able to sit down and enjoy a movie without screaming kids, little toddlers who were *obviously* too young to enjoy Jurassic Park VII, or annoying teenagers who were too cool to sit down, shut up, and watch the show.

We spent a lot of time in movie theaters during our journey, in fact. Why is it that so many straight people think that they can have a baby and otherwise live their lives unchanged? Look, when you have a kid, you just can't go to the movies until the kid is old enough to sit quietly for a couple of hours, unless you're willing to rent a babysitter for the kid. Everyone else does *not* think your kid is cute, we think it's *annoying*. We paid our ten bucks to see the movie, and we'd like to see it in *quiet*, please. We do *not* understand that the kid is too young to sit quietly, and we wonder why *you* don't understand the same damn thing and leave it at home.

It's all part of the bigger problem of people being too damn stupid to understand simple directions and consequences. How many times have you been in a movie theater where the previews specifically instructed people to turn off their goddamn cell phones, and people continued to have ringing cell phones, and even entire conversations, during the movie? Did they not get the memo? Do they think they're



special, and that they simply can't be out of touch for a moment, and that silent mode isn't an option because then they'd have to *wear* the phone and it would make their hips look even fatter than they are?

We're stereotyping and generalizing when we say that most gay people of our acquaintance tend to be a little more considerate of what's going on around them. We dress nicely so that we're not an eyesore, and we put our cell phones on silent when the time is right. We try not to take calls at the table in a nice restaurant. We don't feel like we're the center of the world and that everything we do is, by definition, just fine. This is because our mothers raised us properly, to have and show respect, both for ourselves and for others.

On the other hand, so many straight couples—at least in our generation; our parents' were much better—seem to think that because they can breed, they hold some special place in the world. If their cell phones ring during the movie it's because they left the precious kids at home, and little Cindy might need to reach Mommy during the movie to find out where the cookies are hidden, or to tattle on little Bobby for pulling her braids. Christ in a feather boa, people, don't leave the kids alone at home if they might need to reach you by cell. Teach them when and how to dial 911, or don't leave them alone at all. Stay home, rent the movie when it comes out on video and chalk up your miserable, stay-at-home life to the fact that *you wanted to reproduce*. Nobody forced you to do this and plenty of us have been trying to get you to stop, or at least slow down a bit. But no, you wanted to make little copies of yourselves to prove how wonderful you were, and those copies are going to require at least a dozen years

of close, personal attention before you're through. I mean, the same people who happily quote "A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips" when someone picks up a gummy bear will screw like rabbits for a quick orgasm, never mind the fifteen or so years its going to take to lose the resulting deadweight.

### **Touring Tips**

Obviously, check out Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, one of the nicer theme parks in the country. Plus they give you free beer. But *definitely* spend some time at the Busch water park across the street. Delightful lifeguards. And don't forget that you're just about an hours' drive away from Walt Disney World, so it's worth stopping over for a day visit. We did; Don's Mom came into town and we drove her over to the Magic Kingdom for a day. Don's absolutely insufferable about Disney and insisted on going there several times, in fact. He gets it from his Mom.

Here's another interesting fact: You're just about twelve hours away, by car, from Birmingham, Alabama. We know this because Chris had to drive there to get Don and bring him home. Don had originally set out from Tampa's airport, bound for Seattle and a consulting gig at Microsoft. His plane took off at about 9:00am on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. About the time the plane passed over Birmingham, all planes in the US were grounded, so Don was stuck. Birmingham being the nexus of communications and travel that it is, Don wasn't even able to get through to Chris for several hours, whereupon we decided that waiting for another airplane ride was out of the question. Chris hopped in the truck and arrived in Birmingham that very night, and

we drove back to Tampa the next morning. Just a few days later, in the leading edge of an incoming hurricane, we headed West.



## Go West, Young Men

After two happy months in Tampa, it was time to hit the road again. We'd planned to leave at a leisurely 8:00 A.M. or so, but were wakened closer to 6:00 by intense winds whipping around the RV. Peeking outside, we realized a major storm was about to break. The hurricane that had been lingering off Tampa's coast was coming in to roost. We threw on our clothes and got the hell outta Dodge. We wound up driving through absolutely driving rains for a couple of hours until we cleared the edge of the storm, and then had a relatively easy drive to Tallahassee, Florida.

We can't think of much to say about Tallahassee. It was the first—and last—place where we went to a Steak 'N' Shake restaurant. For those of you who haven't had the pleasure—they're mainly a Southeast thing—Steak 'N' Shakes are basically mid-scale hamburger joints with table service. Picture a clean McDonald's with waiters and slightly better food. They're a lot more creative with their main ingredient—ground beef—than McDonald's, offering the fabulous Chili Mac platter, for example. And they serve milkshakes. Big, thick, creamy, impossibly fattening milkshakes. So we had our beef and milkshake, and then went back to the RV for a nice evening's sleep before the next day's drive.

## **Biloxi, Missouri**

The next day took us to Biloxi. We stayed in a very quiet, very well-kept campground. At the time, we didn't belong to any of the myriad discount camping clubs, but the owner was kind enough to register us with the Good Sam's club discount anyway. He explained at length about the campground's complimentary shuttle service to the Biloxi casinos. When we explained that we were just in for the night, he blinked once, and then continued explaining the benefits and features of the various casinos featured in Biloxi. We listened politely.

Later, when we stopped at the office to ask him where we could find a phone line for dialing into the Internet, he seemed awestruck that we weren't already off gambling. After pointing the way to the phone jack, he started to explain—again—that the campground offered a *free* shuttle to the casinos, and that the casinos all had *gambling*. He obviously thought we were simple or something. We looked at one another and, deciding that we could possibly be arrested for not gambling, promised to check them out the next day. We were just too gosh-durn tuckered right now to really think a thing about it. He looked relieved, and let us go. We left in a hurry the next morning, before the Gambling Police made their rounds and started wondering why we still hadn't contributed more to the local economy.

Now that we live in Las Vegas, we can, in retrospect, understand his attitude. A little. We simply *hate* tourists who don't gamble at least a little bit. We don't understand why they'd be here, otherwise. But we make it easy for them, by including gambling devices in every grocery store, bar, and convenience store in the entire valley. The less-

sophisticated Biloxians apparently rely solely on getting everyone to the casinos as rapidly as possible.

### **San Antonio, TGSOT**

TGSOT, by the way, stands for The Great State Of Texas, and we were informed by natives that it should only be referred to in this fashion. Whatever. TGSOT is certainly *large*: When you're on the road a lot, you tend to gauge distances by exit number. When you're nearing exit number 10 and they've been counting down, you know you're near the state line. Entering TGSOT and seeing exit number 998 or something is possible the most depressing thing in the universe. You wonder if they might not have done better to start numbering outward from the center or something, just to give people some freaking *hope*, you know?

TGSOT believes that things should be bigger. All things. Take Interstate interchanges, for example. We were nearly killed trying navigate one such interchange somewhere in TGSOT: It appeared that something like fifty roads came together at once in a towering stack of cloverleafs and overpasses. We think at one point that we were driving in the middle of a stack of eight or nine roads. It was unholy. It would almost have been less terrifying if all of the roads had simply emptied into a giant, paved bowl, and you just drove as hard as you could for the other side and hope that you hit the right road when you came out, and didn't crash into too many people in the middle.

We'd picked San Antonio because two of Don's friends lived there at the time. He'd known them in high school, and they'd been high school

sweethearts, and happily married ever since, which amounted to over ten years. Until a couple months after our visit, when there seemed to be some kind of affair or a falling out, and they divorced. Straight people, go fig. We accept no portion of the blame. One of them now lives in New Zealand and periodically sends some wonderful photographs. Anyway, we had a lovely visit with them at the time, and went down to San Antonio's Riverwalk, which is very charming and chock-full of barbeque places. Texans either eat barbeque like other people eat ice, or they're hell-bent on giving tourists the impression that they do. Barbequed chicken, beef, pork, and probably cheesecake for all we know under all that sauce.

We desperately wanted to see the Alamo. I mean, we'd driven all the way to San Antonio for Chrissake. But it was closed for construction or something. Possibly the building adjacent to it was falling apart and blocking access; we'd heard something to that effect on the news, that the buildings in downtown San Antonio were falling apart and that people were being damaged by façades breaking free and smashing into cars and whatnot. Why would you build a building so that the façade *could* fall off? When in architectural school do they teach that as an *option*? Whatever.

So we had a lovely little time in San Antonio. We spent a couple of nights, which was a very restful thing to do in the middle of an otherwise lengthy road trip. We got to see some friends, we ate a great deal of barbequed meat and who knows what else, didn't get to see the Alamo, and weren't crushed by any falling building façades. On to the next stop, another one-nighter in the middle of nowhere. Literally.



### **Fort Stockton, TGSOT**

Fort Stockton, TGSOT, is almost exactly a day's drive, for an RV, from San Antonio. We think that's why it's there. We stayed at the KOA there, which was purely in the middle of *nothing*. Not even lights on the horizon indicated that any civilization was nearby. We think we were in TGSOT Hill Country, and we certainly spent most of the day going up and down, up and down, up and down until both we and our truck's poor engine felt a little seasick.

While at the KOA, Chris learned that you can't pick prickly pear cacti without having steel gauntlets. Well, you *can* pick them, but they will pick you right back. Chris had aspirations of making his own prickly pear syrup for margaritas or something. We were joined at the KOA by several co-ed college students—we think—who spent the night all together in a tent having—we know for a fact—sex with one another. Good for them, we say. We were personally too tired, looking forward to a good night's sleep, and anticipating an early day on the road the next morning.

### **Las Cruces, New Mexico**

Ah, Las Cruces. Home of "RV Docs," our campground for the night. Ever seen a medium-sized parking lot, say one you might see next to a local warehouse of beer distributor? Take that, and paint extra-long parking spaces, on a slight angle. You know what we're talking about—easy for an RV to pull in and out of. Now throw in some water faucets for garden hose connections, and electrical hookups. Poof, you've got an RV Docs all your own. "Parking lot camping" is pretty

popular at places where they know they're just a one-night, pass-through location, convenient to the highway and a couple of restaurants.

Chris needed to stock up on food while we were there—mainly some fresh stuff like fruit and deli meat for our lunches on the road. What he came back with from his expedition was nuts and berries. Apparently, the people in Las Cruces—or at least the ones near RV Docs—are big tree huggers and enjoy primarily organic, natural, healthful, nuts-and-berries type food. Chris dutifully picked up what there was to be had and figured we could go shopping again at the next stop. Don, for what it's worth, does *not* believe in organic food. His relationships with insects nearly always result in quantities of pesticide being liberally distributed. Plus, who wants a tiny little brown-spotted piece of fruit when chemicals will give you a nice, big, juicy, shiny piece of fruit? That often costs less, to boot.

We'd hoped for some time in the hot tub. The campground had a portable spa set up, and it looked very clean and inviting. It had a little privacy screen around it, and we figured it would be just the thing for relaxing road-sore muscles. Unfortunately, a couple of *very* old, *very* straight, and *extremely* large men took up most of the tub's six-man capacity. Well, we figured no biggie—most folks only sit in those things for a quarter-hour or so, right? Not. Those two fogies hogged that tub for *hours*. We finally gave up and just went to bed. We're not sure if they were trying to cook the fat out, or if, with all that insulation, they *needed* to be in the tub for hours just so the heat could penetrate through to their actual muscles.

## **Tempe, Arizona**

Tempe was a bit more than a stopover on the way to Las Vegas. Don was speaking at, and Chris was working at, a technical conference being held in nearby Scottsdale. So our first week in Tempe was very tourist-oriented, but the second week was pretty much all work, all the time. We did learn a few things while we were in town, though.

First of all, Phoenix has an excellent zoo, and if you're ever in the area you should definitely visit it. But. Not. In. September. The zoo is almost entirely outdoors, and it's way too damn hot. We felt like we were on a forced march over their asphalt walkways, and there just weren't enough places to get a cool glass of water or even something to snack on. We did learn about scorpions in the zoo though. The next day, we also learned that if you leave your shoes outside at night, they'll be crawling all over with *tiny* little scorpions by morning. Those suckers are *adorable*, and don't really qualify as bugs in Don's book because, well, they're kinda cool. Of course, these tiny ones are also one of the most poisonous varieties in North America, so we had to exercise some caution in removing them from our shoes. Don's solution: Spray bleach and a garden hose. You'll either spray them off, kill them outright, or possibly both, which is always best when you're dealing with a poisonous creature that has existed for longer than mankind.

We also learned that a week on the road in the summertime will result in the most incredible collection of bug guts on the front of you RV. RVs are, of course, aerodynamic in a sort of giant-square-box sort of way, which means any species of bugs existing between Florida and

Arizona had probably contributed members to the general pile on the front of our rig. We spent a fun day in the sun scraping, rubbing, and polishing in an attempt to get about a quarter of the carcasses off. Our next-door neighbor thought this was the height of hilarity, and would stand in front of his RV chuckling at us. We hated him intensely, of course, stupid breeder that he was. His mirth at the RV cleaning was, in fact, exceeded only by the comedic stylings of Chris' haircut. Genetics isn't being kind to Chris, and one look at his father tells us all where Chris' head is going to be in a few years. So he's taken a proactive approach by clipping it every week down to a stubble. Looks great, easy to take care of, and the cheapest haircut in the family. At the time, Don was getting the same haircut (and continued to do so until we settled in Vegas). The breeder next door had *never* seen anything this funny, and would sit outside and laugh out loud. Only when we put the clippers away and went in the RV did he finally leave off and go inside himself. Stupid ass. Don was ready to try him on a course of spray bleach and garden hose.

Speaking of annoying straight people: Our campground had a laundry room, which most do. It had only two washers and two driers, which isn't uncommon for a smaller campground and is usually more than adequate. Except that their machines were priced a lot lower than any other nearby laundries, and they didn't lock the doors to the laundry room. So every idiot straight woman in the neighborhood would wash her family's clothes there, generally bringing along whatever anklebiters couldn't be trusted at home. So not only was the campground almost constantly full of screaming kids who weren't even staying there, but the laundry room was practically inaccessible

at all hours. Chris, the designated Laundry Bitch of our RV, wound up doing clothes at midnight just to get a spot. This was to be the first of Chris' many laundry encounters, which often resulted in screaming fights with little old biddies and their half-deaf husbands. We'll relate those tales in due time.

### **Next Stop...**

We pulled out of Tempe with a lot of excitement: We were headed to Las Vegas. Neither of us had been there before, but we knew it would be fun, or at least interesting. We didn't know at the time *how* much fun it would turn out to be, or that it would eventually become our new home. We also didn't know there'd be a hurdle on the way there.



## Las Vegas, NV

Why is Las Vegas such a big destination? What makes it special? Why do cheap copies like Atlantic City come off as... well, cheap copies?

Las Vegas probably cannot, at this point, be duplicated. Today's Las Vegas is the accumulation of billions and billions of dollars of hotel, infrastructure, and civic investment; to create another Las Vegas from scratch would be financially impossible. And Las Vegas *works* because all of that investment has been built up over time, and because nobody in Las Vegas is afraid to discard something that's no longer working well. Residents of Las Vegas pay no state income tax, and there is no state income tax on most corporations. There are business license fees, which can range from \$85 a year to the millions and millions paid by the casinos. Most casinos, in fact, contribute something like six percent of their take to the county in which they live—which should leave no doubt about who pays for schools, roads, and many other public services. The tourist industry in Las Vegas employs tens of thousands, and exists in a completely symbiotic relationship with the populace.

It's small wonder, then, that most people don't think of Las Vegas as even existing beyond the famous downtown and Strip resort areas. But a quarter mile away from either, Las Vegas turns into a common

suburban sprawl: Shopping centers, residential developments, gas stations, grocery stores, and movie theaters are everywhere. Off the Strip—which few locals frequent—is just like Anytown, USA, and it's often easy to forget where all the money really comes from. All that sprawl does result in the occasional stupid move, though. For example, Las Vegas' city council is almost a proving ground for stupidity, sort of a Stupid Olympics. One of Las Vegas' continuing problems, of course, is water, what with Las Vegas being a desert and not having any of its own. The city's water needs are filled primarily by nearby Lake Meade and the mighty Colorado river, dammed during the Depression by the awesome Hoover Dam. Las Vegas has never been particularly resourceful with water until recent years' growth made it obvious that the Colorado wasn't an endless supply of the stuff. New golf courses are creatively *xeriscaped*, using native desert plants and ground coverings (dirt), to conserve water. But that doesn't stop city council members from occasionally doing something stupid with regard to water. Take one council member, who proposed a ban on all ornamental fountains of any kind. Now, you might be thinking of Bellagio's famous fountains and five-acre lake, which, despite aggressive water capture and re-use, still evaporates through quite a lot of water every day. The councilman was clear to point out that he wasn't referring to *important* fountains (e.g., ones that tourists come to see), but mainly residential ones. Like bird baths, he said.

Whereupon one upstanding citizen got up and asked if the councilman was seriously proposing a ban on bird baths when he personally owned over five acres of grassy land which had to be watered twice a day? The councilman sputtered for her to shut up, but mayor



Goodman—always spoiling for a good fight, and usually on the citizens' side—told *him* to shut up and let her continue. The good lady started naming other council members whose water conservation ways could, to put it mildly, use some help. The council man withdrew the bird bath proposal. A small example, but a common occurrence in council sessions, which are helpfully aired on local cable television. We love this stuff.

### **Straight Slots**

Want to know how to win at slot machines? We think we know. At least, we've watched an *awful* lot of people playing slots, although admittedly we haven't seen anyone hit a big jackpot. But anyway, the procedure seems to go something like this:

First, you need a player's club card. This is a credit card-sized card the casinos will give you for free. You insert it into the slot machine when you start playing, and it tracks the amount of money you put in and how long you play. It doesn't really care about wins or losses, just the gross amount actually put into play. This is the basis by which casinos award complimentaries, or *comps*, such as free buffet lunches. It's mandatory that your card be attached to you by a curly, telephone cord-like tether, almost like a thin umbilical cord. It's possible that the slot machine can detect your heart rate and other vital stats through this cord, alerting casino employees to a player who has died in their chair. We've seen enough ancient people gambling to know that this is probably a real concern for casino management.

Next, you put your money in and start gambling. Standard strategy suggests that you spend as much per spin as the slot will allow, since if you *do* hit the jackpot, you'll win an exponentially higher amount if you had "max coins in" on the spin. However, you don't just repeatedly flush your money into the machine. Periodically, you will need to fake the machine out. Do this by pulling the arm on the machine, rather than pushing the more convenient "spin reels" button on the front. Sometimes you'll want to cash out and then put your money back into the machine, thus fooling it into believing that you're really a different player—slot card notwithstanding—and tricking it into giving you the big payout it was saving for the next player. You should also occasionally touch the front of the slot machine, where the payouts are listed, to indicate to the slot machine which payout you would prefer. Be cooperative, sometimes indicating lower-paying combinations such as three cherries. Continually selecting the big, triple-diamond jackpot (or whatever) will defeat the purpose of this strategy, as the slot machine will become bored with you.

One thing you should always remember, and we're serious about this: If you win more than a few coins on any one spin, *walk away*. These slot machines are often programmed to give back up to 98% of what goes into them—over time. Specifically, over their *lifetime*, which can be decades. This seems like a great deal, because the casino only gets 2%, right? Look around you, stupid. 2% seems to build a pretty bitchin' facility, doesn't it? The casinos are *not* here to lose, and they won't, in the long run. If a slot machine happens to spit some money you're way, thank it and move on. While it's true that a slot machine is equally likely to hit the jackpot on *every* spin (it's a complete myth

that a machine which hasn't "hit" in a while is more likely to do so), you're probably better off with the wad of coins in your pocket than taking your chances. Interestingly, it seems that a lot of folks really do follow the "win and run" strategy, because the newest fad in Las Vegas is slot machines that pay off in barcoded tickets. You can take these to any cash age or, in many casinos, to an automated machine which will convert the ticket to hard currency. *Or*, you can feed the ticket to another slot machine and continue playing. The theory is that the ticket doesn't look or feel like cash, so people are more willing to part with it, and the casino knows that, given enough chances, the house will get to keep it all. You may think this is a stupid idea, and that nobody would fall for it. We submit this: Every casino in Las Vegas has, after a suitable period of experimentation, retrofitted *ever slot machine on the floor* to work with the cashless, "ticket in, ticket out" system. They wouldn't have wasted the money if their trials hadn't indicated that the theory was absolutely spot-on. Remember, Las Vegas was built by losers.

### **Meeting the Locals**

Folks who live in Las Vegas are almost never referred to as *natives*. That's because there's almost an unwritten law which states that anyone born in Las Vegas must eventually leave; most of the permanent residents migrated from somewhere else. It's the easiest way to open a conversation in Vegas: "Where ya from?" The folks who do live here are therefore more properly called *locals*.

The first local we made friends with was Tom, who owns one of the areas most successful—and completely legit—outcall massage

services. We had decided to spend a night in one of the Luxor hotel's beautiful Jacuzzi suites. The Jacuzzi tubs are along the corners of the Luxor's distinctive pyramid, right under the angled window, where they have a great view of the Strip. We treated ourselves to a nice dinner and an evening at Blue Man Group, and called Tom's company to see if we could have a massage in our room before dinner. We hit it off right away. We'd seen Tom's ad in the local gay and lesbian paper, *The Las Vegas Bugle*, so we suspected we was family; a few seconds speaking with him after our massages confirmed it. Through Tom, we met a fantastic assortment of other locals, many of whom became fast friends. They were a primary reason we eventually would decide to settle in Las Vegas: Other than our original departure from Pennsylvania, Vegas was the only place on our travels where we'd regretfully left friends behind.

### **Stupid Management Decisions**

The management of our campground—and the workers in it—were among some of the less-observant folks we've met on the road. For example, our mail routinely went missing. We didn't get a lot of mail; as we'll explain in the last chapter of this book, we had our mail sent to a PO box in Pahrump, Nevada, where a mail forwarding service would collect it and forward it to us once a week. So, run through that math again: One package per week. Not a big burden. And yet the package would frequently be missing, because the campground staff would leave it on the floor, or put it in someone else's mailbox. We've *never* had a problem with campgrounds mishandling our mail *except* at this particular campground, and this was interestingly the only campground in our experience to have *charged* us for this "service."

Water sprinklers were also handled poorly. Understand that Las Vegas is not a year-round tropical paradise. That type of climate requires humidity, which Las Vegas lacks. Las Vegas is a *desert*, which means it gets really hot when the sun is high in the sky, and really cold when it isn't. In the winter of 2001, to be specific, Las Vegas got what is technically called *really damn cold*. Like, ice in the water fountains every morning style cold. And yet management would *insist* on running the water sprinklers once a day to drench the small patches of grass in between each RV space. We're talking about a strip of Bermuda grass about three feet wide by perhaps thirty feet long, completely covered by no less than eight in-ground sprinklers. In the mornings, all you could hear is the cracking noise of ice melting as the temperature warmed up and melted all the ice that had formed when the sprinklers went off the night before. Just stupid.

### **Laundry Tales**

Chris is always willing to tell horror stories of laundry rooms at campgrounds, and Las Vegas presents no exception. It's a source of constant amazement to us that the old straight women can be so demanding in how other people use laundry facilities, and then so completely heartless in their own habits. Not to mention *lazy* as all hell: Despite convenient laundry rooms scattered around our campground, these ladies would drive their cars a hundred feet rather than carrying a single laundry basket. And we're not talking about feeble old things: These same women could later be seen knocking back pitchers of gin and tonic with their neighbors. Their usual laundry routine was to waltz in with a laundry basket, set it to

washing, and then drive the thirty yards back to their RV. Then they'd let the laundry sit pretty much all day. When they were damn good and ready—often the next day—they'd come back and switch the load over to a dryer. Unless, of course, you happened to pull their clothes out so that *you* could use the washer. Then they'd somehow sense it and come barreling into the laundry room screaming bloody murder, and give you an earful of sass for messing with "their stuff." Idiots. Laundry was to be a continual source of strife amongst Chris and other RVers. As we pulled out of Vegas and headed for California, however, we would have been lucky if laundry was the biggest of our problems.

## **California or Bust**

After four relatively happy—and unexpectedly chilly—months in Las Vegas, we pulled out on I-15 and headed South toward Los Angeles. We were planning to stop in Barstow for an evening or two before heading into LA proper. Barstow is located roughly in the middle of nowhere, and is distinguished primarily by the ready availability of gas and diesel—something you don't find much of along the stretch from Las Vegas. We'd ultimately planned to spend some time near Anaheim, visiting Disneyland and Universal Studios, seeing the sights, and eventually moving up into wine country. We even had friends in Nevada City, in Northern California, who were really looking forward to our visit. It was a portion of our trip we'd really looked forward to, taxes notwithstanding.

Yes, taxes. Folks living in California obviously pay income tax, utility taxes, property taxes, and, knowing California like we now do, probably some kind of oxygen tax. Because we weren't really residents of California, the state—sorry, Republic—would be missing out on all those taxes from us. The situation was doubtless made more irritating because we were residents of Nevada, which doesn't even have income tax. The thought of anyone getting by without paying income taxes is apparently unbearable to the Golden State, and so they've implemented a Transient Resident Tax. This is a special tax

applied to people who purchase utilities—like phone and electric service at a campground—without actually declaring residency in the state. And we are absolutely not kidding; this is a real tax we'd already been informed about from the campground where we were planning to spend a couple of months. Like any tourist, we'd still be paying sales tax, occupancy tax, food tax, and Lord only knows what else, but California had come up with this special tax just for those of us stupid enough to stay too long.

Turns out we'd never need to worry about the Transient Resident Tax. On I-15, just outside Barstow, we were stopped at—well, let's call a spade a spade and say that we were stopped at a Republic of California customs checkpoint. They didn't ask to see our US passports, but I'm pretty certain they eventually would have, if they hadn't first found other reasons to be upset with us.

If you've driven into California before, you probably have seen the checkpoints we're talking about. California certainly has a right to protect its borders, I guess, although I seem to recall a big war a few years ago about all the states working and playing well with one another. North versus South, I think it was called. We certainly hadn't run across any other checkpoints when moving between states, and we'd already driven the breadth of the country at that point. We knew that the Border Patrol set up checkpoints to look for illegal immigrants, but driving from Nevada to California isn't technically immigrating, is it?



Now, you may need to whip out a map or something to really appreciate the scope of this. There's a small map at the end of this chapter you can use if your US atlas isn't handy. Usually when you enter a new country (Republic, whatever), the customs checkpoint is, like, *right there*. I mean, you're not going to be driving a hundred miles into Canada before they stop you and ask you where you were born and what you're all about, anywho. California, however, places their border checkpoint about 150 miles into the state. That must be a great comfort to the folks in, say, Baker, who live deep inside the resulting California Neutral Zone, and apparently outside the Republic proper. If the Nevadans ever take it into their heads to overrun California, Baker is history. Anyway, here we are a couple of hundred miles into the state, towing a forty-foot trailer, when this little chick at the customs booth asks us if we're carrying any fruits or vegetables.

Fruits or vegetables? Our first thought was that she had to be kidding, and we actually did make her repeat herself. For crying out loud, Nevada lets Californians drive their cars into the state all the time, although we use the word "drive" very loosely, based on what we've seen hurtling up and down the Strip at all hours wearing California license plates. Nevada certainly lets Californians bring *food* into the state without interrogating them about it.

We'd seen the signs on the highway as we left Nevada, advising us that we were entering some kind of poultry quarantine area, so we were prepared to answer questions about having live turkeys and chickens. We didn't have any, of course, having sacrificed them earlier in a Satanic ritual intended to un-neuter our pet ferrets (turns out simply

bringing them to California would have done the trick, but we're getting ahead of ourselves). What we weren't expecting was questions about fruits and veggies. Don *wanted* to say, "no, this entire forty-foot trailer is full of nice, safe, red meat," but he decided discretion might be in order and simply lied. "Nope, no fruits or vegetables." We later found out that it wouldn't have mattered; any produce we had would have been acquired in Nevada, which gets it all from California in the first place. In fact, we might have won brownie points for repatriating the produce or something.

"What's that in the back?" the customs chick then asked, peering through the tinted windows on the rear doors of the truck.

Uh-oh. That's where the ferrets' travel cage sat when we were on the road, and no doubt the kids were crawled up the side of the cage peering right back at this representative of California righteousness. And we knew that ferrets weren't legal in California. We'd read about it on the Web, and it wouldn't be on the Web if it weren't true, right?

"Hamsters?" Don replied. Maybe she couldn't see them, or maybe she'd never seen a ferret, having lived a sheltered Golden State life.

No such luck. "I'll be right back. Don't move." We started preparing ourselves for the onslaught. Adrenaline started pumping, and Don started calculating how quickly he could accelerate out of the booth pursued by the CHP SWAT teams. So the chick comes back with another dude, who directs us to pull forward and out of the way. He asked again about the furry critters in the back, and Don pointed at

Chris and said, "they're his." Don figured this would be sufficient to cover the hamster bit. Chris admitted as to how they might be ferrets, and the fellow grimly told us to join him at customs central after parking the rig. So we parked and walked back. The dude proceeded to write us a citation—a freakin' citation—for having ferrets. He explained that ferrets were illegal in California because—get this—*they might breed in the wild and endanger the waterfowl population*. Holy crap. We'd had no idea. In fact, back in Pennsylvania, we'd had a major problem with Canada geese in our apartment complex, and had we known ferrets were so inimical to bird life, we'd have set 'em loose on the damn geese. For that matter, why wouldn't California want the ferrets running free? After all, wasn't this a poultry-free zone? Wouldn't teams of troopers with attack ferrets be just the thing to enforce The Law?

Chris, seeing a potential solution in the officer's warning, explained that all our ferrets were neutered. Of course they are; *all* pet ferrets are neutered because un-neutered ferrets are horrible pets. They're big, oily, and smelly; our ferrets are quite obviously small, fuzzy, and adorable. We even had paperwork to prove it, Chris said, assuming—correctly as it turns out—that the customs dude wouldn't be able to look at a ferret and tell for himself that it was a couple marbles short. And then the dude explains that *it didn't matter*. If they escaped into the wild, the ferrets could breed. Swear to God, his exact words: "That doesn't matter. If they escaped into the wild, they could breed and endanger the other wildlife."

"Neutered," Chris stammered.

"Breed," the dude repeated.

We were completely unprepared for that argument. First of all, understand that domestic ferrets haven't been found in the wild for something like a thousand years or more. They were first bred by Egyptians to hunt mice, what with the cats being too sacred to work for a living. Ferrets are so inbred from having been domesticated for so long that they've even come up with their own unique diseases, like adrenal gland disease. So the concept of our ferrets going feral and wiping out the waterfowl was pretty unthinkable. The concept of our ferrets wiping out anything but a chew toy, in fact, was pretty unthinkable. But even accepting the feral bit for the sake of argument, the suggestion that the air in California is so good that ferrets will spontaneously regenerate their gonads was simply something we'd never considered. We had no response to this bit of logic.

As the dude finished writing out the citation, he explained that he worked for the agricultural folks, and that it was Fish and Game's rule about ferrets. He was just doing his job and all that. We halfheartedly tried to explain about the neutered thing again, but we figured he must think ferrets were like his plants, and that we'd, like, graft them or something to make more ferrets in the wild. Maybe they think ferrets bud in California. He then took Chris' name and description, the vehicles' license numbers, and explained that if we showed the ferrets' fuzzy faces in his Republic again, then the state Gestapo (he may have said "police") could confiscate and destroy the animals. Seriously. Ponch and Jon themselves could ride up on their

motorcycles, spot Chris' felonious face, and destroy our pets. We could only have ferrets in California if we had a Fish and Game permit for them, and he'd never heard of Fish and Game actually issuing permits for them.

Wait a freakin' second. Cats and dogs are legal in the Republic, and they go feral all the time. I've personally seen cats do a number on the local bird population when they wanted to, and I imagine a wild dog will eat whatever it thinks might be yummy. Like small children. The concept of a four inch-high ferret threatening *anything* was laughable, and now they're threatening to destroy the animals on sight? And let's not forget that there are *plenty* of ferrets living in California already, aided and abetted by friendly door-to-door veterinarians and a commendable underground railroad-style network of rebel sympathizers. Don still wants to go back and dump some raisins (ferrets love raisins) in the customs dude's boxers and let the ferrets nibble *his* 'nads off, just to test this theory about neutered animals breeding in the wild.

It gets worse. Inspector dude informed us that the citation he'd written gave California troopers the right to enter our RV—our *home*—and inspect for ferrets anytime they wanted. If they found any, they could destroy them immediately. Bill of Rights, thy enemy is California.

Duly chastised, a little scared, and more than a little pissed off, we turned our rig around and headed back for Vegas. We'd come within ten minutes of our stop in Barstow that day, only to be turned around

by The Man, our pets' lives threatened, and the very nature of biology thrown into question. Being in the middle of nowhere as the customs checkpoint is, we had to rely on our spare jerricans of gas to get us back to the Neutral Zone and a friendly gas station. Well, friendly-*er*; they didn't try to douse the ferrets in fuel and light them ablaze to stop the imminent waterfowl destruction. After all, those deep-desert waterfowl are endangered.

Nowadays, we head back to California whenever we have some free time. We don't go to LA, though. Instead, we go to Palm Springs, and we take crowbars. We're prying on the San Andreas fault, bit by bit, hoping that our Bay of Arizona property will become valuable in our lifetimes. We're sponsoring a bid to seal off the Republic of California in a giant oxygen bubble, something the Californian government is obviously trying to achieve anyway. We're also major supporters of a renegade California ferret breeding effort. The group's goal is to breed enough ferrets to overrun the state capitol and decimate the legislative population. We figure "fowl" and "foul" are close enough for ferrets. We're neutering the ferrets at a fairly early age, too. But don't worry: We're keeping them in hyperbaric chambers filled with stolen Californian air, and we're hoping to see signs of gonad regeneration any day now. As a control, we dropped some lizards into the chamber, too, after pulling off their tails. The lizards' tails are already growing back, so there must be something to this California air, after all. Finally, we're preparing to air-drop two tons of Washington apples into San Francisco, just to see what those suckers are so afraid of.

So if you're living in California, beware: Banana-bearing ferrets are headed your way. They're feral, they're fruity, they're breeding, and they're not gonna take it anymore.





## Tucson, AZ

With California out of the picture we decided to head the other direction: Arizona. Because it was still February, however, we were limited in our choices. Phoenix itself has almost no campgrounds; the large RV parks in nearby Mesa and Tempe were big snowbird havens, to the point where they actually age discriminate. Because we were under 55, we weren't welcome, even if they had space, which most claimed they didn't. So we decided on Tucson, which had a nice-sounding campground and an international airport. That was an important requirement for us, as Chris was doing some work that would involve several flights in the next couple of months.

We pulled into the South Forty RV Ranch, in Tucson, just after dark. We normally try not to do that, since parking the RV was difficult enough without the added challenge of nighttime. We did pretty well, though, except that—as you'll read more about in our chapter on Gary, Indiana—straight people in RV parks like to lay out boundaries for their territory. In this case, the territory belonged to an older woman in a corner lot, and her boundary was one of these eight-inch-high white plastic picket fences, firmly embedded in her site's gravel, and protected by some smallish boulders. Sadly, the lane wasn't *quite* wide enough, and the available light not *quite* bright enough, for Don to avoid everything, and the RV rolled right up on a couple of the

smaller boulders. They sort of rolled in the loose gravel, so that the RV wasn't really driving *over* the boulders, but simply pushing them aside and into the, er, white picket fence, which didn't stand a chance. So after a lot of noise, the RV passed on unscathed and the woman's front "yard" was decimated. Oh well. These things happen, and we figured we could drop by in the morning and apologize or something.

### **Airport Tales**

Chris came to like Tucson's International Airport, which had actually just recently been upgraded from being a regional airport. It was quite small, and was still undergoing the expansion and renovation that usually goes with the crowning of a new international airport. Chris usually flew out in the early morning when it was still pretty slow, and even the security guards there got to know him. This was before the Transportation Safety Administration was created to standardize on a low quality of airport security; Tucson was still working with private security firms who provided friendly, efficient service which was inconsistent with many other airports' lower standards. Thank heavens the Feds have since stepped in to save us from the confusion of being treated politely in one location and like dirt in the next; now we have the Federal government's assurance that we'll be treated like crap at every airport, no matter what the conditions.

Speaking of low standards: Chris had the opportunity to fly to Boston on one of his trips, and flew home out of Logan International Airport. This is an airport that should probably just be shut down. Following procedures and recommendations, Chris dutifully showed up at the airport two hours early. He checked in, got his boarding pass, and was

dismayed at the large crowd in front of the security checkpoint. Then he realized that security wasn't even *open*, yet. He had a 7:30 flight, and it was already 6:30, so he pushed through to ask a guard what the problem was. Again, this was before the TSA was created, but Logan was clearly a pioneer in what would become the new Federal standards for security service, because the guard informed him that security didn't open until 8:00 AM. Chris tried to reconcile information that with what was clearly a boarding pass for a 7:30 flight, and the guard informed him that the airline would wait. Obviously, it would have to, or fly out on time but completely empty. Once security did open, there were so many angry passengers who were "late" for their flights that security just let everyone through pretty much in a rush, performing no more than a cursory x-ray of carry-on luggage and pretty much ignoring the metal detectors. This was *well* after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, by the way, and you'll remember that one of the planes hijacked by the terrorists flew out of Logan. Clearly a lesson had not, by this point, been learned. Chris made a comment to that point to the security guard and was given a stern warning. Fortunately, he was in a rush to get to his gate so he didn't pursue the issue.

After complaining to airline personnel at the gate, Chris learned that the airport was still negotiating with the airlines to open security checkpoints earlier. It seems that *sometimes* security *would* open early enough, but not today. The airline personnel were just as bitter as the passengers, because Logan was screwing up their carefully-planned flight schedules by not operating the security checkpoints at consistent times or early enough times. Chris became thankful for the

small-town Tucson airport, where the guards would have a friendly chat while checking his luggage, and always tried to hurry him through the checkpoint because they knew him on sight.

### **Everyone is Gay, Here**

We found several nice gay bars in Tucson. There's actually a decent-sized university in town, so the bar crowd tended toward younger guys and beer bars, which suited us just fine. We found that it was a *very* cruisy town, and you could always spot the gay men because they were the ones being obvious about checking you out.

We spent a day at Old Tucson Studios, which is a sort of Old West theme park. It doesn't have rides, per se; it's actually a working movie studio, and they've provided filming locations for everything from *Little House on the Prairie* (the town scenes) to *Three Amigos* (the Mexican church façade is still on the property). There are a few cheesy "attractions," such as a walk-through "ghost mine" complete with character tour guide ("Gosh, folks, we'd better get the tarnation outta here!"). Their big "attraction," however, is a series of live dramatic and comedic shorts. We use both "dramatic" and "comedic" very liberally. Essentially, a small troupe of characters takes on roles from the Big West Gunslinger to the Crazy Old Coot and acts out scenes from the "Old West." After failing to miss the tail end of one show (they were pretty much uniformly horrible), we found ourselves standing near the building where the cast members disappeared when they were finished. *Every single one of them* was very obvious about checking both of us out as they made for the backstage area. The cowboys, folks, were gay.

Later that night, we went back down to Tucson's main street area, where many of the gay bars are located. A full street fair was in progress, with merchandise and food booths lined up in the middle of the street. On *several* occasions, we were, as we like to say, "cruised with intent to kill." The street vendors, it seemed, were also gay. It probably goes without saying that the bar patrons were gay, what with them being gay bars and all, but we'd like to note that while the straight womenfolk were shopping with the kids, their allegedly straight husbands were swilling beer in the gay bars and watching soft porn and gay music videos on the bars' video monitors. So, apparently, even the straight men were gay which begs the question: Where were the actual straight people? We're not entirely certain we ever actually found them, but we certainly never felt uncomfortable in that town.

We had one interesting experience with regard to gay bars: The bars are all equipped with card-swipe machines, and the bouncers ask you to hand them your driver's license. Arizona, like many states, has switched to a plastic, computer-printed license that includes a magnetic stripe and barcode on the back. Nevada hadn't, at the time. The bouncer actually tried swiping our licenses a half-dozen times before we convinced him that it wouldn't work, and that he'd have to look at our birthdates and do the math. Interestingly, we got new licenses later on, and they don't have a magnetic stripe, either. They just have a barcode. Nevada's not much on things that other states all go in for, like laws, taxes, and, apparently, magnetic stripes.

## Sperm

Around this time, two lesbian friends of our from Pennsylvania were thinking about having a baby, and asked Chris if he'd be interested in being the sperm donor. They wanted the biological father to be someone they knew, who was willing to be a part of the kid's life, and potentially take care of the kid if anything happened to its mothers. Chris was, of course, honored that they thought highly enough of him to ask, and agreed to go in for a sperm test. That's a necessary step; artificial insemination is tricky and expensive enough that the doctors like to make sure they're working with high-test gasoline before they'll make the effort.

No little amount of preparation is required to be a sperm donor. First we had to go shopping for some porn magazines, since it probably wasn't reasonable to expect the clinic to have the appropriate materials for Chris' preferences. We found a nice little porn shop outside of town, and went in to select some magazines Chris thought he might like. While Chris was browsing, Don sort of stood around for moral support, exchanging nods with the guys who came filtering out of the mysterious "video rooms" in the back of the store. Again, everyone seemed to be gay in Tucson. Chris made his selections, paid for them, and we hustled out—the nods were starting to turn into hungry-looking grins and we wanted to beat a hasty retreat.

Before the actual test, you're advised to avoid any, well, *spillage*, to help maximize your results. Chris complied for about a week, just to be sure. On test day, Don went along to the clinic for moral support, reading Newsweek in the lobby while Chris read his porn in the back

and had marital relations with a plastic cup. It took *forever*. We returned a week later for the results. Chris was shown to a small, private office just off the lobby, where a doctor interpreted the printouts. Unfortunately, the doctor had a pretty loud voice, and Chris let him know that this was for a friend of ours who wanted to have a baby and had asked him to be the sperm donor, and so on and so on. Well, turns out that Chris was fertile. Dangerously so, in fact: The doctor jokingly advised him not to even get too close to a woman unless he was prepared to pay child support. Seems you don't wanna let that stuff build up for an *entire* week, or the little swimmers start getting ideas of their own. Just let it out every so often, is all we're saying.

By the way, our two lady friends have unfortunately broken up. While we still keep in touch with both of them back in Pennsylvania, Chris isn't the father of their child. Bet *that* isn't a phrase you'd thought you'd see in this book, huh?

### **Gathering the Olde**

One interesting feature of the South Forty RV park was the weekly themed dinners. For seven bucks or so, you could be treated to a home-cooked meal, complete with door prizes, all in the company of your fellow park denizens. Our fellow RVers were, of course, all of extremely advanced age, to the point where many of them had simply "planted" their RVs in the park, never to move again, and completed them with little gardens, lawn ornaments stuck into the gravel, and even metal carports. We finally caved in for the Saint Patrick's Day dinner, because the entrée was corned beef and cabbage, and Chris'

Irish Catholic background came screaming to the forefront and demanded a traditional dinner. It was an interesting dinner. The food was great, and the iced tea plentiful. Every single oldster, however, asked us, "how can you be full-timing at your age?" The only difference between them was inflection: Some had an accusatory tone in their voice, as if we'd stolen *their* grandkids' inheritance to finance our trip, while others were more congratulatory that we were able to enjoy the lifestyle at such tender years. We did not stick around for the obligatory bingo playing or bridge tournament.



## **Albuquerque, New Mexico**

Albuquerque—and the only reason we can spell that without using the word processor's spell-check function is because we were there for two months and ordered a lot of stuff over the Internet—is the first place something good came of our little California incident: Pepper. No, not the spicy kind, but our fifth ferret, a little silver blaze we named Pepper. She was (and still is) a rambunctious, semi-evil little animal who's quite a lot of fun to play with.

Other than serving as a ferret depot, Albuquerque plays an important role as the country's primary dust repository. Most of the dust in the US, we believe, originates in Albuquerque. We're almost certain that Disney uses Albuquerque dust to decorate the Haunted Mansion attractions at each of their theme parks, and Albuquerque dust is probably used in major industrial applications beyond imagining. As you pull into Albuquerque proper on Route 66, it appears as if the straight people have ripped up every ounce of native scrub vegetation and bulldozed everything as flat as possible. In other words, there's a lot of dust, nothing to hold it down, and nothing to stop the winds. Although our truck was completely covered in red dust absolutely all the time, it was otherwise completely clean, that selfsame dust having scoured it free of any impurities.

Looking back, we were obviously in an acquisitive mood in Albuquerque. Other than a new ferret, we also acquired a new truck. You have to understand that our first truck, the Chevy, was a gas-engine model. It was a 2001, and came out right when GM was switching to a new diesel engine, the Isuzu-built Duramax. See, this is why we could hang out in such straight towns. You gotta learn the lingo. When we were ready to buy, though, Duramax trucks were tough to come by as GM was still ramping up production. We liked the gas truck okay, but it had a few significant problems. Mainly fueling. "Crazy talk!" you're shouting. We know, gas is a lot easier to find than diesel. But gas is usually dispensed from pumps designed more for Chevy Lumina's hauling the soccer team, not a Chevy Silverado hauling a small house. We literally can't count the times that we had to pull into a gas station off the highway, lower the trailer's front landing gear, unhitch, drive the truck over to refuel, drive back, re hitch, and go on our way. The reality of it was a lot more tedious than just reading about it, believe us. The benefit of a diesel engine is that you can go to any convenient truck stop where "roomy pull-through" is a fact of life, thanks to the trucking industry. By the way, if you're a truck guy, or a lesbian, and wondering why we didn't buy a Ford or Dodge, there's a good answer. Don hates Fords and the Dodge dealer didn't advise towing our RV with anything but a manual transmission and even then it would be dicey, even in the biggest Ram truck at the time. To hell with a stick shift and towing an RV, so we bought the Chevy.

So anyway, one night we decided to go to dinner at a little casino—we needed a touch of Vegas—for dinner. Nice restaurant, great wine, and so on. Earlier that week, Chris had taken the Chevy in to a GMC dealer

for an oil change, and the dealer had expressed some surprise that we weren't using a diesel to tow. Chris explained the whole availability thing, and the dealer said that GM had taken care of all that, the prices on the diesel trucks had come down, blah blah blah. So on the way home from dinner that night, we bought one.

Well, not *quite* that quickly. We stopped at the dealership to see if they had any. They actually had the GMC version of our Chevy, with a diesel engine in it instead of the gas engine. The salesperson came up, asked the usual whaddya-want-it's-late question to see if we were just browsing. Don pointed at the GMC, pointed at our Chevy, and said "how much?" He scurried back inside, ran some numbers, and came back and told us. He got a little excited off the bat and actually gave us a pretty decent price. Never one to begrudge a man his profit margin, especially when he's being reasonable, Don said, "we'll take it. We need the hitch transferred from the old truck. Can we have it tomorrow morning?" We're not certain the guy heard us: We was deep in sales mode. We could *almost* see the wife's new necklace, or a meal for the kids, or whatever it is straight people do with their commissions. "We'll *take* it," Chris repeated slowly. "Hitch. Tomorrow?" Chris used to work retail and is used to dealing with people who are a little slow. The guy paused for a breath and realized we'd left him to go find the sales manager. "What do you think of that truck?" the sales manager asked. "Did you finish writing up the sale, yet?" Don asked. The sales manager blinked and caught on, right as the sales guy was running in the door to catch up. "Working on it now!" he offered, and started typing furiously into his computer. The salesman redeemed himself by immediately taking our truck keys.

Never let a sale leave with their trade-in; makes it too easy to call up the next morning and cancel the deal. So we transferred all of our crap out of the Chevy and into a loaner truck they had on the lot, and drove home. Don went back the next morning, picked up the new truck—hitch installed—and drove home. Our neighbor (also named Don, by the way) commented that our truck sounded like it was running rough. Then he did a double-take and realized it wasn't the same gas truck we'd had. Fun stuff. He still had a gas truck, which officially meant we had larger penises than him. He compensated by buying a new Alfa fifth wheel, which are very expensive models. It was delivered a couple of weeks later. We feel like we really bonded with Don, you know?

Albuquerque was also where we got fed right the hell up with dial-up Internet. We also got fed up with Sprint PCS, but for completely different reasons. We could *see* Sprint's cell tower from our campsite, and our phones could tell it was there just enough to never switch into roaming mode. Not enough to place or receive calls, mind you, which meant that to call out we had to use a calling card on the campground's landline, or drive half a mile toward town to get into the cell tower's coverage zone. Just annoying.

Anyway, back to dial-up Internet. Crappy. You may think you've got it bad, but we're talking about *campground* phone lines installed by the lowest bidder. "Snail's pace" was the best speed we could usually hope for, and generally when Don had to upload an entire book manuscript it was a lot slower. We'd heard from a friend of a friend of a friend that mobile satellite Internet was now possible through

DirecWAY, the same kindly people at DirecTV who'd been providing our television service.

We'd looked into DirecWAY once, already, but all they had were fixed-installation dishes meant for permanent installation. We'd suggested once to a salesperson that *all* dishes were *meant* for permanent installation, wink wink, but that we were pretty bright guys and could point a l'il ol' dish ourselves. I swear, the salesperson crossed himself, muttered some FCC invocation under his breath, and swore we could wind up in jail for doing that with two-way Internet dishes because the dish was—pause for dramatic effect—a *transmitter*. It used almost *one watt* of power. For you non-geeks, that's roughly a quarter of what you cell phone is allowed to use. Yeah, scary stuff, huh? Anyway, the dishes were positively huge, so we backed off the idea. Now, it seemed, a company called MotoSat had developed a self-pointing, FCC-approved, Congress-registered, Pope-blessed two-way Internet satellite dish compatible with the DirecWAY service. Plus it could receive DirecTV, meaning we wouldn't have to manually point a dish for television service anymore. What a deal! Our little eighteen-inch round dish was getting harder and harder to lock onto the satellite because it kept blowing off its tripod in the wind and was becoming a bit warped.

Why is it, by the way, that you can never find a good gay-owned company when you need to buy a satellite dish in Albuquerque, New Mexico? Not that we have anything against straight people, and we're not much on buying "Gay Brand" whatever just for the sake of doing

so, but you suspect that a gay man might have been a bit more, well, *focused*.

We contacted the folks at Combined Resource Group in Albuquerque, the dealer recommended to us by MotoSat. Sure, we were told, they could sell us a dish and put it on the roof. They'd done one. One? Yeah, turns out this dish was still in beta testing, as in "beta than nothing." What the hell, though, Don's a professional computer geek. Maybe he could get a magazine article out of the experience (he eventually did). So we had 'em out to do their thing. They spent the first half of the first day crawling on the roof of the RV installing the dish. They were *very* professional and did a great job of the installation. In fact, we're just going to get it out of the way right now that Arlen Dale and the other folks at CRG were among the most professional, competent, and helpful straight people we've ever encountered, anywhere, ever. Just maybe a bit new at this particular device and maybe just a bit unfocused. Stick with the story, you'll see.

It seems that the new satellite dish has an internal global positioning satellite receiver, so that it can tell where in the US it is, and thus figure out where the satellite is in relation. It also has compasses and leveling sensors so it can tell which way it's pointed and how off-kilter the RV is. Very clever. All of this crap has to be calibrated, and there the cleverness ends. To calibrate the sensors, we had to get the RV perfectly straight and level. This is not possible. There is no good explanation for why the dish could not have been put on, say, a perfectly level *table* and calibrated (turns out they do it that way, now). So we had to pull the RV in and out of the space, throwing

boards under the tires to jack up first one side and then another until it was as level as we could make it. Next came the compass. Oh, the compass.

Ever see the movie *Crazy People* with Dustin Hoffman? He starts an ad company run by asylum patients and makes a zillion by creating ads that tell the truth. At the end of the movie they have a mock ad for Sony: "Buy Sony. Because Caucasians are too damn tall." The visual joke is that Americans are too far away from the assembly line to get the details right, whereas the diminutive Japanese are closer to the action and get it right. Americans built the compass electronics in our satellite dish, in case you were wondering.

To calibrate the compass, one drives one's RV in a particular direction. Any direction will do. One parks, tells the compass, "lo, you are pointed in one direction." The compass acknowledges this and begins to meditate. You then quickly drive the RV in the *exact opposite* direction and tell the compass, "lo, you are now pointed the other way. Forsooth." Whereupon the compass goes, "gotcha, boss," and you're all done. Without this working, the satellite dish *will not point* because it doesn't know where it's starting from. We drove around the fucking campground for four solid hours, doing this over and over, and after every time we'd pull back into our space and tell the goddamn dish to point itself and it just *wouldn't*. We think everyone else in the campground thought we were taking RV driver's ed or something, driving around in circles all day. By the end of the day, we'd given up. The working theory was that the dish's upper logic board—the electronics that include all the sensors—was deceased. A new one was

dispatched from the factory. Other theories abounded, however. One suggested that the dish couldn't lock on because of the high-tension power lines in the line of sight between us and the orbiting satellite. Suggestions were made to go traipsing around Albuquerque in our home until we found a nice, quiet spot to try again. Bullshit, we responded. It'll work in the campground or it's useless to us. Other suggestions focused on things like oxygen levels and sunspots, and we just ignored them as the ravings of straight men gone too long without beer.

The next afternoon, the whole crew arrived—new logic board in hand—to try again. This time, Don was taking no prisoners. He used to be an F-14 mechanic and is no slouch when it comes to electronics and was absolutely *not* driving the house around in circles all day. So after the new logic board was installed, we left the RV sitting perfectly still. *You're fucking level*, we told it. Deal. *You, compass, you're pointed in a direction*. There. Then he made the guys on the roof pick the satellite dish up and physically turn it around, so that it sat back in its mounting cradle 180 degrees backward. *Compass*, we told it, *there's the other direction*. *Suck it up*. And lo, it worked. The dish went up, found the satellite like it was its long-lost Siamese twin, and started transmitting Web pages. The three guys were amazed at this new alignment technology which didn't require driving around and around all day. We just sighed, gave them the Amex for the bill, and cancelled our dial-up account. They had quoted us labor charges for a four-hour installation, and didn't charge us a dime more—again, we really respect their business ethics.



Now, you're to take two important things away from this chapter:  
Line of sight is important to the satellite dish, and Albuquerque has no  
vegetation. Quiz will follow in subsequent chapters.



## Colorado Springs and Golden, CO

Our trip up from Albuquerque was relatively straightforward and without incident. After a fairly stress-free day, we were pulling into our campsite in Colorado Springs. The plan was to stay or a couple of weeks, and then head up to another campground in Golden, which wasn't actually that far away. Don was working with *Windows & .NET Magazine* at the time, and several of the editors and staff lived in the area, along with one of the agents from Don's literary agency. So we'd invited them all over to the RV for a picnic lunch one day when we were in Golden.

### What's for Breakfast?

This was the summer of 2002, when Colorado was experiencing some of the worst forest fires they'd had in decades. While we hadn't gone anyway even close to the actual fires—we're not stupid—we were nonetheless within range of them. We know this because the first morning we were in Colorado Springs, Don woke up asking Chris what was for breakfast, and then asking if he was allowed to be cooking outside, because wasn't the area in a drought or something? Chris rolled over and said that he wasn't cooking breakfast. But obviously someone was, because we could smell the wood burning. Trees, apparently; when we stepped outside nobody was cooking, but the smell of a campfire was *incredibly* strong. Not unpleasant, mind you,

but strong. And apparently directly related to the forest fires; it seems the smell would blow down out of the nearby mountains every morning. Nice way to wake up until you thought about what it meant.

Breakfast was, in fact, being served at the campground's little café. A lot of campgrounds are doing this, nowadays: They'll set up a small kitchen with counter service, and then a patio area with tables and chairs. You can usually get a reasonable breakfast or lunch, and sometimes dinner, and usually a scoop of ice cream or something for dessert. It's a great amenity when you just want a decent meal and don't feel like driving into town or whatever. In this campground, the little case was named the Columbine Café. Now, we appreciate that Columbine is the name of a perfectly nice Colorado town, but the folks in Colorado will *not* get it through their heads that the rest of the country associates the name only with the murders in Columbine High. While we're not suggesting that they rename the town or anything, we are suggesting that places—like campgrounds—who deal *exclusively* with people from out of town might come up with better names for their little cafes and gift shops and whatnot. After having heard the word "Columbine" in the news so much, associated only with the tragedy in the high school, we just weren't prepared to attach the name to anything as prosaic as a café.

### **13,000 Feet or So**

A major attraction of the Colorado Springs area is Pike's Peak, elevation fifty zillion feet or so. You can drive right up to the peak itself, through a series of switchback roads, and naturally they've got a gift shop and restaurant up there. We thought it would be fun to drive

the truck—sans RV, of course—up to the top. It was a warm day, pushing ninety, so we thought better this than laying around the trailer all day. The truck had no problems climbing even the steep sections of the road; after all, the truck had climbed grades that steep while towing an extra seven tons or so. It probably thought it was on vacation. When we got to the top the views were, of course, absolutely breathtaking. So was the air quality and temperature. Stupidly, we'd worn t-shirts and shorts for our trip to the top without even a jacket. We know, we know. Even the straight people had figured this one out and were dressed accordingly. So we rushed into the gift shop and found ourselves inside, panting for breath in the thin air. Yeah, good times. So we dutifully browsed around the gift shop, and probably bought some postcards or something—you're pretty much at their mercy when your brain is screaming for oxygen. We took some photos outside—Chris has a thing about heights and wouldn't get anywhere near the edge for a cool photo—got back in the truck, blasted the heater, and headed on down.

They are *very* clear with you that you can't just put the car in neutral and ride the brakes all the way down the mountain. It's a half-hour drive at best, longer if you're obeying the speed limit and not trying to zoom off the side of the mountain. Ride your brakes for that long and you won't *have* brakes. The straight people did *not* have this figured out. We watched several sets of Mom, Dad, and 2.5 kids climb into the family Pinto or whatever and head down and a breakneck speed, brake lights on the whole way. We knew a thing or two about driving down hills, though: We put the truck's transmission in first gear and then just sat back and relaxed. With a big truck like ours, first gear will

get you about 5mph, which is right about where we wanted to be. We'd tap the brakes on sharp turns, but that was about it. About halfway down the hill, we caught up with Mom, Dad, the 2.5 kids, and the Pinto—and every other idiot who'd been riding their brakes all the way down. At the halfway point, they've got another little gift shop and restaurant, and a park ranger stops you and takes your car's temperature. Well, the temperature of the brakes, in any event. If they're hotter than a safe limit, they make you pull over for a half-hour or so to cool down and get in some more shopping. There they were, all lined up in the parking lot with their hoods raised (they make you raise the hood). Our brakes were barely above the air temperature, which at that altitude was about seventy or so. The ranger actually jiggled his thermometer gadget and measured all four wheels before he'd believe it. We just smiled as he waved us through. See, it's not hard: No less than a dozen signs had said, "Don't ride your brakes. Shift to low gear." The people they'd pulled over to cool down should have had their licenses and jobs taken away from them, not because they couldn't read, but because they damn well could read and simply didn't want to follow instructions.

We also stopped by Garden of the Gods that afternoon. Really, really big rocks. Not much you can say about big rocks, but they were damn big. We could go off about straight people and their stupid kids again—signs everywhere asked people to stay *off* of the rocks, and you'll never guess where Cindy and Bobby Brady were having their pictures taken—but what are you going to do? Straight folks these days just seem to assume that, because they have this mighty power to breed, the regular rules don't apply to them. You know, if there's

one single thing we learned on our trip through the Zoo, it's that parents don't *want* to raise their kids. They want to have them, sure, but they don't want anything to do with them after that point. They want the government to tell them what movies the kids can see, what television shows they can watch, and what video games they can play. They want the public schools to raise the kids entirely on their own. They want the local mall to baby-sit the kids after school and on weekends. They won't lift a finger to keep the kids inside the ropes, off the rocks, in their seats at the restaurant, or anything. Two gay men or women who actually *want* to adopt a child and raise it to be a useful, contributing human being will have to go to the ends of the Earth to prove they'll do a good job. But a straight couple can't be *stopped* from having more anklebiters, even with ample evidence that they're not bothering to raise the ones they've got. We don't want kids, but we don't think so many other people should be allowed to have them, either.

### **Mmmm, Beer.**

It's a law in Golden that visitors have to take the Coors brewery tour. Not wanting to upset the authorities, of course, and being the law-abiding citizens that we are, we complied. We don't care about the Coors boycott, by the way. It's not hurting the people it's supposed to hurt, and it sure as hell isn't going to stop us from getting some free beer at the end of the tour.

We learned three important things during our tour. Not anything about beermaking—blah. How boring. The only interesting part about the tour itself is that the brewery is actually built *into* the Rocky

mountains. The better to tap the cold water of the Rockies, or some such reason. No, what we learned was infinitely more important. First of all, you folks on the East coast probably aren't drinking the actual goodness of the Rockies. They ship concentrated beer to a bottling plant in North Carolina or someplace, where it's mixed with local, non-Rockies water for bottling and distribution. Seems it's more cost-effective than shipping the completed product out there, or bottling it all in Colorado—which is what they used to do—and shipping it out.

Second, we learned that Coors makes Keystone beer. Keystone beer, of course, is crap that's consumed primarily with underage teens who can't afford anything better. Coors enjoys the income from Keystone, but they are clearly not proud of the product. As our tour guide was explaining how the beer tasting at the end of the tour would proceed, she was asked if Keystone beers would be available for tasting. That would be the other segment of the population who drinks Keystone: What we'll politely call a "cheap date." The tour guide replied with an obviously well-rehearsed answer, meaning she'd heard this question before. She said, "No, Keystone is our popular price point brand, and we like to keep it on the shelf." Translation: We won't dispense that swill within a hundred feet of our real beers. *Popular price point* is a term we feel we start to become more popular in American commerce. "No sir, I'm afraid we don't offer a test drive of the Ford Fiesta. It's our popular price point car." Or, "no, ma'am, we can't offer you a sample of the wine-in-a-box. It's our popular price point brand." Meaning, of course, *cheap*.



Finally, we learned that you do *not* have to take the tour of the factory to get the free beer. As you enter the building, make a sharp left into the gift shop, explaining that you don't want to take the tour but desperately need to pick up some stadium blankets and bobble heads featuring the Coors logo. Once you're there, just wander to the back of the store, which quickly becomes the freebie bar. Mingle with the next tour groups that comes in and you're home free. The bar officially applies a three-drink maximum, and these are full-sized Pilsner glasses, so three drinks is perfectly reasonable. However, the fact is that if you're friendly, upright, and not slurring your speech, you can have just about all you want. After all, it's *free*, which isn't at all the same as *popular price point*.

### **Now, Park It.**

When we left Colorado Springs and pulled into Golden, we were delighted. The campground featured wide lanes, all pull-through spaces, and was beautifully landscaped. Truly pleasant. Unfortunately, Don decided to park the trailer, which isn't something he's good at. So the trailer wound up slightly out of true with regard to the space we were on. Chris took over the parking exercises just as two old men from the office came by to help. One stood at the back and yelled out instructions which directly contradicted what the one up front was yelling, and neither of them were batting an eye as Chris ran over shrubbery, lampposts, and other items he couldn't see. "Now, turn your wheels all the way left—no, *my* left—okay, now pull forward three inches." "No, no," would come a call from the back. "Turn your wheel to my *right* and back *up* three inches." "No, he's got to get the truck turned 'round so the trailer will follow," came the reply. I

assured him that the trailer would follow the truck under any circumstances, hitched as it was to the truck's bed. At one point, they suggested unhitching the trailer and pushing it into place, ignoring the fact that the trailer has no front wheels and obviously weighs over seven tons. Unless these old men were the grandparents of Captain Marvel and Superman, there would be no pushing. Chris was getting more and more frustrated when he finally decided just to pull out of the space—at this point, the old men had somehow gotten him parked diagonally across the actual concrete pad—and come back for another try. Don distracted the two oldies while Chris pulled in for a perfect landing.

### **The Nightlife**

One thing that really came home to us was that Golden—as well as nearby Denver—are incredibly boring places. Yes, if you ski then there's a lot of that going on in season, but there are no good restaurants in town, no good bars—other than the free one at the brewery, which regrettably shuts down at 6:00 PM—and no good shopping malls. Yeah, it *is* pretty bad when "shopping malls" makes it into a section about nightlife. By the time you read this, Denver Mills—an enormous outlet mall from the folks who brought you Franklin Mills in Philadelphia, Potomac Mills in DC, and other Mills outlet malls across the US—should be open. So there will finally be someplace to *go* in the evenings, and possibly even a nice restaurant as a bonus.

## Wisconsin Dells, WI

### Wisconsin Dells

We spent about two weeks in Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin. Ostensibly, we were there to visit friends of Don's that he'd met while living in Virginia Beach. Joe and Shandra (and their kids) now live in Appleton, Wisconsin, which is about an hour North of Wisconsin Dells. Appleton doesn't really have much in the way of sights, though, other than the only shopping mall for hundreds of miles in any direction, so Wisconsin Dells seemed like a better place to set up shop.

The Dells, as the locals call it, is one of those touristy places that sprung up in the fifties or so, and hasn't really been remodeled since. You've likely seen places just like it, especially if you've spent any time in older East coast beach towns: Pink paint, funny-shaped buildings, and kitsch as far as the eye can see. The Dells' claim to fame is water, in every possible form. The Dells has at least a half-dozen water parks. Not just water parks with a few body slides and tube rides; water parks with *dozens* of attractions apiece: Speed slides, manta ray slides, go-karts, roller coasters, tube slides, wave pools, and more. You name it, and if it has something to do with water, they've got a handful of 'em.

If you look carefully at a map, you'll notice that the Dells is one of the most potentially exciting things for a youngster to do in Northern middle America. Combine that with cheap hotel rooms and plentiful beer stores, and you've got the perfect formula for a mid-America spring break. And *that's* why gay men *need* to be aware of the Dells: Young, drunk college guys, half-clothed and dripping wet, looking for fun. It's soft porn on the hoof, so to speak. Driving down the main strip in between the major water parks presents a serious navigational hazard to the homo man. Fortunately, we drove a one-ton Chevy pickup truck at the time, lending us both an awesome road presence and the pretension of butchness, allowing us to ogle all we wanted and not worry about hitting anyone else on the road. They got out of the way. Guys, go to the Dells for a week, preferably during Spring Break, and be sure to take plenty of film and a 1000mm zoom lens for your SLR.

You don't even have to stay in a hotel, because there are plenty of campgrounds within a five minute drive of the main drag. If you decide to stay in a campground—which we obviously did—bring an oxygen supply. Once the sun goes down, the straight people start piling wood on the campfires. The benefit is that no mosquito can survive for thirty seconds in all that smoke. The downside is that you may not, either. Eventually, we gave in and roasted s'mores over our own modest campfire. Of course, we had deluxe dark chocolate and wine to go with our s'mores.

Another benefit to staying in a campground is the ubiquitous young men, especially during Spring Break. Wake yourself early (there's no

fear about staying out too late as the Dells hasn't got a single gay bar) and stroll down to the section of the campground with the most tents and Ford Escorts. That'll be college town, and shortly after the sun rises they'll all start stumbling out of their tents and off to the bathhouse. Half-clothed at best, of course, meaning you'll want to have a camera handy to, as Kodak says, remember the moments.

### **House on the Rock**

We've both read the Neil Gaimen book, *American Gods*, and were fascinated with Gaimen's description of House on the Rock in Wisconsin. So, we thought we'd drop by the place. Gaimen's descriptions make the place seem positively freaky (in the book, it's a sort of nexus for cosmic oddities), and we're here to tell you that he got it spot-on. This place was built by one *weird* straight guy. We assume he's straight. He may not have been. We don't think he was married and he collected some *odd* stuff in massive quantities. In retrospect he may have been more über-fag than straight.

It all happens back in the 1940s, when a man named Alex Jordan ran across a tall rock formation called Deer Shelter Rock. The formation is basically an enormous pillar of rock—big enough that Jordan thought it perfectly sensible to build a house on top of the thing. The house itself is a Frank Lloyd Wright-esque piece of work, with twisty passages and very cramped spaces, fourteen rooms in all, done up in *very* period interior design. Think red velvet and earth tones. Apparently the simple folk of 1940s Wisconsin hadn't every heard of anyone building a house on a rock, so they all started coming by to see the place. It bugged Jordan, who started charging fifty cents to anyone

who wanted to see the place, hoping to drive them off. Stupid move, because as anyone who's been to Disneyland can tell you, all you have to do to increase interest in a place is to start a line to get in. Jordan was overwhelmed by the tourists, and he seems to have appreciated the extra income, because he set about giving them more reasons to visit. You can read all about it—and even see some pictures—at [www.houseontherock.com](http://www.houseontherock.com).

Jordan was apparently always a collector, and that's where things begin to get weird. He didn't want the place to just be a museum, he wanted it to be a *Collection*. The first thing he seems to have gotten into was music boxes. Now, you might not think music boxes are such a strange thing to collect. After all, plenty of people collect music boxes. Even gay people, although ours tend to lean heavily toward Disney ones. That's not what Jordan collected. Most of his "music boxes" are the size of the average living room, filled with mechanical mannequins playing actual instruments. Some of the music boxes are more traditional ones, just the size of a refrigerator. A couple of them are about the size of a small paddleboat. One's a full-sized auditorium containing a life-size, fully mechanized orchestra. And there aren't just a handful of these things, there are entire freaking *warehouses* full of them. Because that's what House on the Rock is, now: A complex of interconnected warehouses containing all the whack stuff that Jordan collected. In the late Eighties, Jordan sold the whole lot to a friend, who continues to manage the property and build more and more exhibits to keep the rubes coming in. It took us nearly an entire day to wind our way through the place. Jordan is supposedly still alive,

although his participation is, in his words, "present, but not voting." Whatever, you whack job.

Do you like pipe organs? They've got dozens, most of which have twice as many consoles as a good pipe organ really needs. Several have complete egg-shaped pods containing not only the consoles, but also video monitors to keep an eye on the mechanisms. Ever see a carousel? House on the Rock has the world's largest, spinning around fast enough to be measured in miles per hour. Every single animal on it is unique, and not one of them is a horse (you're not allowed to ride, either). That's okay, though, because the walls of that room are mostly lines with carousel horses from all over the world, stacked up one on top of the other like a demented carousel factory warehouse. The ceiling doesn't contain horses, as that's the only place left from which to suspend the hundreds of mannequin angels. Looking up makes you hope angels have better manners than pigeons.

Ever see a dollhouse? Sure, we all have. Some of you probably *had* one, and several of you probably still do, you big queens. House on the Rock has enough to fill a couple *acres'* worth of display cases. What about miniature circuses? Another couple of acres. There's even a room dedicated to the sea. *That* room has a—well, words fail us, but let's call it a "scene" of a whale fighting a monster squid. The whale is longer than the Statue of Liberty is tall. The squid is to scale, as is the poor fellow in a rowboat being sucked into the whale's mouth a la Jonas. There's absolutely no way to take a picture of it, since cameras just can't get it all in. The room also contains another one of the ubiquitous music boxes, this one a Ford Excursion-sized octopus

banging out the Beatles' "Octopus' Garden" on a variety of instruments. Kitsch to the max. This type of thing goes on and on through a complex of God-only-knows how many buildings, winding passageways, stairways, and more. Just when you think you can't be overwhelmed, you turn the corner and there's an eerie tree-like structure, four stories tall, covered in baby dolls, slowly spinning around. Positively *Amityville*-like terror, here. The sanest display in the entire complex is a room full of vintage autos. Any obsessive collector has to have a few dozen old cars, of course, and it's actually one of the more interesting rooms if you like that sort of thing.

You know those carnival machines with the animated fortune teller? You put your money in, she croaks something unintelligible from a decades-old tape recording, and a card spits out with your fortune and luck numbers? Well, at House on the Rock you'll love your fortune, and if you don't, you can get a second opinion. And a third. And a dozen more, because that's how many of those machines they've got. Clocks? Millions. Artifacts from *Titanic*? Got those, too, along with bits from a dozen other downed ships. Airplanes? Couldn't live without 'em, at least in model form, with hundreds strung from the ceiling. There's an eerie bit with puppets that we've both spent months and hundreds of dollars' worth of therapy trying to repress.

This was one attraction where we were absolutely indistinguishable from the straight people in the place: All of us were walking around with our jaws on the floor, amazed that anyone had bothered to assemble such a bizarre collection of stuff, and even more amazed that we'd all paid twenty bucks a head to see it. If you've ever wondered



what the true spirit of America was, then go to House on the Rock and see it in person: A collection of perfectly ordinary things (well, mostly), made incredible simply due to the sheer quantity of it and the fact that people are paying good money to walk in and see it. There's a special hidden attraction for gay men: Something like ninety percent of what's on display qualifies as an antique, so you'll have a great time planning ways to sneak bits out for that curio shelf in your living room.

### **Rubber Cheese**

Since we were in Wisconsin, we figured we were pretty much required to go buy some cheese. Now, the natives don't seem proud of the whole dairy thing. For the past few states, we'd been buying "Welcome" signs with a local theme, and sending them to Don's Mom as a souvenir. For Wisconsin, of course, we wanted a sign with a cow. This would be a sign you could easily purchase in any artsy-craftsy store in any state, excepting Wisconsin, where we had the damndest time finding one (although we eventually did). We did, however, find a nice cheese shop, appropriately named "The Cheese Shop," so we decided to stop in and buy some cheese. We didn't know what we were getting ourselves into.

Obviously, the shop had some nice cheeses, and many of them were locally-made. They also had cheese curds. While Chris knew what cheese curds were, he'd never actually eaten them, and it was Don's completely first experience with them. Cheese curds are sort of a proto-cheese; a substance that isn't quite cheese, but would be if it had been left alone long enough. Physically, it's a bit like latex-coated

foam—kind of like a Nerf football. They come in half-inch chunks, and you're meant to just pop 'em in your mouth and chew. The shop had a little plate of cheddar curds out as samples. The foam rubberiness carries through the appearance and feel to the actual chewing: The stuff squeaks against your teeth as you chew. It's dry, only vaguely cheesy tasting, and almost entirely uncomfortable. If your mother caught you chewing *anything* like that when you were a kid, she'd probably have called the doctor.

We immediately delegated cheese curds to the "do not buy" list. Right then, some locals walked in. "Oh, look! Fresh cheese curds!" they said. Apparently, the Nerf-like bright orange color was a clue to their freshness; older curds seem to be a bit paler, from what we gathered. The whole family of them—Mom, Dad, and the 2-1/2 kids—chowed down on the sample curds and then asked where they could get a bag for themselves. The cashier pointed out the one-pound bags sitting on the counter. The family loudly expressed their disappointment: "Is that all? Do you have any bigger bags?"

We wanted to suggest that they just rip open the seats in their Blazer and eat the stuffing. Same thing. Maybe a bit older-than-fresh in color, but still rubbery, dry, chewy, and squeaky against your teeth. The cashier helpfully offered a discount on a multi-bag purchase of the yummy curds, and the family trooped back out again with a shopping bag full of the nasty chunks—and not a single ounce of actual, finished cheese. Freakin' *yuck*. How much effort would have been involved in just letting the poor curds finish evolving into actual cheese, when *anybody* would have bought it? And what sad, bored, straight cheese

factory worker first reached into a vat of incomplete cheese and thought, "wow, I wonder if these here rubbery bits is any good?" The Wisconsinites we met were pleased to be scarfing down half-formed cheddar, but made it tough as hell to find a simple "Welcome" sign with a cow on it. Go fig.

### **The Natives**

Unfinished cheese aside, the natives of Wisconsin—as well as the transplants who've made it their home—are a damn tolerable bunch of people. They definitely strike you as less-than-sophisticated, what with the lack of any serious social infrastructure like shopping malls, the cheese curds, and the quasi-Canadian accent—but on the whole, they're a live-and-let-live bunch. We never got an odd look. In fact, we decided to spend one night in one of the newer "resort" hotels, as a bit of a treat to ourselves. The place boasted an indoor/outdoor water park with free admission for hotel guests, so it sounded like a fun way to take a break from work. The girl on the reservations phone line never batted a verbal eyelash when Chris asked for a "nice room for myself and my partner, Don, with a single bed." She helpfully booked a room which, she assured us, was both pleasant and very masculine. Most of the folks we encountered in the Dells, in fact, had what we consider to be *exactly* the right attitude: You're a tourist? You've got money? Great, you're fine by us. Would you like to see the wine list?

Middle America is thought of as the conservative heartland of the country, the place where "traditional family values" hold sway and where folks look sideways at "them queer folks from back East." While they might not join a Pride march for gay marriage, though, we found

them to be "just folks," more concerned about putting food on the table and enjoying their lives than worrying about how we were enjoying ours.

## **Gary, IN and Sandusky, OH**

The trip up from Golden took us through several states, most of which were incredibly, incredibly *flat*. Bowling seems to be a popular Middle American sport only because they can play *anywhere*. The trip up was nearly uneventful, although Gary, Indiana—our first stopping point—offered a few difficulties.

### **Gary, Indiana**

We pulled into Yogi Bear's Jellystone Camp-Resort in Gary, Indiana. Jellystone parks aren't usually super-fancy, but they're always clean, well-managed, and well laid-out. We were anticipating a pleasant week in Indiana, which was just a short drive from Chicago. Chicago doesn't actually have many campgrounds right nearby, at least not ones that could handle an RV the size of ours, so camping just across the state line made sense.

Parking our RV was always a bit rough due to its size. In this park, we unfortunately had to make an awkward U-turn to get lined up in the right site. Additionally, the site had a small storage shed on it that complicated the parking. This was our first sign that something was wrong: This particular Jellystone sold most of their lots, like a mobile-home park. Our lot had been sold back to the park and was available

for camping, but the shed was a leftover from the prior owner. More on that in a bit.

Our first issue was the trees, as usual. Although we'd specifically asked for a site with a clear view of the Southern sky, the park management plopped us down on a site with complete tree coverage the South. "Christ on a hopped-up moped," we told them, "you people are idiots." They offered to move us one site down, which was their only other free site—having sold the rest of them—but it was blocked just as badly. A quick test with the satellite dish confirmed that we couldn't get a signal through the dense foliage. Time for Plan B: Spend one night, start making phone calls and rearrange the *entire freaking schedule*. We decided to head over to Sandusky immediately if that park could take us. While Don fumed at the park's incompetent managers, Chris got on the phone—at least the cell phones worked—and started rearranging. To keep things simple, we decided to just move our Chicago week to Sandusky, staying there for a total of two weeks instead of the one we'd originally planned. That way the schedule change wouldn't cascade through a dozen other campgrounds. That decision came back to bite us a bit, as you'll see.

We spent a reasonably comfortable evening. Since we were pulling right out the next morning, we left the truck hitched to the RV. We also spent a lot of time scouting out our escape route, because we were starting to get worried.

The ancient straight people who owned the lots adjacent to us were apparently concerned about encroachment, because they'd erected

fences around their property. That's a problem in a campground with RVs. Picture it the campground layout: There's two long roads, about ten feet wide apiece. The roads sit about sixty feet apart, and between them are the mostly grass-covered lots. Originally, there were no barriers between the lots. Small posts with electrical and water hookups were present on the edge of each lot, but they were small enough and far enough in as to present no obstacle. A one-ton truck hauling a 40-foot RV has the turning radius of a small moon. Normally, when we pulled into a space, we sort of cut the corners and drove a little bit onto the adjacent space as we were making our turn. Perfectly normal, and that's why most campgrounds keep a few completely clear feet right next to the road—to give RVs the turning space they need. However, the squatters had erected their goddamn fences *right up to the freaking road*. With a ten foot-wide road, there wasn't much we could do: We had over sixty feet of truck and RV to maneuver, and it wasn't going to happen in ten feet.

The most direct route out of the park would have been a left turn out of our space, a left turn at the end of the road, and a left turn out the park. We normally love left turns, since they give us the widest possible turn. That wasn't an option, now, though, because of the stupid fence-builders. We thought about ripping the damn fence down, but it was too sturdy. So we decided the only way out was to make a right turn out of the space.

From there, we could have, in theory, gone out the same way we came in, except that the dicey U-turn we'd had to make coming in would have been tighter and more difficult going back the other direction.

Fortunately, the park was *huge*, and we decided just to amble through the entire thing, making an enormous circle around the lake in the middle of the park. We'd circle all the way out and exit that way. We walked the route a couple of times and it seemed reasonable enough; there were some tight spaces, but there were also a couple of different roads to take so we figured we'd be OK.

Wrong-o. We were good until the end. We had one slight left-hand turn to make, and then we'd be on an open road, with a lake along one side and a chain-link fence along the other. From there it was a straight shot out of the park. Unfortunately, at that last left-hand turn, another goddamn ancient fence-builder struck. This time, though, it wasn't a fence, it was a much less movable embankment that the property owner had built for his freaking flower garden. We had a four-foot high stack of landscaping logs. Chris took the turn as wide as he possibly could. In fact, the truck's front bumper was slowly rolling over the chain-link fence on the right side of the road. As the truck bent one of the fence poles down, Don ran over and jumped on it, bending it further out of the way so that the truck could get a wider turn. Even so, the trailer's left tires were dangerously close to the embankment. If it hit, the tires would pull right off of the rims and we'd be *screwed*. Don told Chris to stop, and started pulling up landscaping logs, tossing them into the flower garden. It was early morning and we figured everyone else would be asleep, and if they weren't, fuck 'em. Don got to the last layer of logs and pulled them up. They were still holding a lot of weight, so he had to shoulder up the log while Chris edged the trailer past, continuing to push down the fence on the opposite side of the road. The trailer tires rubbed the



logs—just enough to mark the sidewalks—and then cleared. Chris quickly turned the truck to the left, easing off of the fence, which was completely demolished.

Chris was shaking. He pulled the RV forward a bit more, clearing the last obstacles, and then climbed out of the driver's seat. "You're driving," he told Don.

Did we feel bad for the destruction? Hell, no. If you're running an RV park, you should know what turning radiuses you can support. Turn folks away if their rigs are too large, and keep your damn fence-building, territorial old people from blocking the way. Serves 'em right.

### **Cedar Point**

If ever there was a place that offered a variety of ways for you to lose your breakfast, lunch, or dinner, then Cedar Point is it. America's self-styled "roller coast" offers over a dozen major roller coasters, plus a selection of other thrill rides, kiddie rides, carnival games, and more. Not really a proper theme park—unless "buttload of roller coasters" is a theme in and of itself—Cedar Point is one of the most popular amusement parks in the world. Situated on a small peninsula in Lake Erie, we'd visited in the past and decided to spend a couple of weeks in Sandusky, Ohio, primarily to be as close as possible to the Point.

Cedar Point offers all the usual amenities of a theme park: Unpleasant restrooms, tons of rides, long lines, and plenty of healthy, good-looking guys in tank tops and muscle shirts. The trick to enjoying a

park like this is to being mirrored or dark sunglasses, so that you can ogle the guys standing in line with you and not get caught at it. Because the ride queues are the typical back-and-forth mazes, you're almost certain to be in line near some hotties, and you'll have the pleasure of seeing them again and again as you wind your way through the queue to the actual ride. And then, as a bonus, you get to enjoy the ride! It's really like two attractions in one.

We'd enjoyed several of the park's newer attractions, including Millennium Force (top speed of about 800 million miles per hour) and Raptor (which pulls about a hundred Gs or so around the corners), and decided to try Disaster Transport, an indoor coaster-type attraction. Actually, it's an older bobsled-style ride that was so lame the park could only make people ride it by enclosing the entire thing in a completely darkened building. The theory, we guess, is that not seeing what's coming makes the gentle curves of the ride somehow more thrilling. Whatever. The line was interminable, the building incredibly hot and humid, and there were *no* cute guys in line. A big disappointment. Little did we know that the real thrill came *after* the ride.

When we emerged from the ride, blinking like newborns, we realized that everyone was rushing around kinda anxious-like. Looking out over the park, we realized why: There was a huge waterspout a few hundred feet off the peninsula. Whoops. Waterspouts have been known to turn into sort of mini-tornados when they get over dry land, and everyone was making for the restrooms, which, we realized, were built like concrete bunkers for reasons other than aesthetics. We

followed everyone into the nearest bathroom—after Don stopped to snap a picture of the waterspout, of course—where it became immediately obvious that we were all going to die. Every woman in the bathroom—they seem to go co-ed in a crisis—was in tears, every man looked grim, and the children were clinging to one parent or another.

After a bit, a park employee popped in and said they were moving everyone to the arcade. We'd wondered earlier why they'd built the arcade in what seemed to be a completely buried building; now it was obvious that it was the storm shelter. As we piled out of the bathroom, we looked up and saw that the storm pattern was directly overhead: Angry, swirling black clouds that were obviously only a little vigor short of being a tornado. Into the arcade we rain, just as all the water that the waterspout had sucked into the clouds came gushing back down upon us in an absolutely torrential, Noah-style downpour. They employees locked us in the arcade, where the sense of impending doom was enhanced by loudly crying children, wailing mothers, and the omnipresent grim fathers. Several women had their entire families down on their knees praying forcefully to God for salvation. We stood back in a corner and Don took pictures of it all. Drama for the scrap album; we figured if a tornado and the accompanying doom were really going to happen, it would have. Sure enough, after twenty minutes or so the downpour let up, we were released from the holding pen—arcade, that is—and allowed to go back on the rides. It was blue skies and sunny days for the rest of the day. Having faced impending obliteration, most of the straight folks went home to thank

God or whatever, leaving the park pretty much open for everyone who stayed.

We later realized that Cedar Point had its own RV park, right on the peninsula and practically in the middle of the park itself. We were staying elsewhere on the Sandusky mainland; had we known there was a mobile home park—read, "tornado magnet"—right next to us, we've had been considerably more worried. We also found out that the weather was pretty much localized to the lake itself; just ten minutes away, our RV had barely gotten a sprinkling of light rain.

### **The Ohio Gay Scene**

A quick Internet search will reveal several gay bars in the Sandusky, Ohio area. Damron's Guide mentions several, too. Turns out that not *everything* on the Internet—or in Damron's Guide—is strictly true. Some determined hunting and phone calls revealed only a single gay bar, right in Sandusky's downtown area. And by "downtown area," we mean "the street where they have the most restaurants and sometimes a street festival of some kind." Not, like, skyscrapers or anything; Sandusky isn't the bustling metropolis that, say, Cleveland is.

Sandusky's gay bar (the one we found, at least) is a Standard Model 14. We really love that model, and we're fortunate that it's one of the most popular gay bar models ever sold. In fact, pretty much every town we stopped in had at least one Model 14 bar, and where we've settled in Las Vegas is right near three or four of them. You probably have one or two in your town, even if you live in a major gay ghetto:

Standard Model 14 bars feature a friendly bartender, a simple bar with a dozen or so barstools, two of those electronic 50-in-1 game machines, five or six tables, and a tiny stage. Two to three beers are available on tap and, following standard Model 14 guidelines, none of them are Coors. The men's room is small and the women's room is locked, so that the men don't take it over. One drag queen is provided to run the midweek karaoke show, and racks are provided for the local gay newspaper-cum-escort-ad-magazine (Sandusky does helpfully provide a few escorts, too, it seems). Televisions are conveniently mounted in the corner for watching the local news, sporting events, or, on special nights, the latest gay network television sitcom or series. The audio is turned completely off and subtitles are only available on the television farthest from you. Happy Hour lasts for four hours and offers inexpensive beer and cocktails, and some form of heat-and-serve food—in this case, frozen pizzas—is available in newer units. Model 14-P bars come with one or more pool tables, depending on the size of the bar.

Model 14 bars are *much* nicer than the Model 12 bars they replaced (Model 13 bars were offered for a brief period, but they kept burning down and were eventually pulled from the market). Model 12 bars lacked the stage, which really adds something special to the overall experience. Many Model 12 bars came with surly bartenders, and several were built without beer on tap (although many have retrofitted a single rainbow-colored tap that dispenses Bud Light). Most 12s came preloaded with cigarette smoke and *all* of them had sticky floors. We still have a couple of Model 12s in Las Vegas (actually the special 12-G model, which includes gambling devices in the bar

top), and we always try to avoid them. New Orleans has several and the less said about them, the better.

What Model 14 bars do *not* include is a dance floor, a crowd, fancy light shows, a thumping sound system, or a lot of drama. Model 14 bars are most often referred to as *neighborhood* bars, and we were quite pleased to find one. We hadn't really had any expectations for a "scene" in little Sandusky, and the fact that Our People had a bar of their own was a bit of a relief. We'd had a wonderful time in Model 14 bars in Tuscon a few months back, and we had a great time chatting with the bartender in this one. Don even got up and did karaoke (probably "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," in case you were wondering, which is a karaoke standby that almost all Model 14 bars come with). We had unfortunately missed "College Night," which was apparently when all the kids from the nearby colleges came out, went to Cedar Point during the day, and then came out and pretended to be straight in the town's one gay bar during the night. According to the bartender, while the usual difference between a gay college kid and a straight one is a six pack, on "College Night" it was more like six ounces of whatever was cheapest. We also learned that Sandusky has budding liberal performance arts community (drag queens), but that shows didn't usually run until midnight or so on weekend nights. This being a weekday, we were fresh out of luck, which was okay; we'd been tuckered out by all the tornado action, plus we had plans to go visit wineries the next day and needed to get our beauty sleep.

## **Vintage Ohio**

We've always been fans of wine, and Ohio has a pretty large wine industry, so one day we figured we'd drive around and visit a few of the nearby ones. We spent about forty minutes looking for the first one on our list (accurate directions aren't something the natives seem to worry about much), and when we found it, the damned place was closed. There was a sign on the door: "Closed today. Join us at Vintage Ohio at Lake Farmpark." Hmm, Vintage Ohio, huh? Sounds like a wine festival. Mmm, wine. Unfortunately, there weren't exactly signs pointing to this lake. Or farm. Or park. Or whatever it is. Twenty minutes, two maps, a gas station, and three calls to OnStar later, we finally found the place, and a wine festival it was! Actually, it was a wine festival *plus* a sort of disposable income show: In addition to wineries, there were hot tub dealers, crafts for sale, junk food tents, and so on.

Typically, wine festivals charge you ten bucks or so for admission. This gets you a glass and unlimited tastings at the various wineries' booths. In the past, we're told, that's exactly what Vintage Ohio did. Recently, however, the festival organizers were told by the state of Ohio that they weren't allowed to give away an unlimited amount of alcohol for free. Now, understand that your average wine festival isn't exactly a drunken bacchanalia. Not the kind we run across, at least. There's usually a pretty broad range of humanity attending: Older couples, families with kids (who almost never drink), younger couples like ourselves, and so on. Hardly something you think the state would get in a tizzy about, but there you have it: No unlimited tasting. Instead, Vintage Ohio provides you with a wine glass and a sort of

dance card with a grid on it. Each time you have a taste of wine—and a taste is usually a half-ounce or so—the winery providing the taste crosses out a grid square on your dance card. When the card's full, you're cut off and can start looking for Mr. Right Now. Our cards had a twelve-by-twelve grid, for a total of 144 squares. Folks, when two gay men go tasting wine, 144 isn't a limit, it's a goal. We never would have drunk so much if we hadn't felt compelled to "get our money's worth" by filling up those damn cards. By the way, if you're counting, that's about 72 ounces of wine, or about 12 glasses, which comes out to a couple of full bottles. Per person. Look out.

Fortunately, the festival included a food court of sorts, because the cheese steaks and barbeque are probably the only reason we didn't get alcohol poisoning or something. We *tasted* some wine, by God. We quite possibly tasted every palatable-sounding variety of wine produced by the thirty or so wineries that were present. Many of them we tasted more than once, and as they day wore on the sample sizes got bigger and bigger until a "taste" required several long swallows to dispatch. We had a *great* time, completely lost track of what we were buying, left the place well over the legal limit, and wound up with three or four cases of wine in the back of the truck. Boy, do they make it easy: As you're tasting, you get a little slip of paper listing everything that winery makes. You taste it all, and make a mark on the slip next to the wines you enjoyed. When you're finished (read: sloshed), you go (stagger) to a big tent near the exit and hand them your slips. And a credit card. They gather up all the ones you liked, you blearily sign the credit slip, and they drop the boxes right into your vehicle. We didn't seriously realize what we'd done until the next



day. Surprisingly, the RV didn't come with a wine rack or anything, so we spent several days stashing wine around the place until it was all roadworthy. Had we been pulled over by a cop while towing anytime in, say, the next year, we'd definitely have been given a sobriety test on the spot, or at the very least asked to produce a liquor license.

Wine festivals are absolutely the best circumstances in which gay couples can meet straight people. Two men walking around the wine festival, wine glasses neatly held in lanyards around our neck (for easier carrying and less spillage, of course), and every straight person in the place knew what was what. Fortunately, they assumed that, as gay men at a wine festival, we were far more qualified than they were to be there. Stereotype? Sure; we know plenty of gay men who wouldn't know wine from Welch's. But we were the stars of the show, given more attention by the folks at the winery booths, asked our opinion by straight couples trying to figure out the difference between French and American oak, and shown special vintages by the winemakers on duty. When we didn't know an answer or have an appropriate comment, we made up something about the bouquet, or the wine's "legs," and waved it off with a slightly limp, drunken wrist. Everybody bought it. Hell, half the time they didn't even bother marking off our dance card, which partially accounts for our moderately inebriated condition around noontime. Certainly, nobody had an issue with a couple of fags wandering around a wine festival. If anything, *we* probably had the right to question *their* right to be there.

By the way, if you're a wine enthusiast (or snob), you should know that most Ohio wines tend to be on the blander, more "market-ready,"

side, as they say in the industry. In other words, they appeal to folks who don't prefer hearty, dry wines. That said, you can get some great Gewürztraminers, and there are a few nice Cabernets. Ohio's great for more refreshing, "summer sipping" wines, too, and some of the smaller wineries produce wines with a lot more character than many of the more well-known wines from New York's Finger Lakes region.

## Kings Mills, OH

We'd planned to spend about a week in King's Mills, which is home to Paramount's Kings Island theme park, which has its very own campground. Nothing could be more convenient. The folks on the phone were sure friendly. When informed that we needed a pull-through space—having given up on trying to back the RV into spaces—with sewer, water, and a 50-amp electrical hookup, they typed for a few seconds and then brightly announced "no problem!" That's the right attitude. Even when we called back, oh, a half-dozen times to confirm the reservation, which was under Chris' last name, they cheerily replied that everything was in order and they just couldn't wait to see us. Gosh, what hospitality. We couldn't wait to be there!

Until we got there. Don drove the rig in, and Chris went inside to check in. After a suspiciously long wait, Don went to see what the holdup was. "They can't find our reservation," Chris growled. "But we confirmed it like, six times or something," Don said. Chris just gave the woman behind the counter an ugly look. "Oh, *here* it is!" she chirped. "It was under *Dannon*, with a *D*." Funny how the helpful girls on the phone never had a problem finding it under Gannon, but whatever. "You reserved a pull-through, right?" she asked. "Right," Chris said. At this point, Don figured all was well and headed to the restroom. The

restroom, by the way, had recently been cleaned by the simple expedient of blasting it down with a fire hose. Absolutely everything was dripping wet, although to be sure, there wasn't a speck dirt in sight. There were some ants, though, and Don made a mental note to pick up some napalm that evening. After using the facilities, he wandered back into the office to see if we'd gotten a space assignment yet.

Not exactly. It seems the pull-through sites only had water and electric, and a paltry 20 amps of electricity, at that. We could barely turn on the air conditioner with 20 amps, let alone the television, microwave, and the *other* air conditioner. "Fine," Chris muttered, "what about the back-in spaces?" He knew he'd be the one backing the RV in, and he hated doing it, but Don was mentally unable to grasp the maneuvers necessary. Don's contribution was to watch and holler if Chris was about to hit something; he couldn't even offer Chris advice because it would just get everyone pissed off. "Sure, they have sewer," the woman said, "but we don't have 50 amp electricity. We haven't had anything but 20 amp since this park was opened in 1971." Oh for fuck's sake, people, that was *three decades ago*. You could upgrade a *few* spaces, you know, it's not like 50 amps is a rare requirement in an RV or anything. Most big RVs use 50 amp connections nowadays. Our *pop-up* used 30 amps, for the love of Edison. Come to think of it, the restrooms didn't look like they'd been upgraded since the early seventies, either, and we weren't sure what that was supposed to be telling us about the quality of the roller coasters and other attractions at the theme park next door. Maybe this wasn't working out. In any event, there's no way we could survive on 20 amps. If you're not

aware, an AC outlet in your house provides 15 to 20 amps. Imagine trying to plug a satellite dish, television, two or three computers, an air conditioner, a microwave, and a coffeepot into a household outlet. That's right, your insurance company *would* be picking up the tab. So 20 amps just wasn't going to allow us to stay for more than a night or two, because we wouldn't be able to, you know, work or prepare food.

So we'd been had. It seemed that the cheery girls on the phone would say "no problem" if you asked them for a room in the property's nuclear missile silo, whether or not such a thing existed. Bitches. This is something that's pissed Don off for a long time: Just because employees are going to get paid whether they're polite or rude, and just because these particular phone slaves wouldn't *ever* have to confront the people they were screwing over, they didn't feel they needed to try very hard to do a good job. It's why Don won't ever have employees in his company without a fight, and it's why good employees aren't rewarded well by their employers. Employers are quite reasonably not prepared to believe that there is such a thing as a good employee; most employees spend most of their time goofing off and getting paid anyway. If you want to be successful, you need to be in business for yourself. The girls answering the campground's reservations line—who also handled Paramount's on-site hotel and motel—were probably too busy figuring out how to avoid having to sleep with their redneck boyfriends that night to actually do a good job. Yet they got paid anyway.

At that point, we just wanted to get the hell out of there. Chris was pissed enough that a police presence was becoming an increasing

likelihood with every passing minute. Fortunately, whenever we picked a campground, we always researched alternatives, and we knew there was another campground back down the highway a bit. If they could just give us the electricity we wanted, we'd stay for one night and spend the rest of the day reconfiguring our trip to arrive earlier somewhere else or something. Not like we hadn't rearranged our entire travel plans, which often stretched months in advance, on a moment's notice before. So we rang up the nearby Olive Branch Campground and made reservations for the night, after making them swear to God above that they really had 50 amp power connections. Little did we know how serious an oath that must have been for them.

We didn't quite make the connection between "Olive Branch" and "Our Campground of Perpetual Grace," but that's pretty much what we got, in a low-key sort of way. Don't get us wrong: Nobody showed up at the check-in desk to convert us or anything, and Chris is a recovering Catholic anyway, so he's pretty much immune. There were an awful lot of fliers for church rallies, two or three scheduled services on Sundays, and just a general, pervasive feeling of Baptist around the place. But the campground was pretty much empty when we pulled in, so we picked a spot with blessed (probably literally) 50 amp electricity and what we thought might be a clear view of the sky over the trees. No such luck; the satellite couldn't quite lock on—that far North, the dish points a lot closer to the horizon and trees get in the way. But it was only for one night.

We did meet a nice, if a bit weird, older straight couple. They noticed our satellite dish—this wouldn't be the last time the bright blue glow

and giant dish attracted comments—and came over to talk to us. They felt bad for our plight, shared some bottles of wine with us, and suggested that we consider Nashville, which was on our general route to Orlando. They'd just been there and said the campgrounds were very nice and pretty much empty this time of year. They were also weirded out by the highly religious nature of the current campground, and agreed that heading out the next morning might be best, before someone started passing out Kool-Aid.

We spent some quality time on the phone with various campgrounds (after wandering around the campground to find a spot where the cell phones got reception) and were expected in Nashville the next day. *They* claimed they could get us a clear view of the Southern sky. We'd heard that before.





## Nashville, TN

After an odd night in Ohio's Olive Branch Campground, we headed out and arrived in Nashville. Now, remember that we'd just been through some pretty horrible experiences getting what we'd asked for from campgrounds. Everything from electrical requirements to requests for a clear view of the Southern sky had been ignored, and we were pretty jittery as we pulled into Nashville's Holiday Trav-L-Park. We were shocked. The campground office had already reserved a spot for us: It was at the back of the campground, in a roomy pull-through space. Sewer, water, and 50 amp electrical hookups were available. And adjacent to the back of the campground was a big, completely open field, stretching off to the South. Our satellite dish almost wept for joy as it locked on to the satellite in just a few minutes. We were so relieved we actually went *back* to the office to thank them for listening to us. After explaining some of the hassles we'd been through in the past couple of days, they agreed that it was nice to stay someplace that seemed to have a clue what they were doing.

It was also nice to stay someplace that had some good recreational and diversion opportunities. Our prior stops in Colorado, Wisconsin, and Ohio had been pretty much devoid of social essentials like shopping. Nashville, on the other hand, had Opryland. Or, to be more accurate, it *didn't* have Opryland, the theme park having been

demolished several years earlier and replaced with Opry Mills, an enormous outlet mall brought to you by the same folks who were trying to bring shopping relief to the Denver area with Denver Mills. Opry Mills had little specialty shops, restaurants, and God knows what else. Primarily it took well over an hour to walk through, which is the exact type of diversion we needed now and again. Between the campground and the mall—perhaps a six-minute drive away—was the Gaylord Opryland Hotel. This enormous convention hotel covered several dozen acres that had also formerly been part of the Opryland amusement park, and featured some great seafood restaurants. In fact, our campground—smack in the middle of tourist central it seemed—was within a stone's throw of several excellent eateries. We enjoyed some fried catfish the night we arrived, and finally felt in many regards that we'd found our way back to civilization.

### **Lewis & Chris**

While Don stayed home and diligently worked on his latest computer book, Chris headed West to do some exploring. By this point, we'd decided to buy land in Las Vegas on which to build a house, and plans called for us to return to Las Vegas in the Spring of 2003. Clark County—which is where Las Vegas is—has some of the best government services we've ever seen. Almost every square inch of the county has been photographed by satellite, neatly divided into parcels, and made available over the Internet. On a recommendation from a friend in Vegas, we'd contacted a real estate agent named Sean. Sean had sent us several MLS listings for vacant land, and the listings included the properties' parcel numbers. By punching those into the county's Web site, we could check out aerial views of the land. We

used this technique to narrow down the possibilities to perhaps a dozen plots, and made an appointment with Sean. We figured we'd get him to take Chris around to each of our finalists, let Chris take pictures, and then we could decide which one we wanted.

Chris stopped in the realty office early in the morning, when the temperature in Vegas—in July—had already climbed to triple digits. After waiting for ten or fifteen minutes, he asked the receptionist if Sean was likely to put in an appearance. She got a strange look on her face, and made a few phone calls. Turns out Sean hadn't been heard from. Would Chris like to reschedule? Chris explained that he'd flown in for the *day* from Tennessee, and that no, he damn well wouldn't like to reschedule. He either wanted Sean here pronto or another agent to show him the properties. A few more harried phone calls revealed that Sean's girlfriend was feeling under the weather, and so he was staying home to take care of her, appointment notwithstanding. Chris immediately insisted on another agent, and demanded that Sean be pulled off of our account. And so we met James.

Despite being completely unprepared, James was a superhero. He figured out where each parcel was located, and spent all day driving Chris out to see them. He helped take pictures, and even helped measure the parcels—he knew exactly how long his car was and would drive across the land in car lengths to check the exact dimensions. One particular parcel was memorable: It was in the middle of a completely undeveloped area of land, where even the roads hadn't been put in, yet. The land was a deal—under \$40,000 for an acre—but it'd be years before development made its way out there

with roads and utilities. To find the land, Chris and James had to get out of the car at the roads that did exist, and then walk in measured steps until they met. At that point, they knew they were on the corner of the parcel in question. It was nice-looking land. Very flat. Not really suitable for building a house on, though. We eventually decided on a parcel behind what was then known as the Belz Factory Outlet Mall, just off South Las Vegas Boulevard, and perhaps a ten-minute drive from the casinos on the South end of the strip.

James thought it was great that Chris and "his partner" were moving to Vegas, and promised to introduce us to several of his friends who were "also in the family, isn't that how you say it?" It was cute, and James got the sale when we decided on a piece of property. In fact, Chris asked if he'd be the one to get the commission. James said he'd get a portion, but that Sean would get the sale since we were "his" account. At the end of the day, back at the realty office, Chris cornered a manager and made him swear to take Sean off of the account. Any agent who couldn't even be bothered to call ahead and arrange for someone to pick up his appointments didn't deserve the commission. Chris made it clear that James was the reason another agency wasn't getting our business. In point of fact, James got the agency a *lot* more business. In our travels, we had the opportunity to recommend James to several folks we met—Vegas is a popular land investment location these days—and James sold an apartment building, a couple of houses, and several pieces of land. All because he did a good job, always followed through on phone calls and promises, and just *did his job*. See, it pays to treat every customer like they're your most important customers, and always give it your best. You never know

who you might be dealing with, or how they might be positioned to help *you* out in the future.

Chris also had some leftover time to meet several modular home builders—modulars having been our original plan—and to meet with a more traditional builder who offered ready-made floorplans that we could have built on our property. It was a good trip, and within a few days of Chris coming back to Tennessee, we'd made a decision, placed an offer on the land, and were well into our first big step in settling down.

### **Bad Loan Officer, Bad**

We planned to finance 50% of the land's purchase price, and then pay off the loan in a few months when some projects of Don's completed and he was paid. So, here's the picture: Don has an excellent credit rating. We have almost no open credit cards, having decided at the beginning of the adventure to use our American Express cards almost exclusively. We had no late payments of any kind on the credit report. What's more, we were putting 50% of the land's purchase price down in cash, making this an extremely low-risk loan for the bank. After all, it's not like the land was going to get up and walk away; it was perfect collateral and there was no way the bank could lose out. Nonetheless, it took Mary Jo at NationalCity Mortgage almost *two weeks* to get the stupid loan underwritten. Another couple of weeks and we could have just paid for the stupid land. Chris finally had to call her and explain that she had about thirty seconds to get the loan approved, give a reason why she couldn't, or lose the opportunity completely. She got the loan. This is just *another* example of how businesses aren't set up

to be successful, and we certainly wouldn't ever recommend NationalCity to anyone. Matters became worse when we actually tried to pay off the land: We called for a payoff amount, and were told by the helpful girl on the phone—and we didn't trust helpful girls on the phone after the Ohio incident—that it was \$20 to have a payoff statement faxed to us, but they could mail one for free. Whatever. Mail the thing, we said. A week later, it still hadn't arrived, so we called back. Yes, we were told, she could see where the payoff had been requested but it had never been printed. She'd get one printed today and in the mail.

A week later, still no statement. So Chris gets on the phone and goes Irish on the next chick who says yes, she can see where they were ordered, but they weren't ever sent out. Fax me one, Chris said. Twenty bucks, chick said. Manager, Chris said. Chris explained to the manager that we were trying to pay off our loan. We'd be coming to them soon for a mortgage to build a house, and if they wanted a chance at that business, they'd shape up and fly right from here on out. They'd already admitted that it was their fault we hadn't gotten the statement we needed, and they needed to make it right and fax a statement over at no charge. The manager explained that she couldn't believe we'd take our business somewhere else over something like this. We were dumbstruck. Our *first* customer service contact with these people, which they've flubbed not once but *three* times now, and we were supposed to give them another chance? Chris finally talked her into "breaking the rules" and actually reading the payoff information over the phone. They're not supposed to do that because it could be anyone on the phone, whereas fax machines and the mail,

of course, are highly secure, identity-safe means of transmission. Freaking idiots flying high, is all we can say. When the time came to get the construction loan for the house, we needless to say did *not* select NationalCity Mortgage.

### **Drink Up**

Of course, no visit to Tennessee would be complete without a visit to the Jack Daniels distillery. We'd had such a good time at the Coors brewery that we figured a few shots of free whiskey couldn't hurt, and so we drove the hour or so it took to get to the distillery. It's located in a *very* small town which exists pretty much solely for the purpose of the distillery. Our tour guide was Dusty, an Nth-generations-descendent of ol' Jack D. himself. Dusty was a genuine Tennessee backwoods redneck: "Welcome, yawl, to the Jack Danyahls distillrahy." This took about four minutes to actually say. Then came an immediate disappointment.

It seems that when Prohibition was repealed, you didn't immediately get to drink again. Your town had to have at least a thousand warm bodies who were willing to vote in favor of alcohol. Many counties to this day are still "dry," by their own choice. The county containing the Jack Daniels distillery is dry also, but only because they don't have a thousand people living there. They've been unable to vote themselves "wet" again, and had to get special dispensation from the state government to operate the brewery. So the closest we would get to a free sample of Jack's finest is when Dusty invited us to crawl halfway into the giant mash boilers and inhale deeply. No kidding. We were thus completely sober when it came time to pack the RV and head out.





## Atlanta, GA

We wish we had some really amazing stories to share about Atlanta. We only stayed there a week, though, and Don was gone for most of it. In fact, when he came back it was on a red-eye flight from Seattle, and he got about four hours of sleep before Chris rolled him into the truck for the drive to Florida.

But we should probably start with our *arrival* in Atlanta. Have you ever just wanted to give people a sign that says "STOOPID," and force them to wear it around their necks? That's how we felt about the campground staff. We'd called ahead, of course, and made the usual *big* deal about having a campsite that offered a clear view of the Southern sky. We were assured that it would be no problem, and that they understood completely. By this point, we'd lost all faith in humans' ability to comprehend simply requests like this, so when we pulled into the campground's registration area, Don would immediately set out with a compass. Once Chris found out which site we'd been assigned, Don would check it out and see if the satellite was likely to get a clear enough shot at the sky. In this case, the campground had thought we wanted to *be in the Southern corner of the park*. Meaning they'd assigned us a space smack up against the enormous, eighty-foot pine trees that surrounded the entire thing. STOOPID. Fortunately, the campground was relatively empty, so we

could have our pick of another site, they said. *Unfortunately*, the entire park was, as we said, surrounded by giant trees. We were far enough South that the satellite dish would have a fairly high elevation, so we thought that if we could just find one less-dense area of trees, Don could possibly "shoot" the dish through a hole in the treetops. He picked a site that seemed remotely possible, and climbed up on top of the RV as Chris pulled into the space. He stood right over the satellite dish on the roof, so that he'd be able to "see" what the dish "saw," and had Chris jockey back and forth until it seemed possible that the dish would hit right through a small hole in the treetops—about seventy feet up and over a hundred yards away. And it worked. The signal strength wasn't the best we'd ever seen, but we were getting data traffic through the small gap in the trees. It was just as well—we were betting most of the campgrounds in the area had similar vegetation, and we couldn't leave the area. Don had a flight out of Atlanta's airport on Sunday, just two days out.

The next day, we decided to do the tourist thing and visit the World of Coke. Atlanta is home to the Coca-Cola corporation, and World of Coke is pretty much a museum of all things Coke. They have something like three floors of Coke memorabilia, including advertising materials, television and radio ads you can watch and listen to, and so forth. They also have a giant tasting area where you can sample Coke products from around the world. Other than mainstays like Coke itself, the company tailors their offerings to local tastes. Soft drinkers in the UK, for example, can enjoy a strong-tasting ginger ale, while thirsty citizens in China can refresh themselves with a flat-tasting orange concoction. You should be aware that many of the drinks are,

to America tastes, revolting. There was one number from Germany that tasted basically like liquid carrot cake, and if you're thinking that's appealing then we'll ask you to think again. Another drink from Italy, we think, was just *wrong*. It didn't taste like anything recognizable but it was *nasty*. By the way, if you never make it to Atlanta but do find yourself in Walt Disney World, Coke has a display in Epcot that offers many of the same nasty flavors. After we'd had our fill of gross and unusual Coke varieties, we grabbed a big cup of good ol' Classic Coke and headed out the door.

Getting back to the campground was, as Chris was to learn, a typical experience in Atlanta traffic: Horrendous. These people deal with the absolutely worst traffic we have ever seen, anywhere, and that includes busy metros like LA and Seattle. After Don left, Chris had to go grocery shopping, which required hopping on the interstate at the campground and driving about a mile and a half to the next exit. Due to the disjointed ways in which the various towns are built, there weren't any local roads that led to the grocery store. That short trip took Chris 45 minutes. Traffic in Atlanta seems to start at around 6:00 AM, and slack off at about 8:00 PM. In between, it's almost literally a parking lot: You feel as if you'd be better off parking your car and seeing what someone would offer you for it. Then you could walk up to the exit and buy a car that was sitting there.

Like we said, we knew this would be a short story. After our Saturday at the World of Coke, Don headed off to Seattle on business. He returned late at night on the following Friday, and a few hours later we headed out on the long drive to Orlando, where we'd be spending

the winter. We'd honestly meant to spend longer in Atlanta, and we had been eager to check out the nightlife and local gay scene. Things conspired against us, though, and with the dicey satellite reception we weren't sure we'd have been able to stay long anyway.

## **Orlando, FL Walt Disney World**

Ah, Walt Disney World. Known to fans—like Don—as WDW, these was the stop Don had been waiting a couple of years for. Chris was willing to tolerate it, but still feels that a couple of months would have been sufficient.

### **In the Parks**

Disney holds several special events during the winter, and we attended all of them. Some of them, like Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party and Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party, are an extra admission; others like the Epcot Food and Wine Festival are open to anyone with regular park admission. The Food and Wine Festival is a particular favorite of ours, since we enjoy both food and wine so much. For a few bucks you can sample food and wine from around the world, attend wine tastings and seminars, and more—most of which carry no additional fee. For the extra-admission events, the Halloween Party is our hands-down favorite. Forget Christmas, what the Mouse really enjoys is Halloween. The Magic Kingdom is all decorated in orange and purple lights, with creepy fog and music played everywhere. Cast members at the Haunted Mansion go over the top and put on makeup and special costumes at what is undeniably the evening's most popular attraction. All the Disney characters are available for photo ops, dressed out in Halloween

costumes and fall attire. Lines are almost nonexistent since admission is limited to several thousand guests or so, and there's a special parade and fireworks show. In fact, after settling down and selling the RV we purchased a Disney timeshare so that we could come back every other year for the Halloween party and the Food and Wine Festival.

We went to the H'ween party in costume. Don dressed as a sort of Huck Finn-esque character, while Chris went as Sorcerer Mickey, complete with black nose, Mickey ears and sorcerer's hat, and red robe. All the characters and cast members got a big kick out of us, as we were one of the few adults dressed up (most of the kids were, too). But heck, if you can't be a kid on H'ween in the Magic Kingdom, where can you be? We met two great girls from out of town while in line for photos with the Pooh characters; we took their pictures and they took ours, and we hung out with each other for the rest of the evening doing the camera swap. They were being just as big of kids as we were, and having a great time collecting photos with the characters.

We learned a lot in the parks. For example, cute guys wandering around with an older straight couple are almost always gay men with their parents; it's like supplementary gaydar at WDW. Cast members at Epcot's Canada pavilion are either really good-looking guys, or they are women; whoever's doing the hiring for that pavilion appreciates the effect a good-looking salesperson can have on merchandise sales. We also learned that you can create a line anywhere in any Disney park at any time just by getting four or more people to stand in line in front of something. People will assume it's an attraction, bathroom, or

*something*, and almost instantly form up right behind you. Eventually, you can just turn to the folks right behind you and say, "you know, we were just resting." Walk away and snap a picture of the line to nowhere. It's fun.

### **Happy Anniversary**

We celebrated our seventh anniversary in October of 2002, and Don wanted to do something special. Unfortunately, he didn't really plan very far in advance. Don had just flown back from a busy series of trips, and Chris was flying home that month for his niece's birth. So while he was gone, Don contacted our American Express concierge for some emergency help. They recommended a local company, Memories of a Lifetime, who they said could put together a Disney-esque special event for us. And boy, did they. The company doesn't work for or with Disney, they just plan and execute special events inside the Disney parks.

When Chris got home, Don told him that a special anniversary gift was waiting for him. Don had been working with a particular cast member to get it, so we had to go to the shop—inside the Disney-MGM Studios park—to pick up the present. Chris seemed relatively excited. When we got to the park, we wandered back to a small statuary display, where busts of famous celebrities are mounted on pillars. Near the base of one pillar was a laminated note addressed to Chris from Tigger, Chris' favorite character. The note said that Chris' present had been left sitting here, and so Tigger had bounced it away for safekeeping. Chris would need to follow clues scattered throughout the park to find his present. Big smiles on both our faces—Don hadn't

know exactly what to expect, but this was turning out better than the folks at Memories of a Lifetime had promised.

The trail of clues led us through all of the park's "bouncy" rides, including Star Tours. Chris was directed to find hidden bottles of "Spring" water, a small box of "Bounce" fabric softener, and so on. Throughout the hunt, the event company was keeping one step ahead of us, planting clues and watching over them to make sure *we* picked them up. The final clue directed us to the bounciest ride of all, the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror. During the pre-show, storm effects darken the lights in the loading area; when the lights came back up Chris was wearing one of those headbands with spring-like antennas, topped with Mickey Mouse shapes. It had been slipped on his head when the lights went out, and tied to them was a locker key from the park's pay lockers. After the ride, we hustled to the front of the park and located the correct locker, where Chris discovered a box full of Tigger merchandise: A pair of boxers, candy, a small clock, a coffee mug, and some pins. We were both delighted—Chris of course, had no idea what to expect, and Don had just given the events company shopping ideas and a budget. Then around the corner came our event coordinators, who were pleased to see the big grins on our faces. After telling them that we were staying the winter in the area, they invited us to help them at a couple of future events, which we took them up on. It was a great time.

### **Stupid Straight Tricks**

We decided to go to Disney's Blizzard Beach Water Park one morning. The weather was looking dicey, but it usually goes away by



midafternoon. Just as the park's gates opened, the rain struck. Everyone immediately ran into the nearest shops and started huddling way from the rain. Chris and I were confused: Didn't everyone *come* here specifically to *get wet*? Who cared what direction the wet came from? So we pulled off our shirts, put them into a rented locked, and headed for the water slides. It wasn't a thunderstorm, so the park kept all the rides open. We had a great time, and no lines at all, until the rain slacked up and the straight families came out of the shops.

While we're on the subject of stupid straight families: Folks, when a parking lot attendant waves you into a particular spot, just take it. There aren't any better spots and the tram will take you right to the entrance either way. And don't look funny at us because we parked across two spaces; they *told* us to do that so that *your* sorry ass could get out of your minivan; had we parked our giant truck right up next to you, you and the kids would still be sitting in there, unable to open their doors. And when the guards at the park say they need to look inside *all* bags, that means your purses too, ladies. Those handbags are big enough to hide a nuke inside and the guards just want to see what you're packing in there, is all. You'll get us all through the line quicker if you just zip it open and show 'em what you've got.

Now, the next complaint deserves a preface. We do not have a general problem with fat people. We were getting pretty chunky ourselves at one point, and we understand that some people have medical conditions which make it difficult for them to lose weight. We also know that some people *cannot* put the fork down, and trust us:

Drinking a Diet Coke will *not* change matters if you're still coming away from the buffet line with a plate so heavy you need a forklift. But what *really* chafes our asses is when fat people get a sense of entitlement. We're talking about people who rent an ECV—an electric scooter—so that they can use the handicapped-access line for attractions, and so that they don't have to haul their lard asses around the park, and *then* happily climb off the scooter when it's time to hit the buffet line. That's not a handicap, folks, and it's unfair to the people who really do have disabilities and need a little extra help. Don saw one woman who wedged her scooter into a corner in a tiny little shop, couldn't get it out, and then got off the scooter, *walked* over to a clerk, and demanded that someone either free who scooter up or bring her a new one. She was loud, obnoxious, and clearly thought she deserved some special treatment just because she'd never met a bon-bon she didn't like. She then did the rest of her shopping on foot, making it clear that she didn't have a major disability—she just didn't want to risk any exercise that might jeopardize her role as "Jabba the Hut" in the next Star Wars movie. We're not saying that every heavy person on an ECV doesn't need it, and we're not saying that all fat people are obnoxious. But we saw a *lot* of obnoxious ones in the parks who made it *abundantly* clear that what they needed was a slap in the face and a good dietician.

### **Just Outside the Parks**

Disney's nightlife spot is Pleasure Island, and one of the coolest clubs on PI is Mannequins Dance Palace. Thursday nights are "cast member" nights at Mannequins, meaning it's the unofficial night when Disney's employees show up to party. This is exciting mainly because it's

Disney's *gay* employees who show up, and when they're there in that kind of force, they don't care who's offended by it. It's great fun to stand up on the upper level, overlooking the dance floor, and watch straight couples wander in. Some of them even make it onto the dance floor before they realize they're surrounded by men in tight shirts who are dancing with one another and, in many cases, necking. We love the couples who smile knowingly and keep dancing; we have no respect for the people who beat a hasty retreat.

### **Pin Trading**

One of the more clever Disney merchandising tricks in recent years has been Pin Trading. Disney simply makes a zillion different cloisonné pins, and sells them for anywhere from \$6 to \$18. Many of these pins are limited editions, and available only for a short time. Others are available only to special categories of guests, such as annual passholders or Disney Vacation Club members; others are available only during special events. Guests wear pins on nylon lanyards around their necks, and carry them in special pin trading books. They gather almost every night of the week at various Disney hotels, all with the intent of trading pins. Disney rules say that no money can exchange hands, and everyone pretty much observes this and other guidelines. People select a particular line of pins to collect—based on a character, an attraction, or something else—and then trade the pins they've got for the ones they want. Don got into the pin trading thing in a moderate way, but *nothing* like the hardcore locals who clearly need a twelve-step program.

Take Larry, whom we met in the Passholder's Lounge inside The Land exhibit at Epcot. Larry was organizing his latest acquisitions, some 200 pins he'd purchased in the past week. Larry's goal was to have them *all*, and he accomplished this by buying as many of anything as Disney would allow (many pins were limited to two per person) and then trading for pins that he couldn't get personally, such as those sold only in other Disney parks or on the Disney Cruise Line. Disney positively encourages this sort of thinking, and feeds the fire with special, extra-cost "pin events" where they release special limited edition pins and other merchandise.

### **Ready to Go?**

Chris answer after six months was "absolutely." Don was sadder to leave. For six months, Disney had been our personal playground; we'd met cast members in the parks, bartenders at Pleasure Island, and really experienced more of Disney than most guests possibly can. But it was starting to become routine, and so to preserve the magic Don agreed that it was time to go. Besides, we had a conference to catch in New Orleans.

## **Orlando, FL**

We regard many of our Orlando-area experiences as distinct from Walt Disney World (WDW), which is why we've put them into their own chapter. WDW is very much its own thing, with its own special experiences and observations; Orlando proper—or more precisely Kissimmee, which is where we stayed—is much more similar to the rest of the stops we'd made on our tour.

### **The Oldsters**

There didn't seem to be an overall theme to our experiences in Orlando; instead, it seems like a series of interesting yet completely unconnected incidents. For example: We arrived fairly early in the season, before the campground really got full. As such, we were able to pay a discounted five-month rate that included our electric fees. Most campgrounds use meters and charge you for the electricity you use, often marking up the electric company's rate by a cent or two per kilowatt-hour. With all the electric we used—computers, air conditioners in the summer, electric heaters in the winter, televisions, and more—we knew we'd be making out like bandits on the flat rate. When Chris mentioned this to one of the oldsters at the park, they flat-out called him stupid, saying it was far cheaper to go metered. That same oldster was in the office not a week later complaining about the high electric bill on his account. Chris had the grace to smile politely at

him and say, "too bad you didn't go for the flat rate deal." Okay, maybe "grace" isn't the right word for it.

If there was a theme to our experiences in the campground, it was Vagaries of the Elderly. Every week, our campground played host to some sort of intra-Kissimmee bingo tournament. The oldsters would begin showing up at 4:00 PM to stake out a spot near the bingo hall door. By the time the game started at 6:00 or 7:00, there would be dozens of cars and old people lined up to get in and gamble for a chance to win a hundred bucks or so. We found it especially amusing when a pair of backwoods oldsters rushed from their RV to the bingo hall, shouting "we's gonna be late for *bango!*" It's these quality of life moments that really make it all worthwhile. And God help you if you got between an oldster and their bingo (or bango): One poor soul had the misfortune of parking in front of bingo hall and preventing the usual line from forming. We were certain that the oldsters were going to rock the car onto its side, riot-style, before the hapless owner finally showed up and moved the car amid catcalls and booing.

The oldsters in Florida, like those elsewhere, were orneriest when it came to laundry. On several occasions, Chris caught little old women pulling our clothes out of a washing machine or dryer when the *machine was still running and still had time on it*. Chris would, without exception, go off like a nuke and demand that the offending oldster pay him the time he'd lost on the machine. Then he'd stick the clothes back in for another twenty minutes or so, just to prove the point, and stand there to guard them, glowering at the oldsters the whole time.

The laundry room was also, for some reason, the favorite place for the grandkids—who'd come with their parents to visit gramma and grampa in Disney World—who were fresh out of the pool and dripping wet. With people trying to fold their nice, clean laundry, the kids would traipse all over the place. Chris one time chased a bunch of them out, found their parents, and threatened dire consequences if they didn't start paying more attention to their stupid offspring's antics. Another woman decided to use the laundry room folding tables as a diaper-changing station. Chris caught her at it, hauled her into the office, and made her buy a bottle of bleach to clean the tables where people folded their clean clothes. It's the same self-centered, "I can breed and I must therefore be the only thing that matters" attitude we'd witnessed throughout our stay. Nobody has *any* respect for anybody else's time, property, privacy, or comfort, and parents don't seem to have any concern for how their precious little genetic accidents affect everyone else's life. If its true that children are raised by "the village," then some of us villagers need to be allowed to take a whack at said kids when they get too uppity.

### **Mother Nature**

Mom Nature could be a real bitch when we were in Florida. Chris used to enjoy swimming in the campground's nicely-heated swimming pool, for example, until one day he realized that he had company. As the weather grew colder and colder, the local snakes homed in on the nice, warm pool as a haven against the months to come. Seeing a few slithering lizard-things in the pool was enough to shut down Chris' swimming instincts for the season. From then on, we stuck to Disney's

water parks, which also featured heated water and lacked the snake factor.

Weather only hit Chris when Don was away, and one particular Florida rainstorm was no exception. At the time, we had an outdoor canopy with screened-in sides, which made a pleasant place to sit in the evenings. This particular rainstorm brought down *buckets*, and Chris could see out the window that the entire canopy had filled with water and was about to collapse. Rather than risking permanent damage to the frame, Chris went outside in a raincoat to try and push the water off, and then take the canopy down. The water was coming down so hard that it plashed back up several feet, soaking Chris despite the raincoat. However, he had some initial success pushing the canopy up—until he remembered the alligators. We knew there were some not too far away, and with shin-deep water, they were probably freer to move than usual. Chris dashed back into the RV, abandoning the canopy to the ravages of the wind and rain.

### **Stupid, Stupid, Stupid**

Stupid people have been an ongoing source of amusement on our journey, and Orlando was no exception. One favorite entertainment was on I-4. Several helicopter touring companies had helipads right next to I-4, and would take off and land during traffic. Even the locals would invariably slam on their brakes and *stop* while the helicopters maneuvered, apparently afraid that, despite a lack of any past incidents, that *this time* the helicopters were going to crash into the Interstate. Chris, whose patience on the road is exceeded only by his patience in the laundry room, would invariably lose his mind and start



screaming at everyone on the road. The fact that he was driving a one-ton pickup truck didn't help matters, as now the idiots on the road had to content with whirling helo blades in front of them and an angry diesel tank behind.

Highway accidents are pretty commonplace all over the country, but one special type of accident that's almost unique to Florida seems to be the modular home tipover. We must have seen two dozen semitrucks, hauling halves of modular homes, tipped over on the side of the road. And usually they'd tipped on a completely flat, straight section of road, not an exit ramp or something like you might expect. We think the drivers just got tired and ran off the road a little bit, and the weight of the home just took care of the rest. So if you're looking at modulars that have to come through Florida, make sure you buy insurance.

When we first got to Florida, we needed to take the truck in for service. Nothing major, just a routine change of the axle fluid now that we'd towed through the truck's break-in period. Chris called GMC and was informed that the closest authorized dealer was over half an hour away. After making the trip—through wild helicopters and tilting modular homes—Chris found that the dealer *couldn't* work on our truck. They didn't have a lift that could handle it. Some more research led Chris to a dealer that was only five minutes or so away from the campground; after informing Chris that they also lacked a lift, a passing mechanic said, "no problem." It seems GM had designed the truck to not *need* a lift for routine service like this; the guy crawled under the truck and had the fluid changed in a few minutes. Now, why

didn't the first "authorized" dealer know this, and why didn't GMC themselves know that *any* dealer could handle this, provided his mechanics had knees to crawl on? Stupid, stupid, stupid, that's why.

Our last stupid story is our campsite. Due to extreme mismanagement on the part of one exceptionally stupid woman (who was later found to have screwed up the campground's finances and not paid utility bills for months at a stretch), the RV behind us had to move to the space *next* to us. However, because of the way we'd parked, they wouldn't be able to put their awning down. So we had to rip up our roots, reposition our RV one foot to the right, and then reconnect everything. Now, we'd originally parked the way we did because it kept the left side of the RV—where all the utility connections are—close to the utility hookups. Now that we'd moved, we had to get longer hoses, because our site's utility connections were placed too far to the left. We also had to deal with the tree issue, and it took us almost an hour to get the RV positioned so that the satellite dish could once again get a clear shot through the trees. Just irritating, and all because one stupid woman wasn't paying attention when she was making site reservations.

### **Highlights & Lowlights**

We had some great times in Orlando, too. For example, we met Bob and Janet, an English couple of spent much of their time full-timing in the US. We've kept in touch with them, and they wound up buying our Internet satellite dish from us for their motorhome when we sold our RV. We had fun shopping for Halloween costumes, mainly because a group of hot guys was shopping for togas at the same time.

Unfortunately, Orlando was also where our second-youngest ferret got sick. He was diagnosed with adrenal gland disease, which is a fairly common, and very serious, disease in ferrets. We were lucky to find a vet, Melissa Mueller, who helped out. Tigger had been exhibiting classic symptoms—behavior change, overt sexual behavior in a neutered animal, and so on—that we simply hadn't know to look for; we finally took him to the vet because we was having trouble urinating because, it turns out, the tumor on his adrenal gland was blocking his internal plumbing. Melissa diagnosed the problem and scheduled immediate surgery on our little buddy, which was successful. We became fast friends with Melissa. She now lives in Vero Beach, Florida, and still keeps in touch with us. She's even come to Vegas on visits. By the way, a bit later Tigger was diagnosed with adrenal gland disease in his other remaining gland, which is often considered inoperable. By that time, we'd learned of Lupron, a human cancer-fighting drug which, in smaller doses, can control adrenal in ferrets. Tigger—and one of our older ferrets, Ziggy—require bimonthly shots of Lupron for the rest of their lives, but they're otherwise able to live normally and *without* surgery.

## **Diet**

Orlando is also where we decided we were getting too fat. We weren't obese, yet, but we were definitely on the path. Neither of us was excited about the idea of joining a gym, and living in an RV didn't really make it practical. We'd tried to get in evening walks, but we were wildly inconsistent about it. So we decided on Slim-Fast. Now, we're not poster boys for Slim-Fast, and it isn't the healthiest way to

lose weight. What Slim-Fast is is a crutch: Instead of counting calories, you simply master one meal—dinner—and eat or drink Slim-fast at all other times. Without exercise, you'll lose both fat and lean weight, but you *will* lose weight. We started the plan in January, and within six months we'd dropped close to twenty pounds apiece. Not all of the weight we lost was fat, but it showed us that we *could* conquer the weight thing without resorting to drastic measures. It encouraged us to learn how to eat a little better, and to finally join a gym when we settled down.

### **Ready to Go**

We'd spent some time debating our next stop. We had originally considered Miami, but couldn't find any campground that really met our needs. We'd considered Key West, too, but the campgrounds were even less suitable, mainly due to their smaller size. At this point our land in Las Vegas was paid for, and we decided that maybe it was time to head home. So our next trip would take us to New Orleans, where Don had a conference to speak at, and then we'd head West. And home.

## New Orleans, LA

Ah, Naw'lins, the Big Easy. We were actually spending two months in Slidell, which was about 40-45 minutes away from New Orleans proper. New Orleans doesn't have much in the way of large campgrounds, so we pretty much had to live with the long drive. Slidell actually had *one* gay bar. It's a small neighborhood place, with a Thursday night steaks-on-the-grill get-together, a very friendly couple of owners (a straight married couple, in fact), and a pleasant clientele.

First, a brief word of warning: Don hates New Orleans, and has mentioned this before. Chris loves it. Don believes that the sooner the whole soggy place finally slides off into the Gulf, the better; Chris thinks they should plan to go back for a week every couple of years. We're divided on the subject, but the facts are facts: It *is* a soggy place. In fact, the RV sites at the campground were all gravel, and when you stepped out you could actually feel the gravel sinking beneath you a bit. The only reason the entire RV didn't sink into the Earth is that the gravel sat on top of a concrete slab, which limited the amount of shifting the gravel could do. The place was also absolutely chock-full of bugs. And not ants—Don had long ago learned how to deal with that particular menace. These were swarming little black no-see-ums. Don's only choice was to step out of the RV, can of Raid in hand, and begin spraying. Within a minute, there'd be *millions* of tiny black

corpses everywhere, and within another minute they'd be replaced by mourning relatives, buzzing all around. We took to grilling with smoker chips just to produce a sort of smoky shield against the flying, biting little bastards.

One thing Chris had been looking forward to in New Orleans was a good old-fashioned fish market. After all, seafood is a major feature of New Orleans, and it was at one time a major port city. He'd planned many happy nights of fresh fish dinners using our grill, baking in the oven, and so on. Our mouths were watering a hundred miles out from the campground. Sadly, it wasn't to be. After checking out three local "fish markets," we realized that their offerings consisted entirely of shrimp, crawdads, and—on a good day—catfish. We could get bass, trout, and many other varieties, but they were all frozen and trucked in weekly from elsewhere. The entire New Orleans seafood fantasy turned out to be a big lie.

### **They Sold Louisiana?**

While we were in New Orleans, Louisiana was celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. A small museum had been set up with appropriate displays and whatnot. One of Chris' friends and former co-workers from Pennsylvania, Laura, came to town to visit. She took it in her head to stop into the museum and ask how much the Purchase had actually been for. *Nobody knew*. It became a kind of quest for her: Most people seemed aware that Louisiana had, in fact, been purchased, but many were of the opinion that it had occurred just recently, within the last few years. Most also thought that the United States had gotten a Manhattan-style deal on the place, paying

just a few bucks and some beads to the locals. Chris and I were of the opinion that, since the area was occupied by the French at the time, the US had probably just threatened them and they'd surrendered immediately. The point is that *not a single local* had the slightest notion of how much the Purchase had been, despite all the state-sponsored hoopla surrounding the anniversary. It took some Internet research on Don's part to turn up the correct figure of around fifteen million. The US had to pony up \$11,250,000 in cash, and paid the rest by writing off debts owed by the French government. Nowadays, of course, we'd just write off the debt without any kind of collateral.

### **The French Quarter**

Bourbon street is, of course, a disgusting, filthy, smelly, stripper-invested tank of alcohol-swilling party people. Which is why Don hates it and *exactly* why Chris loves it. But we did find one Bourbon Street activity that we could agree on: Heading into Oz or Parade, the last two bars on the busy section of Bourbon, and standing on their upstairs balconies and people-watching. Both bars are gay bars, and both generally feature mostly-naked male dancers on their bars. The entertainment factor enters when drunken straight people come staggering down Bourbon, wandering in and out of every bar along the way. Since Oz and Parade are clearly the last two bars before you turn around and head back, they dutifully stagger in. And stagger right the hell back out again, in most cases, looking distinctly more sober and trying to conceal embarrassed grins. It's great fun. We were in town for several weekends when conventions and other big groups were visiting, and therefore got to spend a number of pleasant evenings teasing the straight people hurrying out of the bars. "Go back

inside, nobody will hurt you!" It was actually a big community event; at any given time there'd be a dozen or more guys on balconies, on either side of Bourbon, hollering down at the retreating straights. Good times.

Catholicism is alive and well in the Big Easy. In fact, a large, historic church sits on one side of Jackson Square, one of the city's most famous parks. On the other three sides of the square are the voodoo practitioners, psychics, Tarot card readers, palmists, hell-and-brimstone soapbox preachers, and more. It's basically Religion Mart, where you can wander by the displays of various religions and beliefs, and choose whichever ones seem to suit you best. If you don't see anything you like, wander closer to the park's surrounding wrought-iron fence and check out the many starving artists and their paintings, sculptures, and so on. If you can't find a religion to comfort your soul, perhaps you can at least find a comforting painting or two to take home.

### **Chris' Bender**

Laura's final contribution to Chris was to take him on a bender. We met Laura in town on Saturday, and spent most of the day and the evening wandering around with her. We crashed in her hotel room that night, and Chris dropped Don off at the airport on Sunday morning. Don was flying out to Seattle or some other place on business; Laura wasn't due to leave town until Monday morning. When Chris met Laura back at her hotel, they decided to head down to the Garden District for a relaxing day of exploration. Laura did some window shopping, and they decided they were hungry. Being Sunday,



brunch was an option, and so they found a little restaurant and headed in. Obviously, it was a champagne brunch, and so they started drinking. Remember, Laura had to leave on Monday morning, so they had to stop drinking by then. But not until.

After brunch and a short trolley ride back to the downtown area, they decided to wander through the French Quarter. Obviously, a hurricane was in order since the champagne was starting to wear off, so they got one and wandered around. Near the bottom of the hurricanes, they found a little backstreet bar with a live jazz band, so they wandered inside to listen—and drink. This took them to dinnertime, and they decided to head back to Bourbon street for a bite to eat—and a drink. In the restaurant, they ran into a small group of gay men who were visiting from out of town, and decided to hang out with them for the evening. They headed over to Oz, where the guys had adopted a corner of the upstairs balcony for tourist-heckling. Laura became proficient at getting guys on the street to "show their stuff," as is the custom on Bourbon street, and a good time—and more drinks—was had by all. They also spotted a male hustler leaning against a light post, waiting to pick up his next trick. Laura teased the guy mercilessly, at the top of her lungs, and finally shamed him into moving on.

Eventually, they headed downstairs to catch the strippers. Chris actually sat at the bar, and learned that most of the strippers were from Texas, and that for some reason they were all mortgage brokers. Knowing that a construction loan was coming up in the future, Chris spent several minutes talking to a couple of the guys about mortgages.

He got teased, in fact, for "hogging" the strippers, and Laura joked that only he would be caught in a New Orleans gay bar, with a naked man crouching on the bar in front of him, calmly discussing *mortgage rates*. It was getting late, now, so they decided to hit some other bars across town. The one they selected turned out to be something of a drug den, and the entire group backed right out the way they'd come. Deciding that maybe Bourbon street wasn't so bad after all, they headed back. This time, they found a stripper who could easily have passed for Vin Diesel's twin, and Laura persuaded him to pose with her for a photo. Sadly, the photo later turned out blurry, depriving Laura of her proof of the half-naked Vin clone. At this point, it was getting *early*, and so Chris drove Laura to the airport and dropped her off. Then he headed home to Slidell.

We did have a good time in New Orleans, but we were definitely there for too long. After Don's conference near the end of our stay, we were both ready to get the heck out of Dodge. After all, our next stop was Las Vegas, our new home.

## **Seriously—Go West, Young Men**

Finally, we'd decided to settle in Las Vegas, and the time had come to head home. Starting from New Orleans, we'd planned a short trip West on Interstate 40, which would take us most of the way to our new home. Our trips had thus far been relatively uneventful, and we expected this last ride in the RV to go smoothly.

### **The Yellow Rose RV Resort**

Our first stop was in a little, no-account town in Texas, at the grandly-named Yellow Rose RV Resort. When we're just staying one night, we're not exceptionally picky: We want an easy pull-through site, clean bathrooms, and a nearby place to eat. One out of three ain't bad.

The Yellow Rose was run by a charming old woman who'd bought the campground with her now-departed husband. She clearly was having a hard time keeping the place up, and confided that she was looking to sell it soon. The place had actually been a KOA once, and had the characteristic A-frame office-and-house that mark all KOAs built in the seventies and eighties. This one was painted bright, peeling yellow, and from the condition of the campground, we figured KOA probably asked them to take down the KOA signage at some point. The bathrooms weren't dirty, but they were incredibly *worn*, the sort of wear that isn't dirt, can't be cleaned, and is instantly detectable.

We did feel that using the term "Resort" in the campground's name was outright deception. The place was anything but a resort. The pool was half caved-in, the sites were poorly maintained, and there were simply no amenities to speak of other than running water, and even *that* was suspect. Most of the residents were just that: *Residents*. Their RVs were, in most cases, multiple RVs cleverly taped and welded together to form a larger home. The one nearest to us held the closest thing the park had to an amenity: We'll call him "Dave."

Dave was fortysomething, *very* well-built, and very good-looking. He was tan, clean-shaven, had neatly trimmed chest hair, and wore nothing but a pair of very tight, mid thigh-length shorts. Apparently without underwear. Actually, we discovered that he wears less in the mornings when he's making coffee in front of his RV's open window. Ahem.

The owner of the park, as befitting an eccentric elderly lady, had a pet goose. Seems she'd rescued the goose from the highway or something—it still had a limp—and now it followed her around, went where she told it to go, and honked at anybody who got too close to her. Yes, that's right: A guard goose. Only in Texas, and only at the Yellow Rose RV Resort.

We had an uneventful evening, followed by a relatively short five-hour day of driving. We stopped the next evening in northern Texas at a clean, large, easy-to-navigate campground. We enjoyed a pleasant

home-style dinner at a local diner. It was a relaxing way to wrap up an uneventful day. Our last.

### **The Truck**

We pulled out before first light, heading through northern Texas and closer to home. Chris was driving the truck, we were about 20 miles East of Amarillo, and were approaching a Flying J truck stop. We'd planned to stop briefly for fuel and a bathroom break, and then continue driving; while Amarillo was supposed to have some nice campgrounds, it wasn't on our schedule. While changing back into the slow lane after passing a semi, Chris noticed blue smoke coming up from the rear wheels.

*Crap.* This had happened on the Chevy when we'd first bought it. Apparently the factory forgot one of the axle seals, and axle fluid had drenched the brakes and axel, steaming up in clouds of blue smoke. We hadn't even bought the RV at the time; Don had been driving out to the credit union to pick up the title on his Jeep; now that it was paid off, he was finally selling it on eBay. He limped into the credit union's parking lot and called a tow truck. Everything was fixed pretty quickly, and the dealership was obviously apologetic, but that truck's brakes had always squealed after that, no matter how many times we had them looked at.

*What could be wrong?* In those first few seconds, we figured it could have been anything: A blown axle seal—we *were* towing over seven tons of deadweight—brake fluid, or engine oil were the most likely causes. Chris gently applied the brakes, praying it wasn't brake fluid

burning off back there, and got the rig over to the shoulder. Don got out and surveyed the damage: It was obviously motor oil. It seemed like *most* of the oil, in fact, that the truck contained: It was dripping from the bottom of the truck, and had sprayed up from the rear wheels to coat the front and entire right side of the RV, clear to the back. The truck's oil gauge still showed good pressure, so we either weren't in immediate danger of locking up the engine, or the gauge was bad. We decided to chance it, and Don slowly towed the RV to the truck stop, which was fortunately just a mile up the road.

Pulled into a semi parking space, we surveyed the damage, and it seemed bad. The truck and RV were *covered* in a thin film of oil. The truck still ran fine, but it had obviously lost a lot of oil, judging from the mess. Taking no chances, we started calling in our aces: We had roadside assist programs from GM for the truck, Good Sam for the truck and RV, and a couple of other folks we could have called. That far out from a city, of course, or cell phones were nigh-useless, so we camped out in front of a payphone in the truck stop's service center until help could arrive. The service center, as luck would have it, was completely unequipped to deal with a diesel passenger truck.

We also started preparing for a long stay, if necessary, checking our propane levels—the propane-powered generator in the RV could run the air conditioners and microwave, if necessary—our fresh water levels, and so forth. At that point, we weren't sure if there was a campground within range or not, so a night at the truck stop might have been necessary. Don made sure the shotgun was loaded, and we moved the ferrets' travel cage from the truck into the RV.

When a tow truck arrived for our truck, Don rode with it to the nearest GM dealer, where they proclaimed surprise that one of GMC's much-vaunted new Duramax trucks had failed. The evidence was pretty obvious, though, so they put it up on a rack and started looking at it. Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell where a leak was coming from, since the *entire* underside of the truck was coated in a thick layer of oil. It was dripping from *everywhere*. Worse, the engine oil gauge checked out and wasn't indicating a problem, meaning there might not have *been* a leak, or at least there wasn't now. The dealership added oil and waited for it to come spurting out—and it didn't. The dipstick had shown a low oil level, but everything looked fine now, other than the engine oil pooling under the truck.

In the meantime, Chris was working with Good Sam to get the RV taken somewhere nicer than the truck stop. It was obvious that the oil leak wasn't an overnight fix, and we wanted to stay in a campground. There was a great KOA not ten miles up the road that could accommodate us, and could even promise clear sky for our satellite dish. Chris was trying to get a tow truck to come pull the RV, which, other than its new coat of "paint," was undamaged. Don got back to the truck stop about the same time that the RV tow truck did. The GM dealer felt that the truck had blown a seal that had then reseated itself, and that the truck would be fine for a slow, careful trip to get the RV to a campground. They'd provided a case of fresh oil to top-off, if needed, and instructed us to watch the oil gauge like a hawk. The RV tow truck was a *monster*, designed to haul semis at highway speeds. The man had an attachment for fifth wheel RVs, but he'd never used it

before. After several minutes of experimentation, it was clear he wouldn't be using it now, either, because the attachment wouldn't fit over the RV's tow pin. We sent him away, hitched up the truck, and meandered carefully to the campground.

After unhitching, we took the truck back to the GM dealer, where we argued briefly before being awarded a rental car for "just one night." By the end of the day, the dealer had "probably," in their words, narrowed the problem down to the main oil seal between the engine and the transfer case. That meant dropping the entire transmission and transfer case, which is no easy task. It also meant waiting for a new seal to arrive; because Duramax trucks had only been out for two model years, and because they were relatively reliable, nobody was stocking such expensive parts. Fortunately, the entire incident *would* be covered under the truck's warranty, since towing heavy RVs like ours was exactly what the truck was sold for.

So what could we do? We took in a few sights in Amarillo, forcing ourselves to try and relax. We'd get out of there, eventually. We saw a movie, ate dinner, and marveled at the ever-present smell of beef. No matter where you were, you could smell cow, either on the hoof in transport trucks or on the grill covered in barbeque sauce. Every restaurant offered a free 64-ounce steak if you could finish it in an hour, and doubtless offered complimentary ambulance service if you couldn't. We also went to Wal-Mart and bought two bottles of Formula 409 and a six-pack of paper towels. We used them to wipe off as much of the oil as possible from the front and side of the RV.



On the second afternoon, the new seal arrived for the truck. We were given the good news, along with the bad: Because the job was so complex, we wouldn't be able to pick up the truck until the following morning. Another dinner out—we were too stressed to try and cook anything—and a restless night's sleep. We were already planning for the worst: The seal didn't fix the problem. We'd decided there was only so much time we were willing to invest in the truck, and started looking for services that could tow the RV to Vegas for us.

Early the next morning, we headed to the dealer. They'd just finished running the truck for half an hour, and everything looked good: They advised us to go get some breakfast while they ensured the oil drips had stopped, and then we'd see what was what. After grabbing some coffee at a nearby Waffle House, we drove around the neighborhood a bit to kill time. We pulled into a Jeep dealership, so that Don could see if any of the new Rubicon models were on display. They were, and he and a salesperson had a great time talking about how wonderful they were. As we left, we decided that if the truck *was* still dripping, we'd get it detailed, come back, and trade it for the Jeep. That would get us and the ferrets to Las Vegas, and we'd hire someone to tow the RV there for us. We figured that since the truck was under warranty the Jeep dealer wouldn't look to sharply at it, especially if it didn't have any major incriminating oil slicks underneath it.

Fortunately, when we went back to the GM dealer, the truck seemed to be fine. We took the rental car back, and were pleasantly surprised that, either through kindness or simple mistake, the rental car was covered completely by the dealership and GMC. We took the truck

home, where we hitched up and pulled out. Ironically, we'd been driving around the country for nearly two and a half years, with absolutely no mechanical incidents. Here, on our final trip, our still-new heavy-duty truck gave out on us. We chalked it up to bad luck, figuring that every RV couple had to have something bad happen on the road, and that fate was just getting her licks in before we stopped traveling altogether.

Just in case, we made arrangements with Don's mother: We'd call every time we stopped for fuel to let her know we were OK. We'd let her know our route and our approximate arrival time at the next fuel stop. If we got into trouble, we'd put up the satellite dish under generator power, log into our e-mail, and send a "help" text message to her cell phone, along with our location. We gave her our roadside assist numbers, so that she could call on our behalf, since most of the West's interstates are outside cellular coverage. If she didn't hear from us at all by the designated time, she was to call roadside assist and the appropriate police and give them the details of that segment of the trip, so that they could try and find us. We were prepared for the worst, and not completely convinced that the truck was OK.

### **The RV**

The truck experience had pretty much put us in a heads-down, home-at-all-costs mood. Heading for New Mexico, we knew we only had a couple of days left before we could settle down and put all this angst behind us. We spent the entire day looking over our shoulders every ten minutes, checking for the dreaded blue smoke. We let the truck lose speed going up hills, rather than revving the engine and putting

any unnecessary stress on the new oil seal. Around mid-afternoon, finally relaxing a bit, we heard an awful scraping, thumping noise coming from the rig: We'd blown a tire. Holy hell, this wasn't our trip.

Chris again eased the rig over to the side of the road. We *hadn't* blown a tire, it turned out. We could have dealt with that fairly readily, in fact: We had a jack designed for the RV and a full-sized spare mounted underneath. It would have sucked, but we could have called roadside assist and changed it, or text messaged Don's Mom with the satellite dish and Don's laptop. She could have dispatched help. But it *wasn't* the tire.

Our RV was "winterized," meaning the manufacturer had taken some basic steps to make it livable in the winter. The water storage tanks, both fresh and waste, had small electric heater pads attached to keep them from freezing. The tanks were further protected by a layer of fiberglass insulation, which was held in by three sheets of black ABS plastic. These sheets were screwed to each other, and then tucked up in the RV's frame rails. Poorly, in fact. We'd had problems with them since the beginning, as the wind rushing under the RV tended to suck the panels out of the frame, allowing them to sag dangerously close to the road. To correct the problem, we'd bought some metal straps at Home Depot, run them crossways under the RV, and bolted them to the frame. The straps held the plastic panels in, and helped support the weight of the insulation. These plastic panels, by the way, are another fine example of the absolutely substandard design of the Cedar Creek RVs, something we'd struggled with since our first trip from Pennsylvania.

Now, one of the plastic panels' screws had come out, allowing it to essentially drape itself over our metal straps and drag against the road. Predictably, the panel had practically disintegrated on contact with the asphalt, strewing plastic debris and chunks of insulation behind us. This was not an easy fix. Insulation and electrical wires were hanging out; we couldn't just rip the panel off because it was holding in the guts of our RV's underside. To make matters worse, the semis rushing by on the highway were causing our high-profile trailer to rock dangerously back and forth, making even assessing—never mind *fixing*—the damage dangerous and nerve-wracking.

Just out of high school, Don took on a job as an aircraft mechanic apprentice, a civilian position with the Department of Defense. One thing you learn, working on airplanes, is how to jury-rig. Hope that makes you feel better the next time you fly, by the way. Don just wanted to get the thing in a condition to drive to the next campground, maybe another fifty or sixty miles up the road. We felt that our existing metal straps were fine; we just needed a way to prop up the draping ends of this plastic panel. Tape alone—even the very strong duct tape Tina had given us back in Pennsylvania—wasn't sufficient; the wind would have ripped it off. We needed a solid brace a bit longer than a broom pole. Typical, right? We *had* broom poles, so we *would* need something longer. What we did have was an aluminum telescoping pole, originally purchased to help clean the sides of the RV. We unscrewed its foam-brush head and had a suitable brace, which we strap-tied and taped into place. We also taped the panel's edges, hoping the tape would hold and keep the wind from pulling at

the panel any more than it already had. We ran huge strips of tape from one side of the RV to the other, wrapping the tape around exposed plumbing, frame members, and whatever else was available. That way we were relying more on the tape's strength, and not its stickiness.

Another day of limping ensued. We stopped more frequently for fuel, so that we could check the handiwork holding the bottom of our RV together. We knew it wasn't going to hold for long, but we figured we could do something about it when we pulled into New Mexico that night. When we finally did, it was off to Wal-Mart again, this time for a couple more telescoping poles, more plastic strap-ties, and more duct tape. A blessedly simple dinner at Cracker Barrel was followed up by an uncomfortable evening lying under the RV, affixing the new jury rig. It got *cold* at night, especially lying on gravel, and it got *windy*. We hitched the truck back up to provide the RV with additional stability, and decided to leave the slide-outs pulled in for the night, the first time we'd ever slept in the rig that way. The RV rocked and swayed all night in the high winds, which gave us a restless night. In the morning, we called Don's mother and made arrangements for the day's phone relay, and headed out. We'd decided to make one long, last day of it, and drive straight for Vegas. We'd tape the entire RV together if we had to, but we were mentally *done*: We wanted to go home.

### **The Last Leg**

We were almost there. The last day was a nerve-wracking, eight-hour drive through the desert. We couldn't take the most direct route, which was across the Hoover Dam. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the

Dam has been largely closed to big vehicles like ours, and Chris wasn't anxious to navigate the rig down the twisting approach to the Dam, across the Dam, and then up the substantial hills out of the Dam. The alternate route, through Laughlin, Nevada, added a bit over an hour to our trip, giving us more opportunity to worry about what would go wrong next. Every ten minutes, we'd turn around to check the truck, listen for noises from the RV, and worry. We stopped for fuel every time we hit half a tank, mainly so that we could double-check the rig. Miraculously, the day went without a hitch.

That evening, on Sunday, May 4<sup>th</sup> 2003, we gratefully parked our rig, for the last time, in the KOA Kampground at the Silverton Casino-Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. We were home. We'd made it. The next day we'd begin disassembling our RV lifestyle and settling down in earnest.

## Home At Last

### Full Disclosure

Please regard this as full disclosure of the terms of buying and selling an RV, just in case you're thinking about doing so. Fifth wheels, of all RV types, depreciate the fastest. You know how your car loses like 10% the minute you drive it off the lot? Well a fifth wheel is closer to 30% on average. We actually had one dealer tell us that we'd been "ripped off" by the dealer who sold us our RV, because he'd sold it for so much more than book value. That same dealer's own RVs were priced significantly higher than the book trade-in value, too, just proving that they're all bastards. Anyway, because our fifth wheel was so *large*, it would only fit a much smaller potential customer base, making it worth even less. Even though we'd put over \$12,000 in cash down when we bought it, we would still be over our heads on the loan on the RV. We knew most of this going in, so we weren't shocked. We did know that trading the RV in would be our worst deal, and we weren't entirely certain we *wanted* to trade it in, since doing so implies we'd be getting another RV, and we didn't need one. So Don put the RV on eBay. He'd sold his Jeep successfully through eBay before embarking on the RV trip, so it seemed like a good shot, and it only costs a couple of bucks to try. The RV didn't sell on eBay, but it did bring it to the attention of someone who wanted to make a

counteroffer. It seems Joe had a pickup truck capable of towing the RV, and he'd had custom graphics put on the truck which closely matched the custom graphics on the RV. Yes, folks will make a tens-of-thousands purchase decision based on the color of the graphics. And to think that our RV was originally supposed to come with blue graphics instead of the champagne color we got—Joe wouldn't have been interested in blue. Anyway, Joe lived in Tennessee, and wouldn't be able to make it to Las Vegas for a couple of months. So we agreed on payment terms, and when he finally made it out in September of 2003, we completed the deal. Our little home was gone, and by this point we'd moved in with Tom, the massage therapist we met during our original stay in Vegas. He owned a big ranch house and had a room to rent out, and it was a lot more comfy than watching the RV's air conditioners struggle to keep up with Las Vegas' heat.

In a really strange coincidence, Joe decided to spend a couple of nights at the Las Vegas KOA, which is a big facility adjacent to an off-strip casino. We'd stayed there for two months before moving in with Tom and putting the RV on the market; after putting the RV on eBay we'd emptied it out and had it towed to a storage facility, rather than paying the much higher campground site fees. However, when Joe checked into the campground, they assigned him the exact space the RV had occupied for two months.

Don was sorry to see the RV go. After all, it had stuck with us for over two years, been through some amazing experiences, and been our home—the first home either of us had actually owned, in fact, having been renters since moving out of our parents' houses. Chris was less



sorry to see it go—to him had fallen the two-week task of emptying the RV, cleaning it, and preparing it for its new owners. After a week of shlepping our stuff across town in the back of the decidedly undersized Wrangler—we'd sold the truck, as you'll read next—in Las Vegas' 110-degree (and more) summer, Chris was glad to see the end of the RV.

As mentioned, we'd already sold the truck. We actually pulled into Las Vegas on a Sunday, if we remember correctly; Monday morning we were at a local Chrysler dealer looking at Jeep Wrangler Rubicons. Don was hell-bent on replacing the baby he'd auctioned off on eBay more than two years ago, and we were both anxious to be rid of this diesel-guzzling, giant-sized pain in the ass that had tried to strand us in Amarillo. Dealers don't like to take big trucks like that as trade-ins. They'll do it, but they complain that they have such a hard time selling them that they have to assume it'll wind up at an auto auction, and so they want to give you *way* less than it's worth, even recognizing that dealers' trade-in value is already lower than what you could get selling it outright on your own. Don argued them into giving us what the vehicle was properly worth as a trade, and got a decent price on the Jeep to boot, so we were pretty happy. And sure enough: We came back the next day to pick up a few extra things for the Jeep and a prospective buyer was already test-driving our GMC.

So here's the wrap up: We pulled into Las Vegas in early May. The next day, our truck had been replaced by a black Wrangler. Two months later, we moved in with Tom and put the RV in storage. At the beginning of September, we sold the RV, and later that month moved

into an apartment (Tom was buying a new house and wanted to rent the entire old house to someone). And, as we write this, we're still in the apartment; our house is expected to be completed almost a year after moving into the apartment, in September of 2004. If you find yourself in town, look us up. We'll be happy to share some of the other stories of our life on the road.

## Would We Do it All Again?

Almost three years living in an RV, traveling across the US, battling breakdowns, stupid people, and more: Would we do it all again if we had the chance, knowing what we now know?

Yeah, we probably would. We actually miss it, from time to time, and it's amazing to us to look back and think about the enormous route we finally covered. We're amazed by all the things we did and saw, and all the people we met along the way. We did learn a few lessons. If we were to do it all again, we think we'd buy a motorhome. We know the arguments between them and fifth wheels, and we'll cover them briefly in the next chapter, but a well-designed motorhome can be easier to live in, if not quite as roomy. We'd have a smaller vehicle like a Jeep to tow for around-town driving, because believe us, finding parking for a truck like we had could be a real challenge. We'd also plan to spend *less* time in some places and visit more places. Two months in Albuquerque, for example, was too long, and two weeks in Wisconsin Dells was about a week too long. The time we spent in Sandusky, however long it was, was *definitely* too long. We didn't spend enough time, we don't think, in Atlanta; because Don was gone for the entire week, we really didn't get to see much apart from the World of Coke. And we spent way, way, way too long in New Orleans,

and Don doesn't ever really want to go back there. Chris loves it, of course.

By now, we've bought into a couple of timeshares, and have taken up cruises as our favorite getaway vacation. But there are still places inland that we never got to see, like the Grand Canyon, Montana, Chicago, and so on. It's possible that someday we'll take up RVing again, although it's not likely we'll go full-time again. We're more likely to buy a small motorhome, or even one of those van-based jobbies, in which to take extended vacations. We've definitely become accustomed to living within four solid walls, and as we write this they're preparing our land in Las Vegas for a house, which we're obviously looking forward to spending many happy years in.

RVing requires a lot of compromise. Eventually, it's the little things you miss, things you wouldn't even think about until you've done it. RV showers never seem to have enough pressure, or elbow room, for a really good shower. You can't take a bath, which you get to miss after a couple of years. You have to empty your waste tanks, which is a thankless, nasty task. You have to use special toilet paper that'll decompose in the tank and not clog the outlet, and you can't throw *anything* else in the toilet or it'll all go wrong. RVs aren't built like houses, and you'll always wind up with weird plumbing or wiring issues. RVs are subject to a lot of abuse, even if you're kind to yours: Driving on the road creates a lot of vibration, and eventually something's going to give. It's tough to get any private space, and impossible to get any significant amount of space. We found that you have to be *incredibly* careful where you go: If you wind up someplace

that's having a week-long rainstorm and the only diversion available is a run-down seventies-era shopping mall, you're not going to be in good shape by the end of the week. You just can't spend that much time in the RV, especially if the storm is blocking your satellite signal, and eventually that run-down old mall isn't going to offer much in the way of diversions.

Our favorite places included Tampa, for both the people and the recreational opportunities. We obviously fell in love with Las Vegas, since we settled here. Don maintains that Kissimmee or Orlando would have been good second options for settling down, but Chris isn't *that* tolerant of Don's love of all things Disney. Chris would make an argument for New Orleans, but Don wouldn't hear of it. In between those places, we saw a lot of fun things that we'll never forget: House on the Rock, Pike's Peak, Cedar Pointe, the World of Coke, and more. But there are things we missed along the way too, like having steady friends to hang out with on a boring Thursday night, or knowing exactly where to go for a nice latte at midnight. Don's in love with high-speed Internet connectivity that doesn't rely on a clear sky and a lack of sunspots. We have a bathtub, again, and a normal-pressure shower. We have *doors* between rooms. We have full-sized kitchen appliances and we have kitchen gadgets that are only good for one thing, like Chris' salad spinner.

Even knowing what we'd be missing, we'd probably do it all over if we had to. After all, RVing led us to Vegas, and we've never been happier than we are here. But now that we *are* someplace we love, we're really

enjoying the process of settling in, building a house, making new friends, and so on. We'd hate to give that up.

## **You Can Do It, Too**

Full-time RVing isn't difficult. It does require you to be independently wealthy or, as in our case, to have a career that isn't tied to one physical location. Plenty of families are hitting the road, home-schooling their kids, and abandoning the traditional, tied-down lifestyle. You can, too.

Assuming you get the whole money thing figured out (you get a mobile job, you win the lottery, you knock over a bank, or whatever), getting started isn't hard. You'll obviously have to pick out an RV, and you'll need to know a few things about staying in touch and handling affairs—like banking—that you probably take for granted in your current, tied-down situation. Even if you just decide to RV for a few months or a year, we've got some tips to offer to make things easier. And if you'll be taking your loved one along—which we highly recommend—we've got some advice for keeping your relationship sparkling in close quarters. We spent almost three years in less space than the smallest apartment; we learned a lot!

### **Picking an RV**

If you're going to be full-timing, then you've really only got two RV options: A motorhome or a fifth wheel trailer. You could select a travel trailer, which is the kind of trailer you pull behind a truck (a fifth

wheel rides partially in the bed of a pickup, where the hitch is located), but a good-sized one can be exceedingly dangerous on the road. They tend to sway a lot and aren't very stable to pull.

The big difference? Motorhomes are easier to park, easier to drive, and are generally better-built than fifth wheels. You can always tow a car behind them for around-town use (referred to as a *towed car* or just a *toad*). The downside is that you lose some living space to the cockpit area, which is ever-present. Also, if you have mechanical issues with your motorhome, you're going to live in a hotel room until it's fixed, which can be a major inconvenience.

With a fifth wheel, you get more living space, since 100% of the trailer is usable. You often get more raw space, too, since trailers with lots of room-expanding slideouts are more affordable than motorhomes with the same number of slides. You can buy a high-end fifth wheel and truck to pull it for less than a comparable motorhome, and your truck becomes your around-town vehicle. If the truck breaks, you can take it to the shop and still live in your portable house. However, trailers don't generally seem to be as well-built as a motorhome, they're a bitch to park in many situations, and they offer a bit less flexibility. For example, with a motorhome it's no big deal to go make a sandwich while you're on the road. You can't ride in a fifth wheel, though. Motorhomes are nicer if you don't plan to stay in one place for long; fifth wheels are more accommodating long-term digs.

In the end, of course, you should get yourself to a few RV shows so that you can explore the different models and decide for yourself.



## **Staying Connected**

Phone, mail, and Internet: These were our primary concerns for connectivity. The phone part was easy; with companies like Verizon, Spring, and AT&T all offering nationwide cellular plans, just ante up for however many phones and monthly minutes you need. Expect areas of piss-poor coverage with any of them, since campgrounds are often located on the less well-covered outskirts of town. No matter how many coverage maps you see, you'll find plenty of spots where there just isn't any. If it's a concern, look for campgrounds that offer phone service—many do, now. There are two kinds: Instant hookup, where the campground basically lets you plug into a private phone system much like a hotel, and regular, where you have to call the phone company and have them activate service on the line that's already run to the campsite you'll occupy. Be prepared to pay the usual ridiculous "connection fees" and sometimes "disconnect fees," and to occasionally find a campsite with bad wiring.

Mail is easy, too. Clubs like Escapees offer mail forwarding, and there are dedicated mail forwarding companies. We use JB Mailroom ([www.jbmailroom.com](http://www.jbmailroom.com)), although Bill's getting up there in age and might not be running it for much longer. All your mail goes to the service, who forwards it to your campground. You keep them apprised of your schedule via phone or e-mail, and they get the mail to the right spot. During short stays in the summer, Bill would forward mail on to our next campground marked "hold for arrival." We usually got mail once a week in a bundle from him; we signed up for electronic bill paying so that bills wouldn't get missed because the

statement took an extra week to reach us. There's usually a yearly or monthly charge for these services, plus the price of postage forwarding. Whenever we bought something through mail order, we'd have it sent UPS straight to the campground we were staying at.

Internet is harder. You can get by on dial-up if you're going to campgrounds that have phone service options. You can't really rely on standard cellular service for Internet connections, and faster digital cellular connections rarely provide coverage that includes campgrounds on the outskirts of town. If you're just a casual e-mail user, you might survive on "hot spots" provided at libraries and many coffee shops: Just get a wireless-capable laptop and an account with two or three major hotspot providers like T-Mobile. Or, you can do what we did: Get Internet via satellite. MotoSat ([www.motosat.com](http://www.motosat.com)) makes an RV-specific dish that points itself and everything, and is good for DirecTV television signals, as well. Service runs about \$90 a month, and the hardware can be as much as \$5,000. Not cheap. Newer alternatives promise \$3500 dishes and \$50 monthly service, so check around and do some research on the Internet.

### **Getting Your Priorities Straight. Er, Gay.**

This is a tough part if you're going to truly full-time it and not maintain a home somewhere. You have *got* to get rid of stuff. We had a three-use rule: Anything that couldn't be used for at least three things, was gone. Gone was the rice steamer and crock pot, but we kept the deep fryer, which could double as a steamer or crock pot in a pinch (and still does, although Chris threatens regularly to get a real crock pot again). Clothes get cut down to the bare necessities, as do jackets

and shoes. Our greatest discovery was very nice-looking seven-in-one jackets from Timberland that addressed a variety of seasonal warmth needs all in one handy, transformable garment.

Make room for a DVD player, if you enjoy movies, because DVDs are a lot smaller than VHS tapes. All that collectible crap? Put it in storage, except for a few favorite pieces you want to see every day. Believe us, that stuff will have to be carefully packed when you're on the road, and you're going to get tired of packing and unpacking it. When you stop unpacking it, you might as well have left it in storage to begin with instead of lugging it around with you everywhere you go.

### **Staying in Love**

*This* was our biggest concern. Would we kill each other? The RV *would* have a shotgun (the only firearm you can legally possess in all fifty states without having a license in any of them) for self-defense, and it could be used just as easily to off an erring spouse. Turned out there are a few tricks.

First, select an RV that provides "space" for two people. Most have a bedroom and living area that can be closed off from one another, so designate one space for each of you to have some private area when necessary. Not being in one another's face all the time is key. Second, get out of the RV from time to time. Not just out to eat or to the movies, although those are important, too; we mean spend some *nights* out. Pick a local resort hotel or something and spend a night or two. Even if you don't otherwise deviate from your normal routine, you'll be out of the RV for a bit.

Redecorate a lot. Fortunately, RVs don't take much in the way of decorating, so a few versatile pieces will work just fine. A new tablecloth, throw pillows, or a few knick-knacks sitting around can change things just enough to keep them visually less boring, which means you won't be driven stark raving mad and take it out on your other half. And be obsessively clean: RVs are small spaces and they can get really cluttered, really fast. That can make anyone a touch claustrophobic, and whoever you're living with is going to bear the brunt of it.

Choose roles, too. And that's *not* what we meant, you perv. Decide who's going to cook and clean, and who's going to do whatever else. Trade off from time to time if you want to, but don't interfere in the other person's roles. Ideally, you should enjoy at least some of your roles. In fact, this bears careful thought before you even move into the RV, to make sure both of you are going to be able to do stuff that you enjoy, even when it's raining and you've been stuck in the RV for four days straight. If you can't think what you'd do after finishing the latest Anne Rice novel, then the RV life might not be for you.

Finally, agree on a backup plan. Decide that if things get too tense, you'll go to neutral ground—perhaps a hotel for the evening—and talk it out. Or plan to ignore the problem, and just get out of the RV to see if it goes away. A lot of times, we'd feel better after a trip to the mall and seeing other human beings for thirty minutes, or grabbing a coffee around the corner.

### **Explore a Different Gay Ghetto**

A lot of people ask us what possessed us to live in an RV for so long. As we've mentioned elsewhere, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Looking back, though, we've found other reasons to do it. Perhaps first and foremost, we learned how alike we all are across the country. Except maybe for Californians, the folks we met in our travels were just like the folks back home. Some of them were friendly, some of them were assholes, some of them were boring, and some of them were a little weird. Turns out we're really all in it together, and maybe if more of us got to visit each other we'd realize that and stop caring so much about what we all do in the bedroom.

We've also accumulated dozens of memories and stories, many of which we've shared with you in this book. When we're old and decrepit, we plan to regale hapless younger listeners with tales of our travels. These are memories we couldn't buy, see in a movie, or even really read about. They're experiences, and they've become an important part of who and what we are. Our years on the road were definitely life-changing ones, although in subtle ways that probably aren't apparent to anyone who doesn't know us really well. We've gotten more tolerant of people in general, less tolerant of people who can't drive on a freaking interstate highway, and a lot more appreciative of good friends.

So get out there. Even if you do it from a hotel room and fly first class to get there, get there. See something different. Change your perspective. Or validate it, whatever. Experience all that this truly

wonderful and varied country of ours has to offer, and see what it does to you.



