

Alex Marti's and Lucky's great adventure. Part One

A couple of months ago I had this idea to make a trip up through the Northwest...a driving trip that would take us to places like Mt Rushmore, Yellowstone, Seattle then down the Pacific coast to California returning through Nevada, Utah, Colorado and back to Texas. It was ambitious considering that most of our travels in our married life had been by air, either by airline or our private airplane. Usually it was destination oriented...fly somewhere...sponge off our friends a few days then fly back. Things have changed over the years, our interests have changed and lately we have taken up motorcycle riding.

It really was an ambitious plan, driving and camping in our 14 year old Astro Van and pulling a newly acquired and modified trailer for the motorcycles. It would still require some sponging off of friends....a month sleeping only in the van seemed like a recipe for some not so happy moments. I made a few calls and plans were made for a month's travels on the road.

Our planned departure date was June 15th....a Monday. I had spent a week in Wisconsin closing a deal to sell our hanger into a partnership. There were a few hiccups but eventually everything worked out and Marti will get her new kitchen later this summer. I returned from Wisconsin on Saturday the 13th so we had one day to pack for a month and depart the next day. I spent most of Sunday trying to ready the van. I had to weld re-enforcements to the trailer hitch. I went to start the van to go attach the trailer and the battery was dead. The interior lighting had somehow turned itself on permanently....no problem....just remove the lightbulbs..at least 5... and charge the battery. The battery wouldn't take a charge...one more item to get at Walmart before we can go.

Our planned departure time on Monday was 6 am. We finally got going at the crack of 10. We headed North on I-35....drive...stop...adjust the tiedowns...drive drive...stop...more adjustments...redesign the ties. ... drive drive drive go North out of Wichita to Salina, now trouble. Ahead we see lightning. Marti pulls up the radar on her phone. It looks like if we hurry we can outrun the storm to Salina. We did but once we turned west on I-70 we were in it....the motorcycles were baptized...the first in a series for the next few days.

Whoa!! I see sunshine then a Walmart. Pull off honey. We camp here. Outside of a couple of big rigs noisily parking by us it was an uneventful night. The next morning we asked the checkout lady where we could find internet in town. It turns out Ihop had wireless two blocks away. Awesome. We were on the road by 8am

Our dog Lucky is very happy to be part of our travels. For the most part she is well behaved but she has this unbreakable habit of yipping and whimpering for several minutes when we start out...every time we stop and start the engine again....it gets old. When we are on the interstate, she is usually content to lie down and be quiet. On two lane roads it is different. She has a perch in the back where she patiently waits for a car our truck to appear over the next hill. As it approaches she whimpers and then as it

passes, she follows it with her head until it disappears behind us...more whimpering. At Grainfield Kansas we turn north. It was two lane roads for the next two days.



Lucky on her perch



Stopping for lunch at road side park

The good thing about the two lane roads is that there was no traffic to speak of...at least not going our direction. The V-6 powered van struggles a little up the hills with the heavily loaded trailer but makes up speed on the down hills. Nebraska came with more rolling hills. It started to get very green with grassy hills sometimes fading into the

horizon with no sign of inhabitants. It was a soothing drive. We were trying to figure out where to camp Tuesday night. The rand says there is a state park just before the South Dakota border. We camp here. Chadron State Park turned out to be a very welcome shower. We took the Yamaha duel sport for a little spin around the park to warm the oil for a change and got our first distance view of the Black Hills. At some point the drain pan for the oil didn't get packed.... no problem we have this plastic container freshly out of nuts. Hey, I think we might have warmed the oil a little too much. As the oil begins to melt and deform the container we anticipate a hazardous waste clean up. We fix dinner waiting for the oil to cool enough to transfer. The dog is an immediate hit with two young girls camped next to us. Lucky finally had a job to do.

8 am Wednesday found us orbiting the campground trying to find the exit. Our plan for the day was to drive to Wind Cave national park in the Black Hills of South Dakota and ride the motorcycles to Mt Rushmore through Custer State Park. As we unloaded the motorcycles in the park it began to sprinkle. Well the good news is that it is cloudy and the dog won't suffocate while we are gone. The bad news is it is cloudy and beginning to rain. We press on. It never did rain hard. Custer State Park was awesome...a motorcycle paradise with plenty of hills and curves. We could have averaged 30 mph but traffic kept it to about 15....three hours to go 49 miles.



Custer State Park with Buffalo in background

It was beautiful. The free range Buffalo were worth the trip and provided photo ops. The rain quit as we approached Mt Rushmore and the sun came out. It looked like the pictures.



At least the presidents didn't have helmet hair

We took a couple and took the fast road back to the park, loaded up, fixed some lunch and headed west. As we approached Buffalo Wyoming we saw a sign for Deer Creek Camp ground...with wireless internet...paradise for \$22.00. Lucky thought she could herd deer....lol...not a chance.

Our camping reservation at Yellowstone was for Thursday so we pressed on early from Buffalo. Immediately we are climbing steep grades with our wimpy van into the Big Horn Mountains. We could see snow. We stopped at the pass for a photo op.

It was a beautiful drive into Yellowstone. We set up camp. Oh so many rules to remember. Yellowstone is not pet friendly. The campground is at 8000 ft above sea level. There was a snow bank next to our parking spot....brrr I see a cold night a comin. It was a typical summer afternoon in the mountains...sun's out..take off the jacket...clouds, put jacket on...thunder then hail about the size of peas. Enough to make an icicle on the edge of our tarp cover as we cook pork chops on the grill. We cover the motorcycles and get in the van to sight see. It is incredibly beautiful here. In spite of

intermittent rain showers, we manage to see some cool stuff. It is 6:30 we are ready for bed. Let's see if we can stay up long enough to watch a movie on the computer.

We took a deep cycle battery and a small inverter to power the computer for DVD movies and so far it seems to be holding up well. We slept snug all night with 3 sleeping bags and a comforter but morning presented a frozen surprise. Yes ice..not frost...ice solid ice in puddles from the rains the night before. We may have to wait a while to ride today.

We got off to a chilly start about 9:30 and rode north to Tower Falls...a very impressive sight. Descending from the pass over the caldera it began a slow but welcome warming. Tower falls was worth the short hike to view. I took a short movie, a single frame just doesn't do it justice. 60 miles later we were back at the camp to let lucky take a break...chase the ball...against all regulations...we are so bad. We took another short ride to the Yellowstone canyon falls.



There is no waterfall more impressive short of Niagara.... Back to camp, build a fire and cook dinner....tilapia with spinach onion, mushroom and spices...mmmmm mmmm the second reason I married her.

With a little more wine, we were ready for a movie and bed.

Saturday dawned clear and noticeably warmer. This was the day we had planned to do the long loop down south through the western part of the park and down into Grand Teton National park. Start the engine..wimper yip...drive 20 miles stop to view geyser basin, back in the van whimper whimper yip...drive 20 miles ...stop wait for old faithful to erupt...talk on the phone in the limited cell coverage area...back in the van whimper..yip...you get the idea.



Old Faithful doing its thing

It started out perfect weather and slowly degenerated into a rainy day. We did get a good look at the Teton ridge and a short drive through Jackson. It seemed longer driving back in the rain. We gave up on cooking dinner and defaulted to the sandwich shop for chili and a sandwich. Just about the time we finished eating, the sun came out. The weather changes fast in the mountains.

Tomorrow we break camp and head for our friend Jim Robinson's place near Billings. At Jim's I hope to be able to upload the journal and maybe some of the movies I shot. It will be great to be in a place where Lucky can take a dump and I won't have to pick it up!

We awoke to the sound of rain on the roof of the van. Fortunately, we had broken down camp Saturday night and all we had to do was hook up the trailer. We got coffee at the cafeteria and pressed on in the rain. It rained on us continuously for the next two hours. It is a slow drive out the north east gate of Yellowstone. In spite of the wet weather the scenery was gorgeous. After leaving the park we continued to climb into the Beartooth national forest....up and up... the van was flagging at 10,000ft plus. The higher we got the more snow we saw. Close to the summit the lakes were still frozen.



We were soon driving in the clouds. It should have been a great view, but all we could see were the snow banks on the sides of the hairpin turns and whatever loomed out of the fog 50 ft ahead. As we broke out of the clouds on the downhill side of the pass it was sunny and the view was spectacular. It was only another hour to our friend Jim's place and a welcome shower.



Arrival at Jim's place near Billings Montana

The first week will end with good friends and plenty of stories told under the influence of alcohol.