

## **Great American Road Trip (2025)**

The idea for the ‘great American road trip’ actually began on a very sad note. My brother’s wife of 41 years, Teresa, passed away unexpectedly after a brief battle with a rare form of cancer. She was only 66. My brother, Joe, was devastated. They were just days away from a scheduled cruise to Alaska to celebrate their impending retirement when she suddenly took ill. She died seven months later at the beginning of 2024. My brother’s grief was overwhelming. He had lost his best friend, a loving life-long companion who raised three beautiful daughters with him. And I lost the greatest sister-in-law in the world. As Joe began to put together the pieces of his new widowed life, a difficult transition for any man happily married for such a long period of time, he mentioned to me that for her 66<sup>th</sup> birthday they had planned on taking a road trip along the famed Route 66 that stretches from Chicago to Santa Monica, California. I was so moved that I offered to do the trip with him in her memory. But as we began planning the venture, the hellish forest fires along California’s coastline later that summer made us postpone our trip for another time. In the interim, I went ahead and booked tours for Costa Rica and Southeast Asia.

In January of 2025 I came across a travel guide book outlining some of America’s most iconic road trips. The one that caught my eye was the Great River Road which follows both sides of the Mississippi River from its origins in Lake Itasca in northwestern Minnesota all the way

down to Venice, Louisiana (just to the south of New Orleans) where it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. The Great River Road is not actually a single road, but rather a collection of rural and interstate roadways that meander around the Mississippi River through ten U.S. States. It was recently voted the most scenic roadway system in America. I ran the idea past my brother, asking him if he would like to do this particular road trip in lieu of our previous plan to traverse Route 66 (which we had agreed to do at some later date). He wholeheartedly agreed, and so I began organizing the trip, researching the cities and stops along the way.

I rarely do any planning nowadays when I travel. I have grown accustomed to taking guided land tours with travel companies who arrange for all the details. When I was younger (during my Peace Corps days) I wouldn't think anything of sleeping in a bunk bed inside a youth hostel and sharing a single bathroom with half a dozen strangers; or camping out on the floor of a public station waiting in some backwater town for the next available bus or train to pass through. But I was now 64 years old. My increasingly arthritic bones need the comfort of a nice bed and a hot shower. But I had never planned all the details of such a lengthy trip before. My brother and I ended up taking a 17-day odyssey, driving over 4,700 miles through a total of 14 States. In addition, we logged over 60 miles of walking on this trip.

It took several months to map out how we were going to begin and end this adventure, and which cities and sites we were going to visit and all the details in between: from the car rental to the hotel reservations to the purchasing of advanced tickets for the more popular attractions. It was a pretty stressful chore trying to balance

travel times and hotel bookings with sightseeing stops. At one point I even thought that perhaps we were biting off more than we could chew. I mean, really, two geezers with enlarged prostates on the road for 17 days. *What was I thinking?* The pee stops alone could derail us!

Another thing I was concerned about was the idea of sharing a hotel room with someone else, even if it was my own brother. Since my divorce, I have lived alone for nearly thirty years now. I tend to value and protect my independence and privacy. I was not sure how Joe and I were going to get along on this trip. We have always been close as brothers, but we also hadn't hung out (at least not like this) in over four decades. Marriage and life has a way of separating siblings over time. Each of us had developed our own idiosyncrasies and personal (and, yes, *annoying*) habits over our lifetimes. I'm a morning person, up before dawn most days, while my brother is a very late riser. Not the best combination on a long road trip. But we got along very well. In fact, and this may seem almost impossible to believe, we never once turned the radio on in the car. We had great conversations, caught up on old times, laughing and joking and reminiscing about our parents and our childhood. We were also good roommates. I like showering in the morning and he likes to shower at night. It turns out we were a perfect fit for such a lengthy road trip.

As I began planning our adventure, trying to decide which places to visit for our free time, I asked Joe what his expectations were. He surprised me by saying, "*I don't have any*". Neither one of us had any real experience traveling in the Midwest or the Deep South. Having been born in New York City and raised in New Jersey, most of our travels within the United States had been confined mostly to the east coast and the occasional trip out west. So Joe was open to seeing

whatever we could see. Like he said, *everything* would be relatively new to us. In certain cities we did have some personal preferences, but all in all, the majority of the sites we visited were gleamed from travel websites like Trip Adviser and Viator. I would Google the list of the ten most important things to see and do in each city and then simply picked two or three places that were featured in the top five of all of the lists I looked up. Like my brother, I didn't know what to expect on this road trip, and to be perfectly honest, it made the journey more exciting.

One thing hanging over our trip was the rapidly changing political landscape of the country. The victory of Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election ushered in a new era in U.S. politics. And not in a good way, either. I haven't seen this much vitriol and divisiveness in our country since the anti-war movement surrounding the Vietnam War. One would think that our nearly 250-year-old judicial institutions would have evolved in such a manner as to make safeguarding the core principles and values of our 'unalienable rights' under the constitution a given. But since the installation of the new Trump administration at the beginning of the year, and, for that matter, going back to Trump's first term in 2017, the country has undergone a massive overhaul concerning what is now considered legal or constitutional or even *factual*. There was a time in America when there was a genuine consensus on things such as vaccinations, due process, free trade and standing by our allies. Not today, though. Thanks to Trump, Americans have begun to question the very principles upon which their freedoms are based. A very hard, right-wing shift in our national politics has made our democratic

institutions teeter down a seemingly precarious and unpredictable pathway.

To make matters worse – and emboldened by Trump’s personal haphazard style of political leadership, with many of his outrageous executive orders upheld by sympathetic conservative judges – Red States have rushed to appease his ‘vision’ of what America should be, no matter how convoluted or nonsensical his claims or ideas have become. In the process, many of the civil rights and political freedoms we used to take for granted now seem vague or downright unrecognizable. Women, for example, have lost the rights to their own bodies. In certain states a woman can now be charged with murder for having an abortion. Federal law enforcement agencies, hellbent on enforcing Trump’s increasingly racist and xenophobic immigration policies, routinely trample the rights of due process, one of the very principles on which our coveted legal system is based.

In addition, Trump has appointed many individuals to run important and sensitive government agencies who lack credible experience in these areas. Case in point, we now have a kook (for lack of a better word) running our health administration, whose paranoid, conspiracy-laced theories are dismantling vaccine programs and genuinely making Americans mistrustful of valid, science-based health information. It’s as if Trump has convinced his most diehard MAGA supporters that two plus two doesn’t equal four. No wonder American life expectancies (and general IQs) continue to trend slowly downward. Our economy, one of the most vibrant and successful free-market, capitalistic systems since the last century, is now governed by a draconian tariff system implemented by Trump that has steadily decreased job growth, raised the prices of almost all

goods and services and has earned us the ire of the entire world. *Holy shit on a cracker, how did we get to this point?* It almost makes me miss the pandemic!

With massive ICE raids becoming routine and a continual eroding of civil rights for traditionally marginalized or discriminated minorities, traveling across the South and Midwest during this time seemed a tad worrisome. At least, judging from all the nasty discourse online and in social media. I was concerned how two older Latino Americans like us would be received on the road, especially since we would be traveling through mostly Red States. But, like everything else you see or read online, much of our fears turned out to be overblown. I don't like to throw in spoiler alerts this early in my narrative but we had a fantastic time. In fact, with the exception of Mississippi (and, let's face it, no *real* surprise here), we didn't encounter any of the angry MAGA masses we thought were lying in wait in every small town we came across. It was just the opposite. Everywhere we went, people were genuinely friendly and nice, even in the big cities. Quite frankly, it made me feel proud to be an American even in these troubling times.

After careful planning and considerations, our road trip had two basic components: the first part of the journey was to drive north from Miami all the way to Green Bay, Wisconsin before heading west towards Minneapolis to hook up with the Great River Road for the second part of the adventure, the return trip south along this famed roadway system. The trip would allow us to experience a huge slice of the *Americana* that makes the regions we saw so special. In certain areas we encountered the vestiges of America's past right alongside the growth of some of its key future cities. The scenic views were

sometimes awe-inspiring. I have visited dozens of countries now in my years of traveling, and I can honestly say that the United States is as beautiful and wonderful as any I have seen abroad.

The day before we left, my brother and I headed over to the National Car Rental center near the Miami International Airport to pick up our vehicle for the trip. We were given the option of selecting our own mid-size sedan from their lot and Joe picked a brand new black Nissan Sentra with just under 10,000 miles. We were delighted its license plate was from Kentucky instead of Florida. We were afraid of being targeted by local cops, especially in rural areas. With Kentucky plates we looked like a couple of ‘good ole boys’ passing through.

On the morning of May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025, my brother and I began our Great American Road Trip...

## **Day One**

**(To be Continued...)**