



Travel

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IT'S BACK! » Our monthly Road Trip guide and map. Today, Shepherdstown, W.Va. . . . Page F2



The author's beagle, Darwin, gets a good look at Montana's Beartooth Pass.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

With
My
Dog

As My

Co-Pilot

A Cross-Country Drive Seems
Like a Walk in the Park

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN | Special to The Washington Post

ON A COLD DECEMBER MORNING hours before sunrise, I stood in the doorway to my bedroom, where my beagle, Darwin, was curled up on a pillow. “Want to go for a ride?” I asked. She tilted her head, and her ears flexed out like an elephant’s. ¶ “By the way,” I added, “we’re going to California.” ¶ I don’t know how much Darwin remembered of our last coast-to-coast drive, just 18 months before, but she seemed game. She stretched and wagged her tail in agreement, and we loaded ourselves into my Honda CRV. I zeroed the trip odometer, set my iPod to a Johnny Cash collection (which we listened to straight through to Nashville), belted Darwin into the seat beside me, and we were off. ¶ Before our first D.C.-California round trip, people said it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The second time, they simply asked, “Why?” There are much faster and less expensive ways to get to the left coast, and, frankly, covering 350 to 750 miles as a solo driver every day is a lot of work. But the payoff was so rich and treasure-filled the first time that I was drawn to make the journey again in December. ¶ On both trips, I had a schedule to keep. The first time, I was headed to a friend’s wedding in Palo Alto; the second, I was helping my grandmother move in Palm Desert. Darwin and I didn’t travel as quickly or as cheaply as possible; rather, our goal was to make a safe, comfortable drive there and back with some mini adventures along the way. In the end, both trips were priceless.

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Two Treks, Six Legs, One Driver

Photography by MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

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I was awed by our country and its beauty, its open stretches and big sky, its spectacular parks and the remarkable highway system that makes these trips possible.

If you are considering a solo cross-country drive, you need a dependable car and, preferably, a dependable dog.

Beyond that, anything goes. Here's how it went for us, and some lessons we learned along the way.

1 Prepare

This may seem counterintuitive, but clean your car before you hit the road. It will be your home for weeks, and the more organized it is, the better.

Before my first trip, I stopped by a AAA store and learned from the experts about routes and distances. I studied maps for weeks, looking at interstates that cross the country, such as I-80, I-70 and I-40. Pick a few things you don't want to miss, such as Badlands National Park in South Dakota or Arches National Park in Utah. You can estimate the distance you'll cover daily, but expect snags. We ran into snow in Montana (in June), traffic in Arizona, debilitating fog in Arkansas and oppressive heat in Nevada. Remember that the speed limit is 80 in many western states.

Pack as if you're hiking the Appalachian Trail. You can always buy things on the road, but it's best to stock your vehicle. Make sure you take along a flashlight, pocket knife, pens, a mini first aid kit, paper towels, trash bags and rags. My gadgets included a cellphone, Bluetooth earpiece, iPod and GPS device, all of which charged in the car (with a priceless double adapter). Darwin brought her crate, rabies documentation and tennis ball. I picked up empty wine boxes to organize the car: my snacks in one, Darwin's food and toys in another, maps and guide books in a third. Keep your food, gadgets and maps within arm's reach.

Trader Joe's was my go-to place for snack shopping. I had an ample supply of trail mix, chocolate-covered ginger, pretzels, individual applesauces, juice boxes and dried fruit. I brought a travel mug and a

couple of Sigg water bottles so Darwin and I would have plenty of water. I kept one credit card and a checkbook separate from my wallet, just in case.

Go light on the clothes. At day's end, I would bring my laptop, mandolin, camera, jump rope, toiletries and beagle into whatever room we'd rented for the night. Making several trips to the car got old quickly, so I ended up wearing the same comfortable long-distance driving attire nearly every day. Fortunately, I drove far enough away the following day so that no one noticed.

2 Get into the groove

Life on the road is busy. If I wasn't looking at a map or monitoring the GPS device, speedometer, gas gauge, temperature, cellphone minutes or time zones, I was calculating miles driven, miles remaining, average hourly speed and average miles per gallon. I compared gas prices, read highway signs, kept an eye out for Harley-Davidson showrooms and managed the rotation of my gadgets in the charger. I was constantly thinking about where we would make our next pit stop and how far we could drive before dark. Toward the end of the day, in places where I hadn't reserved a hotel, I used my GPS device to find lodging and made calls inquiring about pet policies and rates.

I was so busy that friends would sometimes call during a 10-hour drive, and I'd say, "Sorry, I can't talk right now." I fancied myself a trucker-in-training and pretended I was an honorary member of their brotherhood (and, increasingly, sisterhood). I followed highway protocol dutifully (driving on the right, passing on the left) and napped at truck stops. When truckers honked, I supposed it was for me; Darwin sat smugly, convinced it was for her.

3 Take care

As hard as it is to find a good, trustworthy doctor, veterinarian or mechanic at home, it's that much harder on the road. Be steadfast in caring for yourself, your dog and your vehicle. If your car is not as loyal as your dog, rent one. Remember the dreamy scene in "The Motorcycle Diaries" where Che stops to fix his broken bike? It's not so appealing, say, in the middle of Missouri on Friday afternoon when your part won't be there until Monday. (Likewise on running out of gas: I once drove 28 miles after my gas light went on — in the mountains, at dusk — before I found a gas station, and they were not fun miles.)

I managed a few hotel gym workouts, and both Darwin and I stretched our backs and walked every time we got out of the car. I paid a little extra for lodging for a bed that wasn't cratered, and I splurged

when I could for healthy, fresh food (top meal of the December trip was a \$9 veggie wrap at the Clinton presidential library in Little Rock). But I couldn't avoid fast food altogether. I spent New Year's Eve in Midland, Tex., where, in desperation, I found myself ordering take-out at the DQ. Darwin and I later sat in bed at the motel, I with my Blizzard and a cold, dry, rubbery chicken sandwich, and Darwin with an organic dried chicken breast from Trader Joe's. It's a low moment when you covet your dog's supper.

4 Entertain yourself

My well-stocked iPod was a lifesaver. I enjoyed long stretches listening to music I rarely play, and I passed entire hours with backlogged podcasts of Chicago Public Radio's "This American Life," which often had me laughing loudly enough to wake a deeply sleeping beagle. During slow periods, tracking license plates is still one of the best road games, especially when you're in the middle of nowhere and get a thumbs-up from a car with Hawaii plates, and you know your faraway plates just made their day, too. I also counted Airstreams and kept a log of wild animal sightings.

The highway itself can be amusing. I passed a billboard entering Omaha that read, "If you must curse, use your own name. — God." Another said, "Dick's Auto Body Shop. 24-Hour Toe Service." And then there was the pair of signs just inside the California border: "State Prison 1 mile," and below, "Do not pick up hitchhikers."

5 Nap

Driving long distances is exhausting. You're driving, and all of a sudden you feel as if there's a magnet pulling your eyelids down to your cheeks. The first day of driving is especially grueling, because your body hasn't adapted to a full day in the car. On my first trip, I was so sleepy just two hours into Virginia that I contemplated making a U-turn and heading home. Instead, I napped. Even five minutes in a parking lot (seat back, windows cracked, eyes closed) is rejuvenating. Darwin and I had an unspoken agreement: When I drove, she slept; when I napped, she sat up and played watchdog.

6 Make new friends, visit old ones

On my most recent trip, I scheduled westbound stops around friends in Nashville, Little Rock and Oklahoma City. I stayed with an Albuquerque family I'd befriended at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and in Phoenix I grabbed lunch with a friend I hadn't seen in a decade. With as much time as Darwin and I

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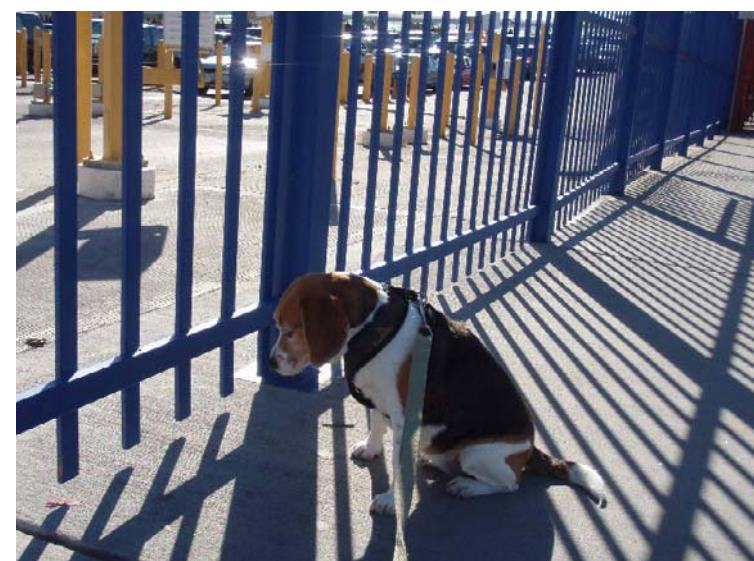
BE PREPARED Cross-country drives require planning for all situations (even snow). Here, Darwin looks out over Independence Pass, at the Continental Divide in Colorado.



EAT SMART You don't have to eat fast food, but you might not be able to avoid it. Maybe you'll see horses in the parking lot, as in Texas.



TRAVEL LIGHT Aside from her harness, Darwin didn't have much luggage: a crate, her rabies documentation, some food and toys.



EXPLORE Darwin couldn't get across the border at El Paso, but her nose (and a GPS device) found a fine barbecue meal in Alabama.



MAKE FRIENDS Saloon No. 10 in Deadwood, S.D., welcomed Darwin and her owner. Inside, the bartender bought her a drink and gave her some treats.

spent alone, we welcomed any chance to get out of the car and be sociable. I used my lifeline to call on friends back home, asking one Texas native what I should see as I drove through his home town of Abilene.

We also made new friends. On our first trip, we had ice cream with an amputee in Red Lodge, Mont., and met a cross-country motorcyclist in Boise, Idaho. Darwin made friends with a gas station attendant in Florence, Ore., who gave her a dog biscuit, and with a bartender at Saloon No. 10 in Deadwood, S.D., who invited her in and, like any good bartender, brought her a drink (on the sawdust-covered floor) and treats.

7 Take baby steps

Think of your journey as a mountain trek: Take one step at a time. Instead of setting your GPS monitor to your final destination, pick a few less daunting distances along the way. After Nashville, I

stopped for a quick tour of Memphis's Sun Studio. At the Clinton library, I checked out a temporary exhibit on choppers. We stopped in Odessa, Tex., to see Permian High School, whose football program was the topic of H.G. Bissinger's "Friday Night Lights," one of my favorite books. As I entered Alabama, stomach growling, I remembered eating years ago at Dreamland Bar-B-Que, so the GPS tool (and Darwin's nose) led us to near-perfect ribs and sweet tea.

8 Wander

The magic of a road trip is that nothing is set in stone. And certainly, some of our top-ranked adventures weren't planned at all. Once, we impulsively pulled off at the Amarillo, Tex., exit, where I stopped for tacos and then drove past a McDonald's with several horses parked out front. Another time, we stopped on a whim in Sheridan, Wyo., and found ourselves in

the middle of a street fair. The same thing happened later, in Frisco, Colo.

I also made a major route change on the first trip. I was set on driving through Nevada to reach San Francisco, but a guy who goes by the name Smooth and runs a coffee shop in Cooke City, Mont., spoke so passionately about the Oregon coast that I had to change my plan. This added miles to my trip, but it remains one of the highlights. Days later, after driving through Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, I approached the coast. I'd logged 542 miles that day and nearly cried for joy when I saw the Pacific Ocean, proof that I'd made it to the other side. The next day we drove south on Route 101, stopping to play on the beach, listen to the sea lions and explore sand dunes.

9 Sleep tight

After a full day's drive, I didn't want to worry about setting up



GUARD, DOG Whenever the author needed a nap, Darwin stood watch. At other times, she was free to nestle in a burrow of maps, snacks and gadgets. At night, hotels often waived their pet fees.

camp. So I found moderately priced hotels, usually of the Days Inn, Comfort Inn or Best Western ilk. Most have free WiFi, most allow small dogs, and many will waive their pet fee if you're calling late in the day and they want your business. My AAA membership paid for itself quickly with discounts, not to mention all the free maps and guides. One night, in Oklahoma City, we upgraded to a Sheraton, which had dreamy beds and a legitimate gym. When Darwin and I walked down the hall early the next morning, she came across a half-eaten room service tray that she thought had been set out expressly for her.

10 Be forewarned

If my drives are a good indicator, the last 10 percent of your trip will be wretched. By this time your vehicle will look like a 7-Eleven trash can. You will curse the day you learned to drive and curse your dog for not having the oppos-

able thumbs needed to massage your aching back. You will eventually make it home, but for weeks thereafter, you and your dog will sleep more than normal, loathe the thought of eating out and wince at the sight of your car.

But with time, you will once again drive without physical or emotional pain, and you'll wonder why you didn't cherish those last few days driving east, when the sunset in the rearview mirror was the color of pink lemonade. You'll start thinking about the places you haven't yet seen, and you'll hear the road calling. And then one day, your dog will wake from her slumber to hear you ask the question that makes her head tilt and tail wag. And her answer, again, will be yes.

Melanie Kaplan last wrote for Travel about her trip with Darwin across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel.

DETAILS

Driving Cross-Country

Trip 1: June 2007
Route description: West on I-70, 80, 90 and 84 to the Oregon coast, east on I-15 and 70
Days: 30
Miles: 8,806
Passed through: 21 states
Expenses: \$2,393

Trip 2: December 2008
Route description: West on I-40, east on I-10 and 20
Days: 18
Miles: 5,531
Passed through: 12 states
Expenses: \$1,105