

## **The Fates Were Against It** **(The Kentucky- Washington Trip: July 2003)**

This trip just didn't want to happen.

A year ago we decided to go to Florida. So this was a Florida trip. It was a Florida trip right up until June 30<sup>th</sup>. But things began to unravel long before that.

We had several goals on this trip, one of which was to see the Kennedy Space Centre. Last fall I discovered that Atlantis was due to launch on July 24<sup>th</sup> 2003. Great, we could time things around that. Then the space shuttle disintegrated over Texas. Scratch that idea. What the heck, it wouldn't have launched on time anyway, they never do.

Another goal of the trip was for Liz to "Swim with the dolphins" at Discovery Cove in Orlando. Reservations had to be made. Airplane tickets had to be bought to fly Liz home from Tampa. But Liz kept putting this off. She had a "bad feeling" about the trip. The available days with the dolphins kept shrinking.

Carolyn was going to be home after the 14 July. When I went to confirm this in late June we got the bad news. Nope, she wouldn't be home until late July. Well cripes this was not good; we HAD to be home in late July for John's visit. Arranging summer vacations when everyone is traveling is a pain.

When we heard that from Carolyn, Liz and I looked at each other and asked the question we'd never asked before: will Scott and Corrine be home? A phone call confirmed our worst fears: NO one we wanted to visit would be home! That was it, there was now no longer any reason to go to Florida.

We breathed a collective sigh that we had not booked anything and in 2 minutes I had the outline of an abbreviated trip down to the Mammoth Caves (Liz was always keen to see these), back up along the Blue Ridge Parkway and into Washington. Forget Florida completely. So it was decided that's what we'd do. A long three week trip to Key West was shortened to two weeks and Chattanooga was as far south as we'd get. No flights had to be booked as Liz could do the entire trip in the car. There was a question about booking hotels in Washington, but Liz still had a "bad feeling", so we didn't. Good thing too.

If this trip has taught us anything it is: NEVER BOOK ANYTHING. Flexibility is the key to traveling with Liz, kids and an old van.

This spring I have got seriously addicted to 3D puzzles and bidding on EBay. It's important to know this to appreciate this next fateful "message".

We were due to leave on Sunday morning. On the Friday before, at 1:20pm an auction for the Reichstag puzzle would end. I wanted to bid, but just at the last minute. Liz wanted me to run over with her to pick up some fabric so we could cover one half of the cushions

on the new couch so they'd match the new chair. We had just enough time to get them and get back so I could bid. We rushed over and got the fabric. Just as we were about to get on the 401 to return the van beeped at me and said "Check gauges". Holy Lord, I was over heating!! We were 2 minutes from Agincourt Chrysler where we get the van serviced anyway so I drove directly there.

While they researched the problem Liz and Scottie sat in the air conditioned service department. I ran over to a nearby shopping centre to find an internet connection. At the Radio shack they let me borrow their terminal for a minute and I got in my bid with about 10 minutes to spare. (I won the auction, but since it was coming from Germany the total cost of the puzzle was nearly \$40.)

Back at Agincourt the mechanic came and showed me the problem: the radiator was the original and was in need of replacement. The air conditioner needed to be serviced, but that involved a \$300 refit because of the Freon. Also the main fan was making strange noises, but it did seem to work. That was an expensive part to replace as well. Oh and by the way the brakes were poor. The actual cause of the over heating was never properly diagnosed.

So it was decided to replace the radiator and thermostat. (It was assumed it had stuck closed.). The air conditioner and breaks could wait. BUT all this would take many hours and we had to get Liz home. So we got a rental: a nice Intrepid, but what a hassle.

By 10am on Saturday I had the van with its new radiator home in the driveway. I washed it and packed up.

We left on Sunday as planned. All the bad luck we had had was repaid with three lucky breaks on the first day.

On the Ambassador bridge going over to Detroit the left lane was clearly marked as "Cars only". It was stopped about ½ way across: at least an hour to get through customs. But the right lane was moving well, so I hauled out and followed the big trucks and a few other cars. Then I saw the customs official and the pylons. The right lane was only for trucks and we had to cut back in the left lane. The official was talking to each car which did so. He was really ticked off and threatened to make us go over to the truck inspection station and wait all afternoon to cross. But he let us in the car lane, and then a new booth opened and there I was three cars back! The officer asked about food and I said we had sandwich makings and then he got interested: "Any beef?" Holy cow, I'd forgotten about that! Fortunately we only had ham and chicken and he let us in without an inspection. We crossed the border in maybe 10 minutes!

The second lucky break occurred just a bit further on. We stopped for gas just outside Detroit and was ate lunch there at the back of the station. There was grass to sit on, but we had to endure this guy's music which he played really loud and every second word was "mother f...er". Then there was this guy who kept trying to put air in a badly flat tire. Of course it wouldn't hold any. Sad. Now you're asking how is this lucky? Well just as

we left the heavens opened up and it poured. In a mile there was a beautiful rest area complete with picnic tables. I kid you not. Liz and I laughed, had we checked the map we'd have found that and gone there to eat and got completely soaked! As it was we had a dry meal and entertainment!

We drove to Stockbridge, just outside of Ann Arbor and found Kathryn's house. This was a lady I met on the Internet. She has a collection of about 100 3D puzzles and she wanted to find a good home for them as she has cancer. The very first puzzle I see in the house is of course ... you guessed it, the Reichstag. Had I listened to the fates, I did not have to bid at all on that that puzzle, because it waited here for me. I could have all that I want for free. She was a wonderful lady. She invited the entire family in and gave us cold drinks. We had a good chat about the puzzles and her home and family. It was amazing to see them all around the house and in the basement. We left with the promise to be back to pick them up. She was going to dismantle them and box them up in the mean time.

Back on the road we headed for Dayton and an Olive Garden. But we had stayed too long at Kathryn's and had to eat an hour before Dayton. We headed for a "Bob Evan's" but darn it if I didn't miss the exit! This was our third lucky break of the day. Just after the exit there was a sign for an Olive Garden! We'd never have seen it had I taken the correct exit. We looped back and went to the restaurant. Had to wait a half hour, but the food was great and the service good.

When we came out it was pouring again. Liz was ecstatic. I don't camp in the rain. Thus we got a Red Roof for the evening in Dayton.

Just as I was moving the van into the correct spot outside our room Liz and Alex spotted smoke coming up from the hood of the van! We were on fire! I checked all my gauges: everything was okay, and we didn't even have the AC on. The smoke stopped as quickly as it started and an inspection under the hood revealed nothing. Everything was fine. I figured a leaf or some grass must have burnt up quickly. Nothing could be done then and the van worked fine. I restarted it and everything seemed tickity boo.



The next morning bright and early we were at the US Air Force museum in Dayton, just a few miles from the hotel. Liz was excited to see BocksCar, the plane that dropped the second bomb (Fat Man) on Nagasaki. They had the Blackbird and tons of other types of plane in four massive hangars. The newest hanger, not yet totally done had a black ceiling. Liz asked why (the others were white). "The General liked the way black looked" was the reason!

Back out on the road for Kentucky we knew we had a problem. There was NO air conditioning. It had not been great but it just wasn't working at all now. We could not drive in this heat and humidity without it. Liz would have died in the back. So after lunch, in Cincinnati we got off the highway and I stopped at a Sunoco. I went inside and was referred to a local garage. They couldn't help, but they in turn referred us to RJR Radiator.

RJR Radiator were the nicest folks. I asked if they could help us out with the air conditioner and as they were deciding if they could do it, Liz and the boys came in telling us how the boiling radiator fluid was running out the overflow and pouring on the ground!

“Well we now have a different problem”, the guy said with a laugh! Seeing the entire family there they took pity on us and looked at the vehicle instantly.

While they looked over the situation we waited in a small air conditioned room and read Harry Potter. After an hour or two they had not found the trouble. The air conditioner needed more Freon, but otherwise it worked fine when they applied power to it. It was simply not getting any power and they didn't know why. The radiator was overheating because the fan wasn't running. Again I told them about the smoke from the driver's side under the hood. Then we all saw it together: a mass of burnt wires. These “fusible links” were designed to do exactly that: burn up to prevent the computer from getting toasted. Okay so now we had a plan: they would replace the links and recharge the Freon. Thank God for the US. In Canada they had to convert the entire thing, here for \$100 I got a couple more pounds of Freon and that was that!

Now all this was going to take some time: maybe it'd be ready at noon tomorrow. So before they started, we drove the van to the Holiday Inn up the road about ¼ mile and checked in. It had a pool and Internet connection! Fanciest hotel I ever been in! Then I took the van back to RJR.

We swam and surfed and read HP.

Next morning at 11am I hiked up to see what was up and if we could check out and continue on our way. Nope. When they had replaced the links and they had burnt out again in 20 seconds. The main radiator fan was causing the problem, it needed replacing: just as Agincourt had suspected. So we'd have to wait longer. We booked the room for another night. Later that evening they called to say that the fan they tried to put in wouldn't fit. They had to get one from the dealer, be there next morning.

That night, as always, the thunderstorms rolled in.



At 10 am the next day I walked up and the van was ready!! Paid and drove back to the hotel. Was I ever happy! We loaded it up and checked out.

When I started the van it went “click”. WHAT THE HELL! I raced in to the hotel and phoned RJR. In two minutes they were there with a boost and we got it back to the garage.

They were the nicest folks. We had the owner and four mechanics working at it at once! The owner took me aside and said “If it had tits or wheels, you’d have troubles.” We laughed. They were so concerned with getting this family from Canada on the road again. We discussed routes and attractions and so on.

Again we sat and read HP while they worked on the van. It was a dead battery. Several cells were completely dry. I had NEVER checked it in five years thinking it was a maintenance free battery! In about 1 ½ hours we were finally on the road again with a new battery. They gave it to me at cost.

In our entire trip no one mentioned SARS or Canada and the war in Iraq. We were treated great everywhere we went.



So if you're counting this was day 4 of our trip. With the AC blowing out the coolest air in years, we cruised the back lanes around Lexington looking at the magnificent horse farms: Vinery, Donamire, Calumet, and many others. It poured rain of course.

Then along another back Kentucky road we found the boyhood home and further on the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln. If there was a connecting theme to this trip, aside

from the freaky fates, it would be Lincoln. We visited his earliest beginnings, where he made his best speech (Gettysburg) and where he ended up (Washington).

We got a Days Inn in Cave City and the next morning we were at the Mammoth cave visitor Centre in time to get the first tour of the day: the Frozen Niagara tour. This was a two hour tour. There were only about 20 people so the guide was able to answer all our questions. It was a neat cave, but it lacked almost all the things you think a cave has: stalactites, stalagmites and flowstone. Generally the only claim to fame is its length: over 300 miles! But it was fun anyway. The entrance was down this narrow twisting stairway of 300 steps! Alex was not thrilled with caves, but he did'em. Now I said the cave didn't have any pretty stuff, but that was not entirely true. At one point, the Frozen Niagara part, was very pretty with the flowstone and so on.

After that we ate lunch and then got on the Historic tour: another 2 hour tour in a different part of the cave. This was the tour I had done 25 years ago with Mom and Dad: lots of huge rooms with a section of narrow passageways. Again very cool, but not super pretty.

The next day we checked out of the Days Inn and took the Diamond Cave tour. This 1 ½ hour tour was through a very spectacular cave with nothing but stalactites, stalagmites, flowstone, cave “bacon” and all sort of other glorious formations. I confess if we ever go back there I think I might give Mammoth a pass completely and just do these private caves. They were very cautious about things and their rules and regulations were the same as in the national park. The guide was very knowledgeable. The only down side was there were lots of broken formations. The guide explained that in the 1930’s, there were many rival caves in the area. They had “cave wars”, in which other cave owners would send thugs into the other caves to destroy the prettiest things. What a shame it was.



After that we drove thru the back roads of Kentucky and Tennessee in a straight line to Chattanooga. It was a beautiful clear afternoon for a change and we got into the city in time to do Rock City up on Lookout Mountain. This was a cool hike thru massive rock formations, over bridges, thru tunnels and narrow passageways to a magnificent lookout. They claimed you would see 7 states from there.



The next morning we did our fourth and last cave trip: Ruby Falls. Now this was certainly a private cave. They had blasted their way into the cave and were not super concerned about keeping things “natural”, all manner of new blasted out pathways had been made. In any case it had many very spectacular formations and the huge falls in the cave was truly awesome.

We couldn't leave Chattanooga without seeing the Chattanooga Choo-Choo so we drove down to see the old steam train parked next to a lovely flower garden.

Then we did a long drive into North Carolina, along the Ocoee River and huge numbers of white water rafters, and onto the very southern end of the Blue Ridge Parkway.



Now I recall that the northern end of this was “nice”. You climbed up a HILL and then drove relatively flat along the ridge. Well not down here! We had to go up a MOUNTIAN! I'm not kidding, from 2000 up to 6000 feet in a few miles! And twisty! It was glorious, with pulloff's every tenth of a mile!

Anyway, I HAD to take pictures and so Liz drove. We had only gone about ½ way

up the first mountain when Liz said, “My feet are wet”. (I hadn't noticed as I had sneakers, but she had sandals on.) The floor was covered in water, which was dripping from inside the dash!

Well this could mean all sorts of very expensive problems if the interior cooling/heating system was broken. I was so depressed at the possibilities. So we stopped at the next pull off.



Fortunately it was only WATER. There is no water in a car. That is to say, the cooling or heating system doesn't use plain water. So this had to be condensation from the AC. This normally drips out a tube under the engine on the ground. Another helpful tourist told us that the tube might be blocked. So while I crawled underneath to find the tube they found a long thin stick. I poked it up into the drain tube, but there was water running out anyway and it did not seem blocked. There seemed to be nothing more to do. The van was in fact running nicely. The AC was good and there was no over heating. In any case we decided it was simply the steep grade that caused the overflow or whatever and we continued on our way, without the AC as it was not hot up here in the mountains anyway. We never saw any more water, but it was a fright for a while.

We got to the top, took pictures and in a info place saw to our horror that it was all up and down for the next several hundred miles! (The parkway was 450 miles + 100 more miles for the Skyline Drive in Virginia!) We had taken a solid hour to go about 10 miles! We'd still be on the BRP today at that rate. PLUS don't forget they said our brakes were not the best! This was not a doable project.

Well I said I'm doing the next mountain and then we can skip some of it. So down we went and then back up to the highest point on the parkway: over 6000 feet. Then down again. It took us 4 hours to go about 50 miles in total when we stopped for the night.

The next day we drove along the flat valley and skipped several mountains before returning to the parkway at Linville Falls. There were hiking trails there. Four of 'em to be exact and I hiked every one. Took us till noon ☺. The falls were great, but nothing to write home about. (Oops, maybe they were ...)



We continued up along the BRP, thru tunnels and over the Linn Cove Viaduct. Very pretty. After about 100 miles or so and most of the day we got off and shot up along the east side of the mountains on I-81 up past Roanoke in Virginia. It poured and poured on us: hail as well. It slowed the Interstate to a crawl.

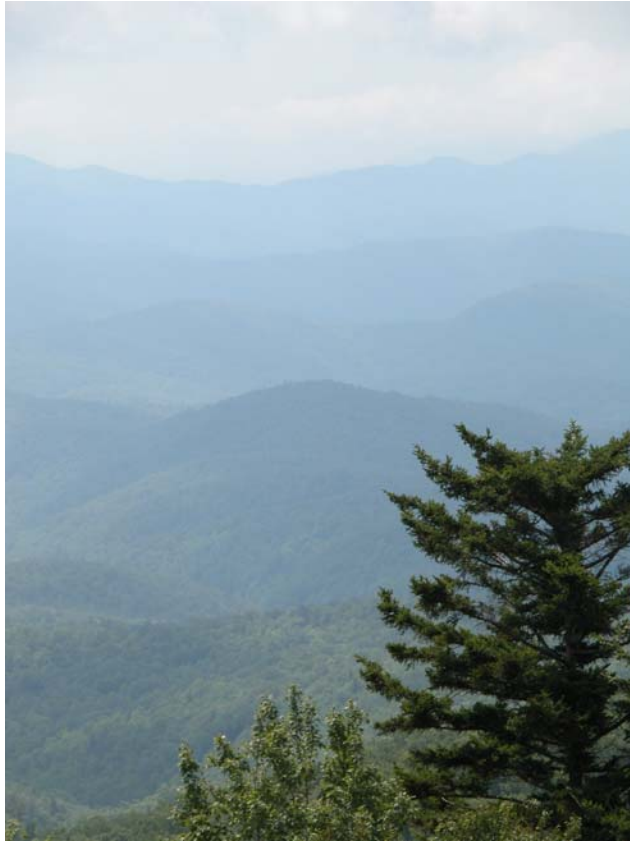
The next day we did the 100 miles of the Skyline Drive from bottom to top. It was foggy on the east side of the mountains but it was clear on the drive. It was pretty to look down on the tops of the clouds. We saw deer and a bear, and I got a quick mountain top hike in while Liz and the boys played cards.

Then it was noon and we were an hour from Washington. It took an hour on the phone, but eventually we got a hotel, right off Dupont circle, in downtown Washington (a 15 minute hike or 2 subway stops from the White House), with a complete suite including full kitchen, living room and bedroom. There was a pool and laundry facilities. It was great and the price less than \$100 ☺.

So we drove directly there. I took a slight wrong turn but it ended up perfect. We drove straight into the underground parking lot and found a space. Had we done it “right” and arrived at the front of the hotel it would have taken a very complex route (because of all the one way streets) to get to the parking spot. We checked in, hauled up our stuff and ran over to the subway: first stop the Natural History Museum and the Hope diamond!

Now a word about the subways: They were very slick. Stick money into a machine and get a fare card. Sort of like a phone card. You can put whatever amount you want on the card. You stick the card in the turnstile to get in and to get out and it deducts the cost of the ride. (Every ride costs a different amount depending on distance and time of day.) it sounds complex but we soon figured it out and it worked a treat. Also the hotel room came with two free passes for a day!

Two words about security: it’s nuts. The Americans are so scared its scary! They have huge cement blocks around all the buildings so you can’t drive a truck into them. (They are replacing the ugly blocks with huge cement planters so eventually it will look okay.) and inside everyplace you have to empty your pockets and go through a metal detector.





So anyway we saw the Hope diamond and a huge collection of other gemstones. After an hour Liz was “Overwhelmed”. We looked around quickly at the dinosaurs and then out onto the mall and back to the subway and the hotel.

The next day it was the US Capital building tour. We got there at 8:45, 15 minutes before it opened. I figured we’d be first in line. WRONG! The line up was huge! After about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an hour we got tickets to the 11am tour. So we hiked over to the Air and Space museum and had a quick tour of that.



At 11am we returned for the tour. They said it would take about 1 hour. They were correct it did. What they didn’t tell us was  $\frac{1}{2}$  of it was in security checks. This is how it worked. We first gathered at the bottom of the hill. A guide told us to go up to these tents. He did not come with us. We went to the tents, after he checked all our tickets. Then we waited a while there and she told to go into a building. We went to the building, after she checked all our tickets.

There we passed thru the metal detectors. Then we were told to go into the Capital itself. We did, again un-escorted. We got just inside the main doors and waited. Then finally the guide there took our tickets and we walked up into the main rotunda and were met by our fifth and final guide. We were told NOT to leave the group. One lady walked over to the wall about 20 feet away to catch a running kid and was nearly kicked out by police! The tour itself was okay but only included the rotunda and another empty room with lots of statues. That was it and it was over! Interesting but short!

Back at the Air and Space museum we ate lunch in the biggest (most customers served per day) and possibly the most expensive McDonald's. We toured the museum, taking lots of pictures and saw a planetarium show.

On our way home we stopped in briefly in the sculpture gardens and returned to the Natural History Museum so I could see some Ice Age skeletons and an Easter Island display we had missed the day before.



That evening while Liz and the boys played in the pool I returned to the mall and hiked up to the Lincoln Memorial and took some night shots.



The next day it was hot and steamy and we did the “Monumental Hike”: it must have been 3 to 4 miles in total: the Jefferson Memorial, to the Franklin Roosevelt Memorial, to the Korean War Memorial to the Lincoln Memorial to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial back to the Washington Monument. After that Liz and the boys were “done”.



Actually, as I pointed out to them while they laid on the grass, they weren’t done. We had to hike to the American History Museum to get lunch and for me to see the display about computers: right from the first ones through to Deep Blue the chess playing machine. I got lots of good pictures for school.

From there we took a subway ride to see the National Geographic Explorer’s Hall. This turned out to be not great: there was a display on Sir Edmund Hillary and nothing else of interest.

That evening while Liz and the boys again played in the pool I hiked down and walked around the White House and watched a military Tattoo on the Ellipse. It was neat to see them dressed up in all the different uniforms from the early Indian fighters, through civil war and on to today's latest "plugged-in" soldier, complete with camera on his rifle, heads up display and GPS tracking. We were able to get close up pictures of all these guys after the main show was over.



The next day we left Washington, after stopping at the Washington National Cathedral. It was a huge church with lots of stained glass, flying buttresses and great grounds.

At Gettysburg we bought a 2 hour guided audio tape tour with a map. We drove the entire battle field and saw every marker and monument and are now experts on the battle. I got lots of pictures and thought it was really neat but sad. Liz and the boys enjoyed the first hour or so. But by the end of the THREE hours it took to do the TWO-hour tour they had had MORE than enough!



Before they could lynch me I drove up through central Pennsylvania and got a cheap motel.

Our last day saw us at the Corning Museum of Glass. We did the museum in an hour and the gift shop in an hour and half! They have the best stuff there. Liz drooled over the Stuben glass sculptures of hot air balloons and of some swans. The hot air balloons were only \$11,000: a real steal.

We made it across the border without a hitch and thru Toronto's traffic jams and were home by 6:30: on the Friday we said we'd be home.

So even though the fates seemed to be against the trip, it turned out just fine. We had a great time. Liz especially loved the fact that the tent was never touched.

July 2003.