

Vacation 2004



DAY	LOCATION	DATE
1	Springfield, MO	Feb 11
2	Waco, TX	Feb 12
3 - 4	San Antonio, TX	Feb 13 - 14
5 - 18	South Padre Island, TX	Feb 15 - 28
19	Denton, TX	Feb 29
20	Rolla, MO	Mar 1
21	Freeport, IL	Mar 2

San Antonio and South Padre Island.

Day 1– To Springfield.

We departed Freeport at 6:45am.

The snow piled along the sides of the road looked like sand dunes. The roads are dry. 180 miles from home the snow starts to disappear. In St Louis we reach a temperature of 53°F.

Look, there's the arch. A brief glance, then eyes back to the spaghetti bowl roads.

Driving south out of St Louis on I44 we pass first through rolling hills and enter wine country. Little sign of snow here. Several wineries have people tending the espaliered vines.

So many cell phone towers....

Tried out the GPS and new software. OK so I know exactly where we are. Now what?

Apart from the stretch around St Louis, the traffic has been quite light.

It is 3:15pm, 450 miles completed, and we are just 100 miles short of Springfield. Having stopped for breakfast, gas, pits and lunch, that is pretty good timing.

Well we made the Comfort Inn, Springfield, 552 miles by 5:00pm. CI are running a promo. Stay 2 nights and get the 3rd free, so we signed up. Should manage that this vacation. As part of this package, we also got a telephone number to call and get a 20% discount.

After a couple of drinks in the room we put on jackets and walked down to Ruby Tuesdays for a good meal. Jan decided to have soup and salad. Weight watching you know. The salad bar was priced at \$1.99, but when we got the bill, quite a shock. Her soup and salad was priced at \$9.00 I asked why and was told that the soup was priced as an entrée. So I quizzed the manager and was basically told "company policy." I asked for a company card and after ten minutes she returned with a scrap of paper with a telephone number on it. Strange. Guess I will have to use the net if I want to grumble. Not that nine bucks breaks the bank, but I think it could have been handled better.

Day 2 – Departing Springfield.

It is cold and windy, only 21°F. As we left and drove west on I44 the temperature drops to 17°F before beginning to rise, but not much. We see no snow, but where water has drained out of the rocks along the roadside, frozen waterfalls abound.

What? Snow..... No! Just a truckload of white turkeys in cages shedding feathers.....

The road to Joplin is bumpy. Here we join the Oklahoma toll way, a much better surface with only three roads joining it. The scenery is flat with only brown grass and cattle to view.

When I checked the mileage using our mapping software, I was surprised to find that San Antonio is 750 miles from Springfield, so I don't think we will make it today.

The sky has been crystal clear for most of the day. The sun streaming through the car windows is hot. Jan & I arm wrestle for the air conditioning and heating controls. Me, I'm hot, she is freezing.

We cross the Texas border from Oklahoma at 2:40pm. Just 75 miles to Fort Worth. Time for another audio CD. Celine Dione belts for us.

So far we have seen only two cops. 30 miles south of Fort Worth there were five within a space of twelve miles, each with a victim. Then number six. He was driving in the left lane at 65mph, the limit is 70mph. I was not about to undertake, so slowed. So did he. We kept on doing this until I was only traveling at 45mph, the legal minimum. We had both lanes backed up behind us. To heck with it and I passed on his inside. Looking back he peeled off into the median to face the opposite lane. Idiot!

Jan and I decided to stay with the Branch Davidians in Waco tonight. We pulled in around 6:00pm having driven 601 miles.

Many of the larger Texas towns have an interesting road system. A service road runs parallel to the interstate, a divided highway. To cross from one to the other, going south to going north, one makes a U turn under, or over the divided highway. There are three lanes instead of two. It takes a little getting used to.

We asked advice at the front desk. "Where can we find a nice steak restaurant." (No prions of course.) The directions required we go north, make a U, go south two underpasses, and make another U. i.e. we are returning on the same side of the highway, but south of our starting point, the hotel. When we arrived back at the hotel, *not intended*, we asked for fresh directions. All our tracks were good except we should have stopped at the second U. The restaurant was right there. Confused? We were. Second try and we holed out.

Day 3 – San Antonio

I carry two wallets. One with money and charge cards, the second other things like AA membership. It is Friday the 13th. Guess what, I can't find the second one! We have just checked out and left our room keys inside. Back to the front desk and I am escorted in, but don't find it. Could have lost in anywhere.

Jan is driving as I write this just before Austin. It just started throwing down ice crystals. We change drivers.

The hail alternated with freezing rain but only lasted 20 miles. It is around freezing.

The traffic is very heavy into San Antonio. We find our desired exit and head towards the River Walk aiming for the Hyatt. "Jan I give up, it is not here!" The streets are narrow, brick surfaced and traffic heavy. No place to stop let alone park. Finally I pull up in a side street and start asking. All I get in response is "Yes, its around here somewhere." As luck would have it a lady delivering floral arrangements parked in front of us and we got good directions. The Hyatt was full. Everyone is coming to San Antonio for Valentines Day. There are several conventions in town. Try the Marriott. No, not that one, the one on the River Walk. Twice round the block and past the Alamo. "Would sir like valet parking?" "Let me see if we can get a room." We did, and no I will park myself. "Jan, I am not touching this car until Sunday."

San Antonio is packed. All the good restaurants stopped taking reservations two weeks ago. Tonight we eat Italian on the water front, but will have to try for cancellations for tomorrow. It is too cold for walking, so we went to the IMAX, twice. Saw the story of the Alamo, and Climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

I don't know who wrote. 'Nothing in this world is ever lost, just it's location may not be known.' Jan, my sleuth went through all our in-room luggage. My lost wallet turned up in an obscure pocket in our small case.....

Supper at the Italian restaurant was superb.

The weather forecast for the next few days is much better. Perhaps we can do the River Walk. The Marriott opens on to a three level mall a bit like Water Tower Place. Outside is the River Walk.

Day 4 – More San Antonio

This morning San Antonio suburbs endured a snow and ice storm. The roads were closed around 5:00am.

We ate breakfast at the food court in the shopping mall overlooking the River walk.

[Marriot River Walk.](#)



Off to the Alamo.

History documents that 189 men died at the Alamo in 1836 at the hands of Santa Anna's army. A new Alamo film is to be released in April. As a result of research for it, they now believe there were some 50-60 more unnamed heroes.



Gardens around the Alamo.

Other Residents.



Here a strange gathering of uniforms. We learn it is to be a re-enactment of Maj. Gen. Twigg's surrender. (Name spelling?)



In 1861 Texas was ready to secede from the Union. The Alamo was then used as a military base and storehouse having been refurbished and roofed. The Texas volunteers confronted Twigg and his garrison of a hundred or so men with over a thousand sharpshooters. Twigg surrendered the Alamo without firing a shot.

Texas Volunteers.

His men returned north, where he was relieved of command. Strangely Gen. Robert E. Lee arrived a day or so later to pay his respects to Twigg, and was promptly told to leave by the volunteers. Later of course he became their commander.



Twigg's Army.



There were several dozen other followers who did not participate in the reenactment per se.



From the Alamo we hiked to the River Walk. Bright sunshine. Lush gardens. No wind. Lots of people. Apparently there is a conference in town for Music Educators, all 20,000 of them.



Lunch at a bar on the River Walk. Then we take a trolley around town. The city center is beautiful. A few blocks away from that is not.





Our feet are tired. Back to the Marriott.

We spotted a nice sea food restaurant, Landry's, on the River Walk and asked about reservations. "Sorry, but we closed those two weeks ago." We decided to try anyway. "90 Minutes wait." I out maneuver at the bar and get us drinks. Jan grabs stools. It seems to me that those with pagers, which we don't have, are moving faster. Go get one. Five minutes later we are paged. So we wait barely an hour. An exercise in the laws of natural selection. Dinner was again superb.

When we got the bill, it was rather more than I had expected although we had eaten well. Then I noticed, number of people, three. Gosh, did Windsor join us? We had the third entrée removed, and I felt more comfortable with the total. Don't you have to watch!

Day 5 – To South Padre Island

As we drive out of San Antonio there is no traffic at all, but then it's Sunday. Prickly pear cactus appear. The trees are more stunted. A few cattle. It's ranch country. Not much to see. Soon the trees begin to disappear. Just grass and scrub.



We turn south just before Corpus Christi on route 77. It is flat. The fields are huge. One at least a mile long and tilled. We see a field of what looks like pampas grass. I always find something of interest to note on any journey, but this stretch is a boring 100 miles.

Super 8 Hotel Room.

Our first sign for S. Padre. We plan to look for a supermarket, but before we realize are approaching the bridge. The island has one main north-south road with lots of little cross roads running east to west.

We check in to the Super 8 at noon, but our room will not be ready until three, so we rendezvous with Rosa & Ken.

We are very impressed with the room. Much nicer and larger than we expected. A modest kitchen has two cooking rings, sink, microwave, small fridge, ample cupboard space and tile counter top.



View from Balcony Outside Room.



We learn that the proprietor was born in Uganda Central Africa, where his family ran foul of Idi Amin's government. They moved to Birmingham, England. Not sure how he ended up here.

We took Rosa & Ken out for dinner to celebrate their 46th wedding anniversary. We had a table where we could watch the sunset over the ocean.

Sunset from our Balcony.

Day 6, Monday, SPI

The hotel provides continental breakfast. I chat with a lady from Illinois. Judging by the number plates, we have a strong mid-west and Canadian group staying here.



Lots of Condos along the Beach.

We hear that the weather has been awful since the beginning of February, cold, windy and wet. In contrast, today has been gorgeous. Clear blue sky, the temperature around 67°F. The forecast is for 80°F later in the week.

Back across the bridge to Walmart where we buy folding chairs for the beach. They collapse into a small tube. Next we shop for food. We take it in turn to cook dinner.





Us tonight Rosa tomorrow.

Access to the beach is across board walks cut through the sand dunes. In several places a fee is charged so we drive about a mile north, park and have free access, although even here I think they charge during spring break. The beach is wide and stretches for many miles. Rather a brisk wind.

Day 9, Thursday – Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge.

Jan and I have slipped into a routine. Breakfast off the motel lobby. Decided to nuke an egg and blew the circuit breaker. You can only run two out of three, waffle iron, toaster or microwave. May have to resort to breakfast in our room.

The beach is tens of miles long. After breakfast we walk about two miles alternating north and south. The island started getting built up closest to the bridge, the southern end. Big hotels like the Sheraton, Holiday Inn and Radisson make beach access very difficult, but we found a ‘back way’ to get through the Radisson to the street.

A free shuttle bus runs every half hour. So we catch it back to the hotel.



This afternoon Ken drove us to the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. We purchased a Golden Age Passport on our last long trip. It gives us free admission to National Parks. So our entrance today was free.



This 45,000 acre park is situated on the gulf shore about 20mi from SPI. Composed of scrub brush and lagoons as well as sea shore, it is home to dozens of bird species. We have never seen such variety in one park before. Osprey, egrets, all kinds of ducks, coots, lots of long legged water birds and on. I am not well versed in birds, but it was most interesting.

[The Dunes.](#)

This evening it is Rosa's turn to cook. We knew the room was not furnished with any cooking utensils, so brought several with us. The electric skillet is proving most useful.

Day 10 (Friday) – Day 13 (Monday)

On Friday we visited Dick & Estelle. [For those of you who do not know them, they are friends from Cedarville.] They are staying at Bahia Mar a condo complex close to the extreme north part of SPI. Most of the building is taking place from south to north.

Surprisingly this is a 'mature' complex. Their condo, two beds, kitchen & living room is nice, but older. They look out on a swimming pool.

We enjoyed cocktails and snacks. Jan's sister and husband had already dined, so we walked across the street to Blackbeard's and were glad to have sweaters.

Not much to note Saturday and Sunday. Isn't it nice to be a beach bum. I am more tanned than through the whole of last summer.





North, adjacent to the Convention Center is a bird sanctuary. We spent an hour in crystal clear weather spotting all kinds of birds. They seem so tame, completely ignoring us on the board walks. We saw a bird with a twelve inch beak digging in the mud up to his face. Would have to be pretty good to get me to do that.

When we walked after breakfast today we saw dozens of blue jelly fish beached at the high tide line. Portuguese Men O' War. Nasty sting. so we walk carefully.

There are dozens of buildings going up. We check out a nice new condo, 977 sq. ft. 2 bedrooms, living room, bath & kitchen. Only \$149,000. "Hey Jan, we could afford that." Read the fine print. Monthly dues \$269. Taxes \$3,400.



A similar condo at the Radisson rents for \$2,400 a month.

SPI is a wonderful location in fine weather. Sun, beach, sand, water and sky, but I don't know what you would do if the weather was poor.

We sat on the beach this afternoon, at around 77°F. It began to cloud over. In came a sea fog, and I mean FOG. My glasses clouded over. Water condensed on my arms and legs. And yet it was still warm. Weird! We left. Nice long sleep till supper.

Day 14 – Tuesday, Harlingen.

More sea fog so we drove to Harlingen and spent a few hours in a mall.
A mall, is a mall, is a mall.....

Day 15 – Wednesday, Brownsville and Matamoras

It is bright and sunny, about 68°F, but the wind is dreadful, gusting to 35mph. Off to Brownsville. We see a fleet of shrimp boats. Indeed the shrimp has been very good eating here

Ken, our confident navigator, has me within yards of the International Bridge to Matamoras, Mexico, insisting there will be a parking place at the entrance. I balk and head for a parking lot a block away. Just as well.

Foot traffic is 50c. We cross the Rio Grande. Not as wide or grand as I expected. I pause for a second, one foot in Mexico and one in the USA. The bridge has a twelve foot steel fence with what looks like razor blades on top. No customs or any kind of immigration check on the Mexican side.

We spot a large store, Garcia's, and take the elevator up a floor to the displays. There is some nice merchandise as well as junk. We make a few purchases. We check out the comparative prices of our prescriptions. The prices from Canada are better. Some from Walgreens are better. We buy nothing.

“Jan, I'm not going to walk around carrying all this like some ass.” Back to the car. Only 25c from Mexico.

Customs was satisfied with our driving license as proof of residency, but pointedly asked if we had purchased pharmaceuticals. We had to pay duty on two bottles of Kaluha which surprised me. I guess you have to be out of the country overnight?

Ken stays 'in Mexico' sitting on a seat. His walking is not good.

It takes only a few minutes to unload and repeat our crossing. Again we head for Garcia's. This time to their restaurant for lunch. Soup salad bar, entrée and desert for just \$8.95. The place is large and packed. A large party of ladies wearing red hats and purple dresses occupy several tables. Nice linens, and clean carpeted floors. We make our way to the salad bar. When I return to the table, my glasses are missing. I interrogate the waiter, whose English is not the best. It turns out Ken had picked them up “for safety.” That nearly started an international incident!

The meal was superb!

We take a free bus a mile or so to the city market and are let out at the back of a store. The market is a mixture of stalls and nice shops. I am struck by how clean the streets are. Unlike our previous experiences in Mexico. A large number of locals are shopping. Gringos are a minority. Strange. We resist the pressure to buy. “No, I don't want a Mexican hat or gun belt. And, Jan, you will fall out of that hammock.”

Again we check out the price of pharmaceuticals and arrive at the same conclusions. No bargains.

Time to head back. We wait where the bus dropped us. No sign of it. A local tells us there is no free return. The taxis are waiting like vultures. He takes us two blocks up the street where we wait for a local bus. I assumed he wanted a tip, but no. He just asked “How is my English?” and explained that he had learnt from television instruction.



“It is very good, Texas-Mexican.” He grins and disappears. The bus cost \$1 for all four of us.

We don’t need supper so dine with the Colonel (KFC).

Day 16 – Thursday

This morning the temperature is in the mid fifties, still windy but bright sunshine. It is supposed to warm later.

We are on the second floor. The view from our room overlooks a small inlet from the bay. We watch a white egret fishing for breakfast. A gray heron lands on a house opposite. Sheltered from the wind he is still there when we return from food shopping.

Day 17 – Friday

Jan feed the birds with stale bread. I get bitten by a gull. Jan gets ‘anointed’. We discover the swimming pool. Private, walled and nice shelter from the wind. I jump into the pool and all but have a heart attack. The Eskimos are warmer. The hot tub is a warm bath. Time to shower.



Day 18 – Saturday

Each Saturday they hold a market at the convention center. Interesting junk. Time to pack. This can’t possibly fit in the trunk!

Next to the Convention Center is a series of board walks extending into the bay for bird watching.

Dinner at Scampi’s. Superb.

We plan to hit the road at 6:00am.



Two Kings.



Two Queens.

Day 18 – Sunday, Depart SPI for Denton, TX.

Neither of us sleep well so we rise at 5:15am and are on the road by 6:15am. It is still dark. Two miles over the bridge which joins the island to the mainland at Port Isabel. We understand another bridge is planned to handle the traffic. Since the present bridge is six lanes, three each way at 55 mph, it must be really bad in high season.

The hotels are beginning to fill up. All the Texas Universities are on break at the same time this year.

Everywhere you look, condos are being built. Some magnificent, but I am sure beyond our reach. Still I think I prefer the flexibility afforded by renting. You can go to different places.

It is getting light. Good. Too many road works to be enjoyable driving in the dark. Route 77 is being replaced by I69, under construction. Many bridges and over-passes have been completed, but not the road bed. This has a strange effect on navigation. To continue north on route 77, one must fork left at each bridge. If you go straight ahead, you exit.

A farmer is tilling his fields on a Sunday, and it is barely light. Maybe he has another job?

A sign proclaims, 'Border Patrol, all traffic stop.' Barricades guide us onto a slip road. Three armed guards with canine challenge us. "Yes, we are citizens." "Pass!."

We breakfast in Bishop at the same Tex-Mex restaurant we found on the way down. The potatoes are fried cubes and of course it comes with refried beans.

We notice wild flowers coming into spring bloom. In places, carpets of brick red ones. Never seen those before.

The blue sky gives way to heavy clouds and a sprinkle of rain. Although it is flat, the air is filled with mist and the horizon not visible. The rain must have been heavy because the fields are flooded.

Again we see cops galore doing strange things. Looks like they are setting up a road block. Two facing north on the south bound lane with one blocking a cross over.

The traffic is light and we are making excellent time. Our target was Waco which we pass mid afternoon. On through Fort Worth to Denton. Its near dusk now. "Lets stay at the Comfort Suites and see if we can redeem our free night? Look for exit 466A."

"Jan, I hate to tell you but we just passed exit 42, no way can that be the right exit."

Route 37 has a split personality. South of Fort Worth and Dallas it divides into 37W to Fort Worth and 37E to Dallas. These then merge again at Denton.

We follow 37 north until we find exit 471 where we turn around and retrace our steps. Six miles south we are back to the forties. Then it hit me. We were following the west leg. Our exit was on the east leg. Dutifully we exit at 466A. Comfort is in sight. We turn under the interstate only to be confronted by NO ENTRY signs. Cars are pouring off the interstate slip road towards us. I pull into a gas station opposite.

“How do I get THERE from HERE?” Two oriental guys barely speaking English tell me the signs don’t mean what they say. Sure and those big Texas trucks won’t run over me?

I navigate through the parking lot of the adjacent gas station and hole out. The front desk explains we should have gone south and made a Texas U.

“Can we claim our free night?” “Sir, you have to make a reservation by phone. Over there.” Ring, ring. “This number can not be reachedreachedreached ...”

I give up and fronty dials. “But sir, you have to allow at least three decades for your points to be recorded.” Grrr!

Fronty drops our price by \$18. We would have stayed here at any price. Why am I always composing terse letters to corporate America?

A Texas U takes us to the Outback and home.

Day 19 – Monday, to Rolla, MO

This has been a great day for driving, 57°F bright sunshine, not a cloud in sight.

Me driving. “Jan, do we take this exit for I35? I thought we went straight through. Help me. Look at the map. We are on I235. Is that right?”

Jan, “I can’t find I235!!!!”

I pull off down a ramp, take the spaghetti route and pull into a business parking lot.

“Let me see. Which map are you looking at. Tulsa? But, this is Oklahoma City.”

More miles.

Jan driving. Big truck in front. “Jan, I think this is the exit, follow that truck.” Which she dutifully did..... into a weigh station. Fortunately we realized my error and were able to abort at the last minute. “No dear, I’m not trying to see how much weight we put on during vacation.”

The usual with Comfort. “Sir, you are credited for one nights points and need two.” Rather funny because we were sitting in the hotel lobby making reservations. “No I don’t need directions or late arrival, I’m already here.”

They offer free high speed internet access via a wireless connection. I sign up, but after some thought realize I don’t have adequate security features installed on the lap top, so decide not to use.

Both the Comfort Suites we stayed at last night, and the one today appear to be new. The rooms are immaculate. Now if only I could sleep.

Should be home tomorrow.

Day 20 - Tuesday

Home by 3:30pm. No snow!

Our journey, 3,544 mi, 119 gal gas, 29mpg.