

CALIFORNIA OR BUST!

THE COMPLETE AND
UNABRIDGED TRIP DIARY

By Niels Kjaer

Prelude

As the weather in North Carolina steadily improved and summer approached, we could see the end of our exchange experience. Since August of 1995 we had lived as Americans, except, of course, for Dave who arrived some months later. By April he was every bit as American as the rest of the group.

A mixture of sadness and anticipation filled us as the final semester of college drew to a close. By this time each of us had gotten used to our new lives away from our families in Europe. Indeed, America is the *Land of the Free*, and we all enjoyed the freedom that our temporary lives as Americans had offered us. Before resuming our real lives we needed some way of finalizing the memorable stay.

Until this point in time we had only gone on minor unsupervised trips – although not all four at the same time. For instance Dave and Manuel went to New Orleans during Mardi Gras, while Marco, Dave and Niels visited the Outer Banks and Virginia Beach in April. Taken into consideration that each excursion only lasted a few days we had gotten along very well. The foundation of something bigger had been formed.

When you went to Greensboro every once in a while to buy cheap CDs, you drove along Interstate 40, knowing that the road wouldn't end until Barstow, California, some 2300 miles away. It was strange to think about. A road that on the way to *Four Seasons Mall* seemed rather characterless also went through far-away states like New Mexico and Arizona, past towns with exotic names; places that made you wonder what they would be like. The sheer vastness of the road inspired us. What kept us from exploring below the horizon?

The initial steps were taken by Marco who could borrow David McCusker's (Mark's host dad) Ford van, which at the time was up for sale. At first the idea was to convince 5 or 6 of the other exchange students. Dave and Niels liked Marco's plan and so did Maja Dragland, the Norwegian exchange student, at first. However, after some consideration she backed out of the project. After this, the venture looked to be an all Guy thing. Manuel was also asked and although he liked the idea of going to California he wouldn't give us a straight answer. Apparently he had several other options to choose from; one of which was to go to New York City.

Then suddenly, some weeks before school ended, David McCusker sold the van, which, needless to say, radically altered our plans. At this time the trip had grown on us. We had passed the point of no return; it couldn't be called off. This was simply something we had to do. Without the van, though, we were in a difficult situation. We realized that we had to go by car but the three of us couldn't possibly be in one car and still have room for the luggage. It meant that we had to go in two cars. This alternative, three people in two cars wasn't really an option either because it required that the driver of the second car would be on his own, which would be intolerable. Once again we pleaded with Manuel and finally we were able to convince him.

The formal outline for the trip was drawn up in early May 1996 at Hardee's near exit 145 in Burlington. Each of us made a list of sites he'd like to visit and soon the entire trip took shape.

It wasn't difficult to choose cars. Mark's Mustang was an obvious choice; the condition of the car clearly outranked all the other cars: Manuel's 1975 Mercury, Dave's Escort, and Niels's Camaro, the latter being the one with the second best service record of the four cars. Going in

two cars meant that if one had a breakdown way out in the boonies, the other car could pull it to the nearest garage. For that exact purpose Dave McCusker had given us a strong towrope. He claimed it brought good luck but his statement proved to be somewhat questionable!

May 15 - Wednesday

Scheduled trip: NC - Tupelo, MS

Actual trip: Burlington, NC - Lexington, NC - Burlington, NC (130 miles)

Crash and burn!

May 15 had finally arrived. This was the first day of our continent-crisscrossing trip, which marked the end of the exchange experience. Barbara D'Anna, our exchange coordinator and chaperone, had received a rough itinerary so she had an idea where to find us.

That morning we met at Dave's house and loaded the remaining luggage. The CB-radios were checked, and the police detector was installed. Everything was set. We were ready to go.

After a rainy start to the day, the sun appeared once in a while as we moved westwards. The CBs were used extensively. Chitchat and nonsense filled the airwaves. Every time a car overtook the other, four fingers were displayed forming a 'W', *Wezz Coazz't*, or even a middle finger in a friendly salute. The spirit was high – even downright ecstatic. Nothing but open road stood between the Pacific and us.

The traffic on I-40 was moderate and soon Greensboro popped up in the horizon. We drove onto I-85 and continued towards Charlotte. The initial radio frenzy had died down a little; the novelty of the CBs was replaced by normal conversation in the two cars. Marco and Manuel in the Mustang were taking the lead when suddenly a strange oily smell appeared in the trailing Camaro. Dave and Niels looked at each other hoping the smell didn't emanate from their car. It wasn't. Ahead of them the Mustang seemed to lose momentum and Manuel appeared on the CB. Trouble! The leading car drove onto the shoulder of the road and the Camaro followed suit. Marco soon declared that he had lost the gears. The gearbox was one big mess. In an act of frustration the hood was popped, naturally, to no avail. This was a mild setback to say the least. Less than 60 miles had been traveled. The entire trip now seemed to be over before it even began.

Dave and Niels drove off the Interstate at the nearest exit and found a gas station where Dave managed to organize a tow truck. Meanwhile, back at the Mustang a state trooper had pulled up to see what was going down.

Some time passed before the tow truck arrived. In a matter of minutes the Mustang was loaded onto the bed of the truck and we all drove to a Chevron station outside Lexington.

Two friendly mechanics had a quick look at the damage. The diagnosis was disappointing. Marco phoned his host family who promised to come and pick him up. The wait was spent in quiet contemplation. Dave McCusker arrived in his Ford LTD and had a brief conversation with the mechanics. It would be at least 24 hours before the Mustang could be driven again so we headed back to Burlington. Needless to say our host families were quite surprised to see us return so soon.

May 16 - Thursday

Scheduled trip: NC - Tupelo, MS

Actual trip: NC - Tupelo, MS (630 miles)

Take two

Thursday morning it rained relentlessly. The downpour was almost tropical in its strength. Niels started the day early. Before resuming the trip, he wanted to try to get the Camaro's suspension problem fixed. The right rear wheel had a nasty tendency to scrape against the body whenever the car hit a pothole. Mounting air shocks should solve the problem, he was told. However, he couldn't find anybody who could install them on a moment's notice so the project was abandoned all together. The whole West Coast thing seemed like a farce at this point in time. We had two cars, none of which was in 100% working order and we were growing restless. The day before Marco had been in contact with Lexington and was informed that a used gearbox was being installed. The car could be picked up before noon.

A day had already been lost so we decided to go ahead once again. Dave and Niels arrived first at the Chevron station and waited for Manuel and Marco to show up. They did after about 30 minutes and Marco went in and paid the bill, which set him back some \$700: not a good bargain considering a used transmission was installed.

As we drove onto I-85 our spirits lifted. It was nice being back on the open road. Like our moods the weather had cleared up considerably. Before long we had passed Charlotte and crossed the state line into South Carolina only stopping when we needed to refuel. Soon we entered Georgia and we hit Atlanta during early rush hour. Some places traffic came to a complete standstill and one had to keep cool in order to stay in the right lane. One wrong turn and the two cars could be out of contact because of the CBs' limited range. Dave reminisced about the time when he had had a breakdown with his Ford Escort in the fast lane of an Atlanta artery. We didn't need something like that happening to us but in the light of our recent motor problems it didn't seem highly unlikely.

We made it through Atlanta without breakdowns and continued into the little appreciated State of Alabama, which is characterized by its straight-as-an-arrow highways.

At sunset we entered Mississippi and pressed onwards to Tupelo. The evening was quite humid and we ran our A/Cs continuously while we looked for a motel. After a short search we came across a cheap motel in the outskirts of Tupelo. In fact the place was so cheap we decided to book two rooms, a luxury we couldn't afford all of the time.

Earlier that evening we had passed an auto part store. We returned to look for something to stiffen the rear suspension of the Camaro. The clerk recommended a small metal gizmo, which was purchased and later installed in utter darkness in the parking lot of the motel. At the same time the Corvette Rally centers were taken off and placed in the trunk for safekeeping.

May 17 - Friday

Scheduled trip: Tupelo, MS - Oklahoma City, OK

Actual trip: Tupelo, MS - Henryetta, OK (480 miles)

It wasn't a breakdown!

We rose as early as we could, knowing all too well that we had to travel in the vicinity of 500 miles that day. However, the morning was to be dedicated to Elvis Presley. As any self-

respecting Elvis fan knows Tupelo is the birthplace of the King. Neither of us was fan of the guy but when has a little sightseeing hurt anyone?

It was a nice morning. The sun was shining from a clear blue sky. The work of the previous night was inspected. It seemed as though the rear of the car had been raised enough to avoid contact with the right tire. Niels discovered a large crack in the front window of the Camaro. Obviously this had happened during our nightly overhaul of the car. A jack must have been placed at a sensitive spot, buckling the car and thus cracking the window. It was too bad but didn't have any influence on the performance of the car.

As we loaded our luggage a friendly black man approached Dave and Niels, asking for a ride to the nearest bus depot. He asked us where we came from and we told him we were from North Carolina. He knew the Burlington area well, he said. After a brief conversation he changed his mind. Suddenly he didn't need a lift at all. The guy's behavior was somewhat peculiar.

First stop of the day was the Elvis Presley Museum located in a Tupelo residential area. The admission fee was outrageous taken into consideration that the museum only had one room filled with various Elvis memorabilia. On the other hand the true Elvis fan must have felt something like religious awe when confronted by all the authentic stuff the room contained. Imagine seeing Elvis's first guitar, toothbrush, or whatever so close you could touch it, if it hadn't been because of an inch of bulletproof glass.

Some bucks were spent in the gift (a.k.a. poison) shop. Quick hellos and messages were scribbled down on postcards and mailed back to NC or Europe.

Heading through the light traffic of downtown Tupelo we stopped at a red light. Suddenly strange noises emerged from the engine of the Chevy and we pulled over and popped the hood. The engine coolant was boiling hard, so hard in fact that the lid of the tank shot a few feet in the air and landed under the car. This time Manuel and Marco went to look for help while the Camaro cooled down. This wasn't exactly what we needed. Car trouble had already cost us enough time.

The Mustang returned and fresh water was added to the coolant of the overheated engine. We had a lengthy argument about this incident should be classified as a breakdown. Niels argued that the car could move by its own power, hence this wasn't a breakdown. This sentiment met massive opposition though.

Marco lead the way as the crippled Camaro made its way to the nearest mechanic. At a gas station a rather apathetic looking mechanic turned us down; he didn't have the necessary equipment to repair the car. However, he gave us directions to "Tupelo's best mechanic." The directions turned out to be bogus so Dave and Niels agreed to stay behind until the repair shop was found. Some time went by and finally we arrived at this alleged "mother of all mechanics."

Wonderboy turned out to be a sympathetic, talkative old-timer. He threw down whatever he was working on and looked the car over. Faulty wiring had caused the overheating; the fan simply didn't get enough juice to function properly. The mechanic removed the melted wire while we bought sodas in a vending machine across the street. The old guy had noticed the "California or Bust"-sign in the rear window of the Chevy and we had a pleasant talk about the Golden State. He'd been there in the 1940s, in San Francisco it turned out. He gave us the advice never to call it "Frisco" if a native of the city heard it. Apparently it seems to be some sort of derogatory word... Within an hour we were back on the road. The operation had come to a measly 20 bucks. If only we would be spared any further car misfortunes it would be okay!

We joined I-40 again at Memphis, Tennessee, crossed the mighty Mississippi River, and entered Arkansas, "Home of President Clinton." Still, we were behind schedule so we blasted through the state, only making the occasional pit stop. During the evening we found a motel just off I-40 at Henryetta, Oklahoma (hometown of quarterback Troy Aikman, Dallas Cowboys) and we decided to call it quits for the day despite not reaching the designated goal: Oklahoma City.

May 18 - Saturday

Scheduled trip: Henryetta, OK- Roswell, NM

Actual trip: Henryetta, OK - Roswell, NM (560 miles)

Don't have a cow, man!

Early morning in Henryetta we checked the oil levels and added a little since both cars were burning fluids. The weather promised us a fine day and after breakfast we continued westwards. The first fuel stop was made in Oklahoma City. At the same time the suspension contraption was adjusted because we had experienced some wheel/bodywork contact the day before.

By now a ritual had formed during fuel stops. Everybody got out to flex the muscles; maybe the cars changed drivers. The exact amount of fuel purchased was carefully noted so fuel efficiency could be calculated. We each took turns paying the bill. Most of the time it came to less than \$15 per vehicle. While one guy pumped the gas the other cleaned the windows, which in no time became very filthy indeed. Extra supplies were bought so each car had an adequate stash of sodas. Trash was discarded while Mark didn't think twice about popping the hood for a quick glance of his 302.

We raided a nearby supermarket for some groceries. Some of our favorite brand names included Doritos, Nachos, Coca-Cola, Mountain Dew, Fanta, and to a certain extent, beef-jerky. The latter really first became a hit on the way back east.

We could have visited the infamous site of the Oklahoma City Bombing but opted not to partly because of our tight schedule but also due to the fact that nothing but an empty lot remained. Instead we spent some time at a Native American souvenir shop located on the plains west of Oklahoma City. We didn't meet any 'real' Native Americans though; most of it was just a tourist scam where Taiwanese plastic crap was cleverly disguised as authentic Americana. The view from the parking lot was interesting though. No trees or bushes grew for as long as the eye could see. The only vegetation was knee-high grass, which emulated the waves of an ocean as the strong, dry winds blew across the plains.

Not long after entering Texas giant billboards appeared off the Interstate. They spoke about an Amarillo restaurant, *The Big Texan*, where you could get a 72-ounce steak for free, i.e. if you ate it in one hour. And why not? After all this was Texas, the bovine state. Each billboard told the exact distance to the restaurant and as we closed in on it we agreed to give it a go. The 72-oz would certainly not be our primary choice - less could do nicely. In the last few days our diet had consisted solely of junk food so we all craved some real sustenance for a change.

We pulled over around noon and as we entered the establishment a slab of meat resting on a mountain of ice cubes greeted us. At closer inspection we discovered that what we gazed upon was in fact the much-fabled 72-oz-artery-clogging piece o' meat one had to devour in 60 minutes if you were to get it for free. It looked like an impossible mission and none of us had the guts to go ahead with it.

The inside of the restaurant was designed as an old-time saloon. The walls were decorated with old revolvers and Winchesters and a bunch of stuffed animal heads were thrown in for good taste. One end of the room had a podium with a table and a chair. This was where the contestants had to do battle against time and meat. During our dinner, which consisted of puny 20-oz steaks, a guy fought valiantly with his side of beef. From the looks of it he made it before the allotted time ran out so who said it couldn't be done, huh? Although the place was pricey our money was well spent. The steaks were tender and it was definitely the best meal we'd had for days.

Now our journey turned south towards New Mexico. The grassy plains were replaced by dryer, somewhat more desert-like landscapes. On Highway 70 traffic was very scarce. As we approached the village of Elida (or was it Kenna?) the radar alert went off for no apparent reason. Naturally we slowed down to the legal speed but we couldn't see what was triggering the device. Then, half a mile up the road we discovered a police cruiser sitting by the side of the road. There was no way we would have discovered it if it hadn't been because of the radar detector. Both drivers would undoubtedly have received a sizeable ticket if the alarm hadn't sounded. Really, this was a tourist trap intended to raise money for the municipality. Luckily we didn't become donors.

It was strange passing through the sleepy townships on the road to Roswell. Everything seemed to be abandoned but at closer scrutiny people just stayed off the streets. Maybe it was due to the dry heat, which probably was in the 80s.

In the car you either ran the A/C or you opened your windows. Both options had their drawbacks. Using the A/C was nice and cool but as soon as you had to go outside your sinuses would be messed up. The alteration between hot and chilly could eventually give you a nasty cold. However, if you opted to drive with the windows wide open (what Dave McCusker called the 4-60 air conditioner – 4 windows down while doing 60 mph), your eyes would soon feel dry and irritated.

We reached the Roswell City limits just before sunset. It wasn't a problem finding a motel downtown. After unloading the cars we went sightseeing in the Mustang. First stop was at an abandoned gas station outside of town. Here we enjoyed the spectacular sunset. Dave was determined to get some good pictures so he climbed a roof and placed his camera on a tripod. He managed to get down again without hurting himself.

We briefly discussed how to spend this Saturday night in the middle of New Mexico, and the choice fell upon the cinema, which showed the movie "Twister". The local cinema was located in a brand-new mall, which we checked out before the movie started. Some time went by in the CD store. Jokingly Manuel bought some "Brujería", a Mexican rock band, largely because the cover contained several misspelled words.

"Twister" was a disappointment. It had some nice special effects but the story line was crap, we all agreed during the ride back to the motel.

May 19 - Sunday

Scheduled trip: Roswell, NM - Flagstaff, AZ

Actual trip: Roswell, NM - Flagstaff, AZ (565 miles)

Desert driving

We started the day at Wal-Mart where we had breakfast and 36 cans of soda, just to be on the safe side. It's not a whole lot of fun running out of drinks when you're driving in the desert.

Most of the cans were put into the cooler in the Mustang while a small supply went into the Chevy. Manuel and Niels switched places.

Roswell is probably best known for the alleged UFO crash of 1947. The town boasted at least two museums dedicated to this event, one of which was our next place of sightseeing. A map of the town was purchased at a gas station and after some effort we found the museum. Unfortunately it was closed on Sundays so we didn't hang around for long.

We went west on Highway 380 and passed the off-limit White Sands Missile Range. No activity whatsoever could be detected from the road. The landscape was quite arid. A few scattered trees could be seen but otherwise the vegetation mostly consisted of bushes and dry grass.

After crossing the Rio Grande, Marco and Niels in the Mustang lead the way as we approached the north/southbound I-25. Dave was giving instructions over the CB. Nonetheless the leading car missed the ramp and was forced to go south instead of north. Much profanity cluttered the radio waves in the next few minutes. This was the first and only time tempers really flared on the trip. Some 10 miles in the wrong direction had to be traveled before we got a chance to make a spontaneous U-turn.

Going in the right direction once again everybody settled down. In the Mustang conversation died down. Niels got a monster of a headache possibly caused by draft in the car the day before.

The speed limit was a pleasant 75-mph so both cars rocketed towards Albuquerque, sometimes faster than the speedometers could measure (they stopped at 85 mph). Once again we rejoined I-40 and continued towards California.

We passed through a corner of a Navajo Indian Reservation in the afternoon, crossed the Arizona State line, and decided to check out the Petrified Forest National Park. For some reason it was closed too.

Late in the afternoon we reached Flagstaff, booked a room in a high-rise motel complex, and went out for some grub. Mostly we just rented a single room with two beds so every other night you had to bunk on the floor. Usually a motel bed is made up of several sheets and blankets. Therefore it is possible to build a rather comfortable 'nest' on the floor. During our days on the road nobody ever complained about flooring it. Ordinarily we were so bushed that we could have slept anywhere.

May 20 - Monday

Scheduled trip: Flagstaff, AZ - Grand Canyon

Actual trip: Flagstaff, AZ - Grand Canyon - Las Vegas, NV (410 miles)

Camaro 2, Mustang 1

We checked out of the motel and drove the 15 miles or so to the Sunset Crater National Monument, an extinct volcano. The area surrounding the summit looked quite fertile. The dominant vegetation was some sort of pine tree that grew almost everywhere. The landscape was quite distinctive. Some places black magma formed small, uneven hills, which looked as though they could have been formed recently rather than hundreds of years ago. We strolled along the paths around the base of the cone. Traffic on the actual volcano was prohibited so nobody got the chance to look down into the impressive monument. After an hour we made our way back to Highway 89 and headed north. At Cameron a fuel and supply stop was made before turning west.

The road leading to the Grand Canyon was littered with Native American souvenir shops. We stopped and had a look around before proceeding to the first view point over the canyon. Although it was still early in the day, the place was swarming with tourists. A little haze hung over the enormous canyon but nonetheless you could see for many miles. We climbed a lookout tower as if the view wasn't already breathtaking from the ground.

By car we followed the rim for miles stopping at scenic lookouts to take pictures. Unfortunately due to our schedule we didn't have time to venture down into the canyon, which would have been interesting but could have taken at least a day. In the original schedule we had given Grand Canyon a whole day but because of the previous car trouble we decided to cut the visit short to gain time.

We returned to I-40 but just for a few miles before veering off on the legendary Route 66, the old highway to California, a one-lane road. After the introduction of the Interstate system, Route 66 is not used much any more. Still it is quite popular among tourists and it proved difficult finding a "Route 66" road sign, of which we all wanted a picture. Obviously the signs are highly appreciated among tourists. So much, in fact, that they are dismantled and driven away.

During the 110 miles on 66 we only met few cars going in the opposite direction so much of the time was spent driving side-by-side. Occasionally the headlights of an approaching car in the hazy horizon were spotted, which forced us to follow the rules of traffic. In the middle of nowhere we pulled over at a disbanding-looking tourist center, in what seemed to be an old gas station. Evidently this had served as a rest stop for generations. The rusting hulk of a car from the 1920s or 30s was a prominent feature of the site. Wherever the car had been going once, it was probably safe to say it hadn't reached its goal.

Route 66 rejoined I-40 at Kingman, AZ, but soon we left the Interstate again going northwest on Highway 93, heading for Las Vegas. Near the state line between Arizona and Nevada traffic passed Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. The dam is the main supplier of electricity to Las Vegas, which even after American standards is a well-lit city.

Accommodation can be cheap in Vegas. Somewhere along the trip we had picked up some ads about motels. Using this material we quickly found a place downtown where we could crash. Unfortunately, as we pulled up on the parking lot, the Camaro started making noises, which had become far too familiar. Nothing could be done about that at that moment because of the time; it was well after sunset. Those problems had to wait until morning. In stead we went to our room and changed our clothes. It was gamblin' time!

None of us had the courage or money to try our luck on the blackjack tables (Dave and Mark were excused because they both were below the age of 21), so we went for the slots instead. Manuel was the only one who came out on top, while the rest lost miserably!

A nighttime stroll in Vegas was a unique experience. In the distance, the Stratosphere Tower with the famous Big Shot thrill ride on top could be spotted and there was general agreement that we ought to walk over to it and check it out. Niels pointed out that it was a 3-mile walk but his friendly contribution was quickly cut down. After close to 45 minutes we finally arrived and went inside. By now every casino resembled each other so we got some refreshments while we rested our weary feet and started to figure out how to get back to the motel.

Outside a row of cabs was parked so we hailed one. The driver was Asian and a bit of a prankster. During the entire ride he told us about his many investments, and that in a few years he would retire and live on his vast savings. We didn't tip him very much. If he was so affluent, he probably didn't need the extra buck!

Around 10.30 PM everybody besides Niels decided to shoot some video of Vegas by night. Niels, whose feet had become blistered due to the long walk in fancy shoes, entertained himself with the movie "Deadfall", starring a glue-sniffing Nicolas Cage.

May 21 - Tuesday

Scheduled trip: Las Vegas, NV - Los Angeles, CA

Actual trip: Las Vegas, NV - Victorville, CA (190 miles)

End of the road

We began the day before 8 o'clock. The first thing we did was to check out the Camaro; some more coolant was added but it was clear that we needed a mechanic. First, however, breakfast was included in the price we paid for the room so we went around the corner and got a decent bite to eat.

Nobody at the motel could direct us to a reliable garage and for that reason Marco and Manuel once again set out to find a car doctor. Half an hour later the Camaro was taken to a large gas and repair station not too far from the motel. This time the mood was not as optimistic as it had been in Tupelo. Now two mechanics had a go at the car. The diagnosis was dire. The cooling motor had to be replaced; the new wiring installed in Tupelo had caused the old motor to short out entirely. It was certainly going to be more than just a few dollars this time. The manager of the garage noted the "California or Bust!" in the rear window. He said a sign like that always brought bad luck but his statement was largely ignored and the sign was left alone. We had more important things to consider than superstition. Once again we were stranded, at least for some hours so we might as well make the most of it.

Downtown Vegas was bustling even though it was still early in the day. None of us felt the urge to gamble hence we just walked around absorbing the atmosphere. We hung around for a few hours, had some refreshments, and returned to the garage. Naturally the car wasn't done yet; they had problems locating the right parts. The spare time was spent writing postcards or inspecting the used cars on the lot. The slippery manager offered to trade the Camaro for an older, uglier, 4-cylindere model. The generous offer was categorically declined.

Around 2 PM we took to the road. Despite being set back \$261, Niels was glad getting out of the clutches of Vegas. From this point we agreed not to use the Chevy in stop-and-go city driving if it could be avoided. The electric system of the aging car was simply too unreliable for us to risk any further meltdowns. After all it would have been heartbreaking if another melted wire forced us to end the trip.

The highlight of the day was unquestionably when we entered California, which also signaled an end to I-40. At that point, all our problems seemed trivial but fact was that we'd traveled less than half of the entire planned distance.

Just before reaching Barstow we made a little detour to Calico Ghost Town. However, quickly we discovered we had been wasting our time. Calico was apparently off-limits because the road leading to the town was blocked.

We could have gone all the way to Los Angeles that day but decided to stop in Victorville. Everybody was wary about going into the metropolis, looking for a motel after dark. Instead we toured Victorville and had dinner at El Pollo Loco, a fast food place, which has specialized in chicken; the Hispanic equivalent of KFC one might say.

May 22 – Wednesday

Scheduled trip: -

Actual trip: Victorville, CA - Long Beach, CA (105 miles)

Long Beach in the house...

Wednesday morning Mark wanted an oil change (preferably synthetic oil) for the Mustang. After checking with the local yellow pages, we found an adequate lube place and hung around while the operation was performed.

On the way to Long Beach, our intended base for the next few days, we passed through some of LA's suburbs. We came pretty close to Disneyland in Anaheim. From the main arteries not much of the city itself could be seen. The roads were either elevated or submerged in the ground, and large concrete slabs shielded the surroundings from the noise of the many cars.

Long Beach was fairly quiet that Wednesday morning. Only a few other cars occupied the parking lot near our motel. We got a room on the 2nd floor. Access to this upper level was by an outside stairway. The room was dark and nondescript like so many other rooms we encountered on our trip. There was no sense in staying cooped up so we proceeded down to the beach, half a mile away.

The beach was virtually deserted even though the sun was out. It was still early in the season, even for southern California! A four feet wide concrete walkway ran parallel with the water as far as the eye could see. Occasionally bike riders went past us. The Pacific looked inviting but we knew the water was too cold to enter. Instead we sat down on the sand and relaxed for a while, analyzing our situation. First priority of our adventure had been achieved: we had reached the West Coast.

Lunchtime approached rapidly. A small junk food outlet served us well. While we ate our Nachos, a couple of police officers on bicycles stopped and had some lunch too.

We talked about what to do next and the choice fell upon the Hollywood area. First we drove through the fashionable Beverly Hills (nine-oh-two-one-oh) and Bel Air (nine-oh-two-one-one) to gawk at the many mansions. Next we tried to find a way up to the famous Hollywood sign in the hills above the town but to no avail. We ended up in yet another high-class neighborhood.

Later the Mustang was left at a parking meter and we walked along Hollywood Boulevard, which is also known as the Walk of Fame. Everybody who has achieved a certain amount of fame in Hollywood's film industry has received a star in the sidewalk. Each slab of concrete has the hand and foot impression of whoever the star belong to. Among some of the names we stepped on were Marilyn Monroe, Boris Karloff, and Charles Chaplin. Melrose Avenue was checked out afterwards. Melrose, a very trendy neighborhood, has some of the weirdest shops one can find in Los Angeles. Also, quite a few of the pedestrians were extreme in their choice of clothing and hairstyles. We didn't seem to blend in very well but that was probably for the best. Most of the 'freaks' had spiky hairdos or generally just dressed like some sort of deviants. For an observer it wasn't hard to tell that the four of us, rednecks: body and soul, had just arrived from good ol' Carolina!

At Jonny Rocket's, a sidewalk dive on Melrose, we sat down and had some drinks. The establishment excelled in different flavored cola, and as true "Pulp Fiction" fans we had Vanilla Cokes.

Later, at Santa Monica we walked the beach and the characteristic pier, which contains restaurants and an amusement park. The evening was rather chilly and we were only lightly clothed. By this time the sun had gone down but it was too early to go back to the motel.

Downtown LA was busy. Many people walked on Third Street and the atmosphere was relaxed and pleasant, a far cry from what one might picture LA at night. We found another Jonny Rocket's and had more Vanilla Cokes and Chili Fries. Manuel and Dave wanted to check out House of Blues but you had to be 21 to enter so we went back to Long Beach instead.

May 23 - Thursday

Scheduled trip: -

Actual trip: -

See that tree? It's made of Holly Wood...

Across the street from the motel was a Subway where we had breakfast. When you're in Los Angeles you have to check out either Warner Studios or Universal City Studios. We chose the latter. The studio lot is a very popular attraction among tourists. We left the Mustang in a nearby parking complex and entered the site. It was still early in the day so the place wasn't too crowded yet. The first thing we did was to have a quick look around. Naturally numerous stores selling movie merchandise littered the place. We visited a large music store too. It even had some Brujería! Close to the entrance of the store, one of the DeLorean cars from the "Back to the Future" trilogy was displayed, and further away yet another famous car could be admired: Kit, the intelligent Pontiac Firebird from the popular "Knight Rider" TV-series. This car fascinated especially Marco. There is no way to deny it, Mark. We have it on tape!

The entire lot must have covered several square miles. Hence we tried to coordinate our movements so we could participate in most of the tours, which began every hour or so. We saw the "Back Draft" attraction, a brilliant pyrotechnics show, and took a ride "Back to the Future", a computer simulated roller-coaster ride. The "Wild West Show" and "Water World Show" were action saturated, with actors doing backbreaking stunts like falling from great heights or being blown up. Each show lasted about 15 minutes and the time was well spent.

We also went on (what seemed) an hour long guided tour of the studio's fake neighborhoods. Naturally we didn't have to walk around. No, we were driven in a specially designed vehicle that consisted of three independent cars, which were linked together. Our guide, who was a real comedian, showed us the houses where famous actors and directors had stayed while shooting their films. He also showed us some more cars, like Tom Selleck's legendary Ferrari 348 from the "Magnum" series, and the A-Team van.

At one point in time, our vehicle stopped at a small lake. Suddenly, the waters parted in a weird, biblical way and we drove into the pond with water towering on each side of us. As we approached the other shore, Jaws, Spielberg's man-eating shark, attacked us. There certainly wasn't time to get bored on this ride! Still, the fun didn't end there. We were taken into what seemed to be a subway station. Without warning an earthquake shook our vehicle and the roof above us collapsed, sending a large fuel truck hurtling towards us. It hit a concrete barrier and exploded right in front of us. Meanwhile, on the other side of our sightseeing bus, a wall of water came rushing down a stairway. That was rather intense! As we drove out of the subway station, we encountered King Kong, who was having a bad day. The gigantic animated monkey was roaring and blowing steam at us even though we didn't try to mess with it in any way.

Also, we had the dubious pleasure of crossing an unstable bridge. Not surprisingly it collapsed the exact moment we had reached the other side.

We passed a reflecting pool with a large fake background. According to our guide this was the place pop group "TLC" had shot their video called "Waterfalls." Finally we saw the set of a new Schwarzenegger movie ("Jingle all the Way") but unfortunately none of us got to see Arnold in the flesh.

It was mid-afternoon before we got our lunch. By this time the place was becoming crowded so after a final visit to the souvenir shop, we decided to leave at around 6 PM. It had been a very entertaining day indeed.

That evening Marco wanted to visit one of the dance-places in LA. According to our guidebook there were several to choose from. The first, however, was closed so we went to the next one on the list. This club was situated in a poorly lit neighborhood and it was strange that so few people were entering the establishment. We locked the car and went to the entrance and were confronted by the doorman who kindly informed us that it was "Gay Night." We were out of there so fast we must have left vapor trails!

Mark's enthusiasm had plummeted dramatically so instead of looking for more clubs we toured Mulholland Drive, a famous road above LA with excellent scenic lookout points. We had the road to ourselves and stopped frequently to get pictures and video footage of the twinkling lights of Los Angeles.

May 24 - Friday

Scheduled trip: -

Actual trip: Moved to Thousand Oaks (Malibu) (60 miles)

Touring LA

This morning we took some time "sleeping in", as Dave would say. It wasn't until 9:30 AM we cleared our room, loaded the cars, and paid the bill. Having experienced Hollywood and the upscale neighborhoods the day before, we still had only seen a fraction of the sights in the Los Angeles area. We might as well move up the coast because it was there most of the places of interest were situated. As we got ready to leave the "California or Bust!" sign was finally taken down. Superstition or not, why tempt fate?

California has close ties with Mexico and especially one section of LA is renowned for its Hispanic roots. That morning we left the cars in a parking building and went to Olvera Street on foot. On the way we saw the courthouse made famous by the O.J. Simpson trial, which had come to an end only a few months before.

Olvera Street was packed with vendors trying to sell all kinds of more or less exotic goods while people, mostly tourists by the looks of them, swarmed among the shops and restaurants. After ample browsing we settled down on the porch of a Mexican restaurant. The chaotic buzzing of the street could easily be observed from our table. Naturally we ordered Mexican food. Dave and Manuel shared a carafe of wine while Mark and Niels stuck to sodas. Pending the arrival of the food the spare time was used to write yet more postcards.

Not far from Olvera Street was the Asian part of LA. However, this neighborhood wasn't nearly as lively as the one we'd just visited so we didn't hang around for long. Generally the shops were the kind that specialize in herbs and alternative medicine; the anonymous windows didn't quite capture our interest and as we walked back to the cars we discussed what to do next.

The choice fell upon the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu. Once a private collection, the artworks from Classic times are now displayed so everybody can appreciate the grandeur of bygone eras. We were lucky to enter the grounds because the museum closed early on

Fridays. In fact we were the last two cars to enter the compound that day. The museum itself was built in Greco-Roman style with marble pillars and shallow ponds that reflected the sunlight. We spent close to two hours admiring the exhibits and we finally left the place with an overload of our aesthetic senses.

According to the schedule we were supposed to reach Santa Barbara but Thousand Oaks, some 20 miles up the coast from Malibu, had to do. We found a motel in the right price class and booked a room. The place had a swimming pool, not an uncommon feature among America's motels. Some of us had a swim that evening.

May 25 - Saturday

Scheduled trip: -

Actual trip: -

Burn, baby, BURN!

Because we hadn't made a detailed outline of what to see, we did everything on the spur of the moment. Saturday none of us felt up to more sightseeing, so we decided to go back to Malibu and lounge on the beach.

When you go to the beach you have to be properly prepared. A cooler stocked with sodas is a definite must. Also large beach towels are quite nice if you can't afford the luxury of a beach chair (or maybe even a hammock!). And whatever you do, don't forget to bring the sunglasses! In retrospect we discovered that it would have been useful if we'd also brought a decent sun block. It is safe to say we underestimated the powers of the otherwise meek Californian sun. More about that later.

We arrived around mid-morning, parked the cars, and found an adequate spot on the shoreline. The place was utterly deserted so we could pick the exact site we wanted. The air was warming up nicely (probably to 85F or so at noon) but the water was cold, we discovered as we dipped our toes in it.

As the day matured more people found their way to the beach. Still, it was a far cry from what one could expect of a South Californian beach. The ocean was left entirely to the occasional speedboat, Jet Ski or wind surfer.

We passed the time reading, talking, or just relaxing quietly while sipping from our perfectly chilled Mello-Yellos. Basically we tried to look as cool as we possibly could. To break the monotony once in a while, we went for walks in pairs. Two stayed behind guarding our stuff, while the two others explored beach. Half a mile up the coast, a fence stretched across the sand and into the ocean. Apparently a private beach. Not a soul could be seen on the other side of the 7' high wire-mesh fence. What a waste of perfectly good beach!

That afternoon Niels became the first victim of our collective recklessness. After a few hours of exposure to the sun, he turned red as a lobster. Since we didn't have any sun block and it was too early to leave, the only alternative was to put on more clothes and bury any body parts that might still be bared. For the remainder of the day only $\frac{3}{4}$ of Niels was above ground...

That evening we returned to the motel in Thousand Oaks where we'd checked out the same morning and went for some dinner. Later we raided a local mini-marked for its supply of sunscreen because at that point in time, Niels wasn't the only one sensing the throbbing, itching sensation of having been toasted.

May 26 - Sunday

Scheduled trip: -

Actual trip: Moved to Lompoc (120 miles)

Peel City

After a night of all too many reminders of the beach, we arose to another day of fine Californian weather. Niels checked out his new tan, which still was a prominent red. In the more sensitive places, e.g. on the back of the knees, on the ears, and nose, the skin had started to peel. Now, there's something basically disappointing in seeing your tan fall off before you've even gotten used to it. Going through the irritating period of sunburn would be a fair tradeoff if you were promised a nice tan after a few days. However, it doesn't necessarily work that way. It was time for damage control. Applying a generous layer of sunscreen to the disaster zones induced a cooling effect, which made life worth living again.

It was Sunday and everybody displayed a rather lazy attitude so sightseeing was off the agenda. MTV announced that they would have a beach party somewhere in the LA area and we seriously considered crashing the party. Meanwhile we were drawn by yet another television generated desire. Most young men who've been exposed to the TV-series "Baywatch" probably have a secret wish to go to Santa Barbara and meet Pamela Anderson or one of the other bathing beauties. In other words, none of us would mind experiencing a bustling beach populated only by girls of supermodel quality.

Sta. Barbara Beach was nice but not nearly as crowded as portrayed on TV although more people were on the beach than the day before. A moderate wind kept the temperature in the high 70s.

When things became too dull we threw around a Frisbee or went exploring. Not far from the place we camped, a lifeguard hut - exactly like the ones from TV - was occupied by a male lifeguard. What a downer! Occasionally yellow and red pick-ups (also true to "Baywatch") cruised up and down the beach. Although the setting was right, the atmosphere never came close to that of the TV-series.

When the novelty of hanging out at 'Barbara had abated we decided to find a place to stay. Quickly we discovered that the cheaper places didn't have any vacancies so we drove up the coast. Around 7 PM we reached Lompoc and found a motel that suited our wallets. The place certainly wasn't overbooked; judging from the parking lot, we were about the only ones staying there.

The town of Lompoc wasn't that exciting, we noticed on an evening tour. Other, more fashionable communities on the Californian coastline easily outshine Lompoc. However the town was quiet and prices were lower than at the trendier places down south.

We stopped for some fast food before returning to the motel where we spent the evening in front of the television, probably watching out for Beavis & Butt-head.

May 27 - Monday

Scheduled trip: -

Actual trip: -

Doing the laundry

The CBs were essential; the trip simply wouldn't have been the same without them. They gave us the comfort of two cars without hindering conversation between the four of us. Unfortunately, by this point in time, the Mustang's antenna, the one with the longer range,

had given in to the constant wind pressure of the last several thousand miles. Instead of standing straight, it bent 90 degrees at the magnetic base. Duck tape had solved the problem for some time but this solution was only short-lived. Furthermore, the CB in the Camaro started to blow its fuses at a rate of one every few days. Dave and Marco decided to get a new antenna and fuses so we went back to Sta. Barbara in search of a Radio Shack. While Mark and Dave went shopping, Manuel and Niels stayed behind at a beachfront cafeteria.

For a change it was an overcast day; in fact it was a bit chilly. Occasionally the sun broke through the clouds and gave the few beach visitors a welcome reminder that it indeed was Southern California. While waiting for the others to return, Manuel and Niels passed the time by writing postcards and talking basketball. Chicago was to play that same night against Orlando in the Eastern Conference finals. So far the Bulls were up 3-0 and clear favorites to advance to the finals.

Next stop was Solvang, a Danish settlement and major tourist attraction. We arrived before 11 AM and even though the place was crowded, we easily managed to find parking spaces. After visiting a nearby visitors' center, we went exploring.

Solvang is not a typical Danish town. In fact many of the buildings looked like something you would expect to find in Germany. Maybe the surrounding landscape contributed to the notion that this wasn't Denmark. Rolling grassy hills and few trees characterized the landscape. But despite the fake feel, Solvang was quite pleasant. The town was nothing but bakeries, souvenir shops, and restaurants... and of course tourists. As the sun finally defeated the clouds our stomachs started to growl. Initially we searched the restaurants for smørrebrød, open-faced sandwiches, a Danish specialty, which Dave had raved about. However the search was fruitless so we picked a place that wasn't too swarmed.

Whatever the course consisted of is erased by time. It was neither Danish nor American but most likely a mixture of the two. Still it was a nice replacement for fast food, in which we had indulged too much.

It was mid-afternoon when we were back in Lompoc. Having reached the halfway point of our trip, we had accumulated a great deal of dirty laundry. Thus we decided to do a thorough search of Lompoc to find a Laundromat. As we pulled out of the motel's parking lot, we noticed a sign announcing that our motel offered a laundry service. What a good fortune! We didn't need to go anywhere.

May 28 - Tuesday

Scheduled trip: Lompoc, CA - Palo Alto, CA

Actual trip: Lompoc, CA - Palo Alto, CA (290 miles)

The City at the Bay

The time had come to continue north. Once again the cars were loaded. Everything had become a routine by this point in time. Almost daily we checked the fluid levels of the cars before starting off for the day, adding oil and water if needed. Another fuse had gone bad in the Camaro's CB. Dave easily made the repairs. The rate at which the fuses burned out was worrying because we still had another 3000 miles or more to go. Something fishy was definitely going on in the Chevy's electrical system but as long as it was only affecting the CB and not the car itself, the problem wasn't too critical.

We left Lompoc around 9 AM and headed straight for US-1 a.k.a. Pacific Coast Highway, a winding and very scenic road that stretches from the area east of Lompoc to northern California. Some of this road was used as a model for the classic computer game "Test Drive

2 – The Duel”. As in many cases reality beat fiction: The hairpin turns and dramatic hills were even more fun to negotiate than in the game. Of course the speed was considerably slower, in fact we had to slow down to 15-20 mph in order to turn a corner safely. The roars of the V8s compensated well for the lack of velocity.

We stopped at Hearst Castle, a grandiose “summer cottage” built by William Randolph Hearst, the media tycoon. Discouraged by the entrance fee, which was close to 20 bucks, we went for a walk outside the grounds instead. The castle was situated on a hilltop and it looked very impressive indeed but no one really wanted to pay out the money in order to have a closer look.

Continuing north, we had the road to ourselves most of the time. However, it was rather annoying when a slow-moving car or camper blocked the road. Overtaking was a tricky business because most of the time we couldn’t see more than a few hundred feet ahead of us. Luckily in most cases the slower moving vehicles pulled off the road to let us pass.

Naturally we also had to stop several times to enjoy the landscape. At one point we saw several seals and sea lions lounging on the cliffs below us. They didn’t seem to mind being watched from a distance. The lazy mammals earned the name ‘farting animals’ due to the noises they made while digesting whatever they had been eating.

We reached the southern part of Palo Alto before rush hour started. Dave gave us directions to the house of Ursine Bernhard, a girl he had gone to school with back in Switzerland. The house was situated in a rather fashionable suburban neighborhood, which we didn’t have any problems finding.

After being introduced to Ursine and her aunt, who owned the house, we were assigned rooms. The wooden house consisted of two stories and had a nice backyard with a pond. Here we met a friendly Golden Retriever that insisted to play ball with us. Without hesitation it even dived into the pond in order to fetch the ball... Talk about retrieving!!

Mark was quick to discover the sound system and immediately put on some techno music. Apparently he had drawback symptoms because Manuel didn’t let him play it all the time in the car. Manuel, that’s cruelty! To keep a man from his music!

After a talk we decided to go out for some dinner. Ursine took us to a restaurant where we had the buffet. The remainder of the evening was spent on talk before we turned in around midnight after an exhausting day.

May 29 - Wednesday

Scheduled trip: -

Actual trip: -

Touring Frisco

We helped ourselves to breakfast and briefly discussed what the plan for the day was. Once again we let Ursine pilot us in her Mercury. One of the first points on the agenda was Golden Gate Bridge, the trademark of San Francisco and probably the most famous bridge in the world. Indeed it was quite exhilarating to drive across this famous structure. We went to the north shore and drove into the hills that overlook the entire Bay Area in order to take some pictures.

The climate of Middle California was quite different than what we had gotten used to in LA. A strong wind contributed to the chilly feel of the day; it couldn’t have been more than 60F even though the sun was shining. The view from the hills was nice but we didn’t stay around for longer than we absolutely had to.

We headed back across Golden Gate and into San Francisco. We toured the characteristic streets that are made famous by car chases in films such as “Bullitt” with Steve McQueen, and “Dirty Harry” with Clint Eastwood. Our speed was somewhat more leisurely but we weren’t chasing criminals in the first place. The next stop was the Coit Tower, a lookout point, which also gave a nice elevated view of the area. To the east we could see Oakland and other bridges that span the Bay. In the other directions the financial district with its skyscrapers, and the to the west the ocean could be seen.

San Francisco is also famous for its streetcars. We rode one for a few blocks in order to get to another landmark: Lombard Street, probably the most crooked street in the world.

Next we drove across town, left the car in a parking complex and headed towards the seaport on foot. The wharves were crammed with tourists and vendors. We discovered that the next ferry to Alcatraz wouldn’t leave for ages so we dropped the idea of visiting this infamous prison. Instead we strolled along the piers and watched a large colony of sea lions occupy several low, wooden jetties.

By this time hunger began to take control of us. We decided for Chinese for a change and none of us regretted the choice. We could choose from several types of chicken, seafood, and, of course, rice. The food was excellent and cheap as well.

Later we visited Ghirardelli’s, a large chocolate store. It carried every type of chocolate imaginable, everything from the darkest to the whitest. Everybody sought out his or her personal favorite before we headed back to the car.

To round the sightseeing off, we went to a bar on the Pacific Shore. From our table we had a lovely view to the Ocean and the setting sun. We stayed for more than an hour while chatting and writing postcards.

Later that evening back at the house we decided to go see a movie. We had to hurry if we were to catch the 10:30 PM showing of “Mission: Impossible” in the local Century Cinema. We missed the opening credits but at least we were able to find our seats in the darkness. The film wasn’t as bad as “Twister” but that didn’t stop Niels from catching a nap toward the end. It must have been all that fresh seaside air!

May 30 - Thursday

Scheduled trip: Palo Alto, CA - Utah

Actual trip: Palo Alto, CA - Fallon, NV (310 miles)

Nevada revisited

It was time to start the return leg of our epic journey. Although we had scheduled to stay one more day in San Francisco, we had to be back in Carolina before June 7. We thanked Ursine for her hospitality and headed off to I-80.

The first part of the day was rather uneventful; we passed Sacramento, the Californian state capital, stopped at Lake Tahoe and lingered a while in the beautiful surroundings. In the early hours of the afternoon we crossed into Nevada.

Nevada is a strange state in many ways. Prostitution is legalized, which is quite evident when you go through the state. For instance, in the middle of the desert, a house just off the road usually with a high electric fence for privacy is almost certainly a brothel. Gambling is not just confined to Las Vegas. Even the most backward hotels at least have some slot machines and maybe a real casino albeit much less glamorous than what Vegas offers. This cesspool of sin called Nevada is made to look even worse when it’s compared to its eastern neighbor:

Utah, probably the most pious state in the Union. Only in America does such contrast exist. It's like imagining the Vatican placed right next to Sodom and Gomorrah.

We had expected to reach Utah that day but it soon became clear that this was impossible. In fact we only made it to Fallon, a small, quiet town in western Nevada. We had two choices of entertainment: gambling or TV. We chose the former and went over to the largest hotel in town and started to throw some money around. The casino wasn't exactly up-to-date. The carpets and brownish interior spelled out quite nicely that we weren't in Vegas if anyone had forgotten it. After spending some time and losing a few dollars each we returned to our room and turned on the TV.

May 31 - Friday

Scheduled trip: Fallon, NV - Grand Junction, CO

Actual trip: Fallon, NV - Escalante, UT (540 miles)

Going Utah

In the first few days of the trip, we had established a morning ritual, which we didn't break away from much. Usually it was up to Niels to decide when it was time to get out of bed. Naturally this had its advantages too. Thus he had the right to 'baptize' the bathroom, i.e. take the first shower of the morning. By shower number 3, the room would be more or less submerged. Even the clean towels could be wet.

Mostly Niels's fellow travelers were sound asleep when he returned from the hose-down. This was easily corrected though. The TV was switched on. Deep moans and the occasional loud curse usually followed a few seconds of MTV. It worked every time. Next there would be a scramble for the bathroom door; who would do the 'confirmation'? Usually that privilege fell upon Manuel, which left Dave and Mark to administer the 'last rites' of the shower.

We bought groceries in a local market. It was a sunny day so we camped right in the middle of the parking lot and ate our breakfast.

As we headed East the terrain was rising gradually. We crossed the low Shoshone Mountains and the Monitor Range. However, these were mere bumps in the road compared to what we would encounter later.

The drive through Nevada was rather uneventful. We crossed into Utah that afternoon and by this time we knew it was impossible to reach Grand Junction, which had been our intended destination. Distances on a road map can be conceiving and once again we had thoroughly underestimated the great expanses of the American West.

Instead we headed for Bryce Canyon. We arrived just before sunset and discovered that this was the perfect time to see the great gorge. Dusk arrived as we descended the canyon. Some places the path was so steep it was difficult walk on. The ascent was a test of one's physical condition but we all lived to tell about it.

Then we had to find a motel. We knew it could be difficult because we were in a scarcely populated area of the state; it was far between towns. We tried the nearby Cannonville but without luck. The question was whether we should double back to Cedar City, the largest town in the area, or if we should continue eastwards. We went east. After 25 miles we reached Escalante and found a motel.

June 1 - Saturday

Scheduled trip: Escalante, UT - Grand Junction, CO

Actual trip: Escalante, UT - Grand Junction, CO (360 miles)

Doing the Nat'l Parks with sensory overload

Southeastern Utah is literally one big national park. Even though we were behind schedule we simply had to do some more sightseeing in this picturesque state. First stop was Capitol Reef. That morning the visitors' center was already crowded before 11 AM. Obviously we weren't the only ones who wanted to enjoy the grandeur of the red cliff formations. A narrow road wound its way through the landscape. Following it was like riding a roller coaster. At several interesting sites we stopped and took pictures.

By this time we had been on the road for more than 2 weeks. We had already seen so much it was getting difficult to digest new sensory input. Surely we didn't spend the necessary time at each of the fantastic sites. Majestic rock formations unlike anything else in the world were bypassed without much thought; it had become somewhat commonplace.

After covering Capitol Reef, the winding back roads led us to Arches Nat'l Park, which was less crowded than the previous site. We parked the cars and hiked into the landscape following the carefully marked paths. As we caught a glimpse of the first arch, we found ourselves on a rock with what seemed like a 150-foot vertical drop on two sides. There was no railing so standing at the edge was certainly not for the faint-hearted. After verifying the awe-inspiring drop each of us kept at a safe distance. It shouldn't be a big deal, standing at the brink of a chasm. You can stand at the top of a long staircase without thinking twice about it yet you can't face a drop like the one that we encountered.

It wasn't easy finding a cheap motel in Grand Junction. In fact we drove around for about an hour before we found something suitable. After checking in, we went for some food. Dave called Karla Frank, an American who Dave knew from an exchange program in Switzerland. They set up a meeting the next day. Karla played on a soccer team and we were to meet her at a local tournament.

June 2 - Sunday

Scheduled trip: Grand Junction, CO - Boulder, CO

Actual trip: Grand Junction, CO - Lafayette, CO (280 miles)

Kings of the Hill

Around 10 AM that morning we went out to the soccer tournament that took place in the outskirts of the town. A host of matches were already under way, both girl and boy teams played. Dave went looking for Karla while the rest of us followed some of the games. Some time passed. Finally Dave returned with Karla and we were all introduced. While Dave and Karla talked of old times, Manuel and Niels went to buy brunch and supplies at a nearby supermarket.

The climate in Colorado was comfortable. It wasn't as hot (or as dusty) as New Mexico or Arizona. Although the sun felt less potent it soon proved necessary to turn to the old trusted friend: the sun block. A few hours of exposure in the relatively thin air caused sensitive places to sting. An ample amount of lotion, strategically placed on the hotspots provided instant relief.

Just after noon it was time to get back on the road. As we pressed eastwards, the road gradually rose ahead of us. Crossing the Rockies was quite easy due to the excellent I-70:

Four, six lanes of traffic and surprisingly few sharp bends brought us to altitudes of 10-12,000 feet.

The ascent took us way past the timberline and eventually we also encountered some snow by the side of the road. We drove through Vail, the classy ski resort, its lower slopes were grassy green. In due time the road started to slope downward. Just by putting the car in neutral and let it roll freely, speeds in excess of 85 mph were easily attained.

Even though it was Sunday we encountered many heavy trucks, thundering down the steep road. Sensible drivers geared down in order to spare the brakes any unnecessary punishment.

We turned north before reaching Denver, the Mile High City. In Boulder we had a hard time finding a suitable motel, spending ages looking for one. Ultimately we found a suitable place in Lafayette, just east of Boulder. It wasn't really a room - it was an entire apartment with two rooms, a bath, kitchen, and 3 televisions (only 2 worked!). The price was reasonable, not more than we usually paid for accommodations. We even had a porch with lawn chairs! One of the working TVs showed the 7th and final play-off game between Utah and Seattle. Manuel was certain that one of these teams would replace Chicago as World Champion.

Marco called David McCusker's sister, Nancy Benson, who lived in Boulder with her family. She invited us over that evening. We spent a nice couple of hours talking about our trip and our native countries. They urged us to visit downtown Boulder, which we did later that evening. Finally we looked for a fast food place but everything was closed.

June 3 - Monday

Scheduled trip: Lafayette, CO - Kansas

Actual trip: Lafayette, CO - Colby, KS (350 miles)

Pipe off (Camaro 2, Mustang 2)

The day before, Marco had noticed a car wash in Lafayette so we started the morning by cleaning off the bugs that had accumulated during our journey. Back at the apartment Manuel and Dave had packed their stuff together and were ready to leave. As we pulled out from the lot, Marco felt parts of the Mustang scrape against the curb. There wasn't anything to do about it so we decided to go back to Boulder to get some breakfast.

We came across a 1950-style diner, a nice change of pace. In the parking lot Marco checked the Ford's exhaust pipes. One of them was indeed bent. A closer inspection revealed that the entire pipe had broken off and was only held in place by a rubber band. The safest thing to do was to dismantle the pipe before it fell off completely. Marco crawled under the car and cut the rubber with a Swiss Army knife. The loose pipe was then carefully wrapped in paper and placed in the trunk. With a few feet of tailpipe missing the Mustang sounded meaner than ever!

The restaurant lived up to the expectations of a classic American diner, even the waitresses: they wore roller-skates. The food was pretty good.

It was still early in the day so we detoured north to the Rocky Mountain National Park. Again we climbed mountains. However, this time the roads were less straightforward. During a climb Dave and Niels noticed nasty blue smoke coming from the Mustang. Whether this was due to the missing tailpipe or a failing transmission was unknown. Some places we saw snow that was several feet deep. At one point we stopped and got out of the cars, dressed in only T-shirts and shorts to enjoy the view. It was gray and windy on that mountaintop, cold too, probably around the freezing point but we all enjoyed the experience.

We grazed the suburbs of Denver, getting a fleeting glance of downtown before we continued east. With the mountains behind us it was downhill all the way to Kansas. For once it was overcast and just after the Colorado/Kansas state line the water started to pour from the sky, the first rain we had encountered since May 16. The weather matched the landscape perfectly: Kansas was certainly looking dreary from I-70. We didn't bother to stop for anything except gas.

After sunset we began looking for a place to spend the night. The choice fell on Colby, a small town with several motels. We followed the billboards and stopped at a religious motel with HBO. Later Marco and Niels went to buy take out fast food at McD's.

June 4 - Tuesday

Scheduled trip: Colby, KS - St. Louis, MO

Actual trip: Colby, KS - St. Louis, MO (620 miles)

Kansas, the Sleepy State

It had rained a lot during the night. The next morning the potholes of the parking lot were filled with water, making it difficult to get to our cars without drenching our shoes.

Colby was very quiet. Even the supermarket was deserted. It started to rain again as we left town.

Continuing through Kansas was a bit of a bore. Seemingly endless, flat prairie lined the Interstate. Every now and then we passed by a town but nothing made us want to stop and explore. A large billboard outside the town of Russell proudly announced "Hometown of Bob Dole!", the Republican presidential candidate. But even that couldn't get us off the road.

As the day progressed the rain let off a little. At one point Dave discovered a strange-looking airplane flying south of the Interstate. As it got closer we saw it was an F-117 Nighthawk, the supposedly radar invisible fighter-bomber.

Communication between cars was scarce. In stead we listened to music and quietly badmouthed the monotonic landscape. We passed through Topeka, capital of Kansas, and we entered Missouri not long after that.

Most motels we stayed at weren't situated in large cities but rather in a suburb, a little off the way. St. Louis was an exception. We found a place not too far from the city center. It was after dinnertime and we hadn't eaten yet. We discussed what to do next. Niels had noticed a Hardee's across the street and wanted to pay it a visit. Everyone else was more in the mood for an evening drive in search of nothing particular so we went our separate ways.

June 5 - Wednesday

Scheduled trip: St. Louis, MO - Knoxville, TN

Actual trip: St. Louis, MO - Knoxville, TN (550 miles)

Caves and cars

We started the day by doing some light sightseeing in St. Louis. The main focus of our attention was the Great Arch. After parking illegally we quickly took some pictures of the impressive structure and removed ourselves before any parking attendants came around. The Arch also bears the name "Gate to the West", a fitting analogy since we were in the process of leaving the West behind.

Soon we crossed the Mississippi and entered Illinois and Indiana not long after that. In Kentucky we encountered toll highways for the first time. A small fee of a few dollars gave us the right to travel a certain distance. These toll highways were rather deserted and quickly took us through Northern Kentucky.

The next major stop of the day was the Mammoth Caves, about 60 miles south of Louisville. We arrived just in the nick of time in order to join a guided tour. Standing at the mouth of the cave was a strange experience. Cold air rushed out of the opening and into the forested surroundings. It was like standing in front of an air conditioner. An underground river largely formed the caves although some excavations have taken place throughout the centuries. Our guide informed us that it was the longest cave system in the world, running for scores of miles. The corridors were well lit. As we went along our guide turned on the light in front of us and turned it off behind us. Even with its big "rooms" the whole cave experience could seem a little claustrophobic. We saw daylight again after about an hour under ground. After spending some time at the Gift Shop we got back on the road.

It was mid afternoon when we passed the National Corvette Museum, not far from the caves. The Chevrolet Corvette is only manufactured one place in the world: Bowling Green, KY, which is also where the museum is located. Except for a 'Vette with a flat tire the parking lot was utterly deserted; the place seemed closed, but we tried our luck anyway. We met a clerk inside. It appeared that the place was about to close for the day but he let us in nevertheless. The first object that caught our eyes was a shiny new Corvette convertible. Visitors were urged to sit in it and admire the cool-looking engine. A price tag of a mere \$43,000 seemed more than reasonable! Inside the actual museum classic Corvettes were displayed along with awesome racing versions.

With the yearnings for horsepower, speed, and elegance satisfied, we returned to our own cars that faded slightly in comparison to what we'd just seen, and headed toward Tennessee. After nightfall we reached Knoxville and found a suitable motel close to a large airport.

June 6 - Thursday

Scheduled trip: Knoxville, TN - Home

Actual trip: Knoxville, TN - Home (300 miles)

How we escaped the Lynching Mob and lived happily ever after

Even though our motel was situated close to the airport, the planes hadn't disturbed our sleep. After checking out, we went to a local Waffle House and ate a wholesome breakfast. This was our last day so we might as well enjoy it while we could.

We crossed the picturesque Great Smokey Mountains and before long we found ourselves back in North Carolina. However, we were determined to make the most of the day so our time of sightseeing wasn't over just yet. Somebody had the bright idea of visiting a nearby amusement park. Soon we discovered that the entrance fee was a bit steep and the rides were mostly oriented toward kids. It wasn't worth it we agreed and went for a Cherokee Indian Reservation instead. We stopped in a small town, which certainly didn't provide the right *Indian* feel. Mostly the town consisted of gift shops, offering plastic replicas of various Indian paraphernalia, and refreshment centers.

Marco discovered that the Mustang was leaking what seemed to be transmission fluid, a dire sign considering we were still a long way from home. Later we had a mechanic look at the Ford. The transmission fluid level was far too low; several quarts were added. While the

mechanic worked, each of us called home to notify our host families that we were on the way. After the short service stop the Mustang seemed to function normally.

We were back in Greensboro around 6 PM. Even though we were close to home there was general agreement on stopping for food. Finding a fast food restaurant in America isn't particularly difficult. However, this evening we ventured into a part of Greensboro neither of us knew. Finally we came across a McDonald's. The Mustang parked on one side of the restaurant while the Camaro had to circle to find a vacant parking space. As Dave and Niels got out they noted that some of the other visitors started to behave in a bizarre way. Mark came around the building, saying we should leave right away before hurrying back to his car. Apparently someone had thrown a beverage at the Mustang and it was quite obvious that we weren't welcome in this neighborhood. As we drove out, more people had gathered in the parking lot to see us off. How strange things turn out! We had traveled through some of America's largest cities without incidents, but then, right in our backyard, we found trouble. All of us were a little shaken and on the way back to Burlington we tried to reprimand each other for what had happened. In truth none of us were to blame for anything. Besides, nothing except our pride was hurt.

Back in more familiar surroundings we stopped for food. It was with mixed feelings we realized that our trip had come to an end. We no longer had to sleep on the floor every other night, average close to 350 miles per day, or worry about whether the cars could make it back or not. Nevertheless, all this seemed a small price to pay for such a unique experience. Not only a score of pictures had to be developed in the following days, each of us had to process all the impressions that the trip had provided.

Dave was dropped off at the Barefoots' and the remaining three travelers quickly became two as Marco drove Manuel back to his home in Mebane, while Niels exited the Interstate with a final flicker of his high beam.

Epilogue

- Niels left the country on June 12. The lure of the European Soccer Championships was just too strong! Alas, Denmark did poorly.
- Manuel lounged around until June 16. Before his departure he spent some time at the beach and on the fairly difficult project: Finding a buyer for the legendary Mercury.
- Marco had a new transmission installed in the Mustang. The rip-off mechanics in Lexington didn't get paid; Marco went as far as hiring a lawyer before going home on June 19.
- Dave hung out at Myrtle Beach, SC for some weeks before he returned to Switzerland in the beginning of July.

Author's notes

No regrets

In retrospect many things could have been done differently. Driving 8,000 miles in 23 days and still act as tourists was tough, but we had a schedule to keep so it was necessary for us to stay busy. A little more time wouldn't have hurt anyone.

California was our priority all along. But maybe we were a little too narrow-sighted and forgot some of the other interesting places that USA has to offer. But who can cover a continent effectively in less than a month? Still, the last few days of the return leg were somewhat of an anticlimax; it was just a question of getting home. However, we followed the

original itinerary to the letter and made the most out of the allotted time. No one could accuse us of slacking!

The fact that we had to go in two cars as opposed to one van didn't spoil anything for us. In fact using two cars meant that safety was heightened a great deal; if one car broke down it wasn't likely that the other would break down at the same time. If we were unlucky to have a breakdown in the middle of a desert, the other car could go for help, or even pull the busted car to the nearest mechanic. As for the CBs: they were really the icing on the cake. They allowed us to communicate between cars and the whole thing wouldn't have been as fun without them.

There is no 'I' in 'team'

This diary was written primarily in the 'we' form. However, at this point in time I have to let go of the 'we' and speak for myself. With this new degree of freedom I would like to emphasize that the diary is my recollection of the truth and how I perceived the many days on tour, hence my travel companions may not share some of the sentiments expressed in the text. I could have chosen to make a more personal journal but I opted not to go through with that. Instead I hope this will serve as some sort of collective memory for all of us because details will fade with time whether we like it or not. The last few years have clearly dislodged and reorganized some of the many wonderful impressions that I got during the three weeks on the road. Amidst the blurring details, one thing is crystal clear though: May 15 to June 6, 1996 will be etched in my consciousness as a monumental experience that I wouldn't like to have been without.

My heartfelt thanks go to:

My Parents – for sending me to the States.

David McCusker – for being such an outstanding guy and lending us the hardware (CBs etc.) that made this trip so memorable.

Barbara D'Anna – for her courage to let us go off on our own.

Special "thanks" to:

The **Punks** at that Greensboro McDonald's – for not cracking our heads open.

* * *

This account was written - on and off - in Aarhus and Aars, Denmark in the period between March 1998 and April 1999.