

Cross-Country Covid-19 Covert Tour by Marilee Free

Sorry We're Open - Please Stay Home

Every year, I look forward to traveling for my birthday in September. However, in 2020, I was caught by the "Catch 22;" should I stay or should I go? I certainly did not want to get sick or bring Covid home to my 82-year-old mother. So, is traveling in a pandemic necessary? Maybe not, but for some people, it is what we do when we can. Staying home and staying in one place can cause depression, stress, and restlessness.

My best friend in California was disappointed when her trips to South America and Kauai were cancelled due to the pandemic. She told me she wanted to drive across the country to see me. This friend has flown around the world, but had never driven across the US. I told her if she was sure she wanted to do a road trip, I would fly to Los Angeles and ride to the Keys with her. She got very excited. Spontaneously, I booked a one-way flight to Los Angeles, for \$58.

Being an inquisitive, roving reporter, with a bad case of wanderlust, I wanted to see what traveling was like in the "new norm."

Questions ran through my head as I was shuttling to Ft. Lauderdale Airport with Norm, the comedic 'Gabby Gabby' (shameless plug, call Norm if you need a ride 727-542-1075).

Most of the vendors were closed in the quiet terminal, as I was awaiting departure, including the bars. Burger King and one newspaper convenience store were the only options.



Black Lives Matter mural in Hermosa Beach, CA.

I watched a cleaning team of two go through the plane, supposedly sanitizing for about 15-20 minutes. But in all honesty, it did not look that clean. Masked, I took my window seat, third row. Hoping for room to stretch out, but no. Clear blue skies above as we circled over the East Coast and headed west. I closed my eyes and tried to rest.



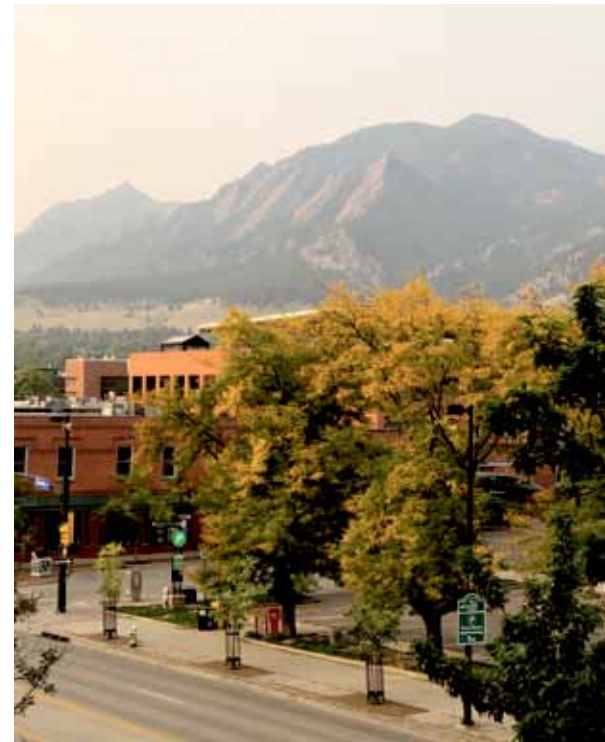
Sunset on the Colorado River, Vail, CO where Smokey Bear says, "only you can prevent forest fires!"

As we began our descent to LAX, it took 15 minutes to get down through the mess. The smoke the wildfires had caused was thick and brown, as the Spirit jet safely touched down.

My traveling inspiration, we will call her "Badge," was standing by to pick me up. LAX was eerily empty, again with very few vendors open. Even Gene Simmons & Paul Stanley's joint, 'Rock n' Brews' was closed. 2020 is truly the year the music died. Traffic was light at LAX, one of the nation's busiest airports.

The next day, I awoke in the smoke and began a new appreciation for fresh, oxygenated air. I took a long walk, masked, of course. California had strict mask laws in place with spotters ticketing anyone at the beach without a face covering.

There were joggers, dog walkers and others around on the Greenbelt Path to Hermosa Pier, poor air quality



Our view from the Boulderado Hotel, c.1909.

notwithstanding. It was strange to see the calisthenics equipment covered with temporary construction fencing, so no one could use it. I spotted a "Black Lives Matter" mural, and a sign that said, "Finally, We Are Open." Street parking had been converted to outdoor dining areas. Take-out and outdoor dining places were busy, as no indoor dining was allowed in LA. Everywhere we went, someone had a lament.

My birthday was shared with some of my favorite Cali-friends. My farewell feast was at Joe's Crab Shack, Redondo Beach, my former employer. Joe's has a big outside deck. They had moved all the inside tables to the parking lot and put up large tents to accommodate their guests.

Badge and I began the cross-country trip the next day. Traffic was moderate leaving Los Angeles and through Vegas, but not as busy as usual. We drove to St. George, UT the first day. Our hotel's pool and jacuzzi were open. We watched motorized hanggliders and a hot air balloon from our hotel window in the smoke-filled, hazy air. We had dinner at Benja Thai & Sushi, with only limited indoor seating. Everyone was wearing masks.

Vail, CO was our next stop. We stayed the night in a Marriott on the Colorado River, it felt as if we had the hotel to ourselves. Many stores and restaurants were closed, maybe due to Covid and maybe because there was no snow on the ski slopes. We dined indoors at the Vail Chophouse, a busy

Cross-Country Tour , continued

place with good food and a full bar. We asked the server there about the effects of the pandemic. She said they were closed for three months and were just getting opened back up. She informed us that bars and restaurants were ordered to close for a 9 pm curfew. Most everyone wore masks, except for the few people riding bikes on the beautiful bike path that follows the Colorado River.

Then the short drive to Boulder, CO, where we toured the hip, college town where Badge's niece attends the university. Outside dining only was permitted there. We had lunch at The Sink with comical murals on the walls. We checked into a nostalgic hotel built in 1909 called the Boulderado. It was quiet, with few people staying, but it



Is this a zombie apocalypse? Nashville's empty streets!

was like a trip back in time. We saw lines of students in a parking lot wearing masks and standing 6 feet apart, waiting for Covid testing. The day we got there, the university went on lockdown and we were unable to see Badge's niece, except for the magic of Face-Time. That night, for dinner, we walked the famous Pearl Street Mall area. There were older people out and about, but very few college students, unless they were working.

The smoke was finally lifting as we made it to Oklahoma City, OK. Restaurants were serving inside and outside there. We had breakfast at Café Kacao, it was quite busy, and tables



The Boulderado Hotel Bar dates back to prohibition days, c.1909. A sip back in time!

were not spaced 6 feet apart. Some non-essential businesses still were closed, or maybe they hadn't reopened after the shutdown.

We toured the OKC Bombing Memorial, a beautiful park to commemorate the 168 lives lost in 1995, in a very tragic event in our nation's history. The town was full of colorful murals and lots of interesting things to do, with trendy restaurants and a plethora of cowboy boots and accessory stores. We went to an indoor estate sale, in a mall, that was a first for me. The fall colors were just starting to turn, as we toured around the quiet town.

The next stop, a quick lunch in Memphis, TN. Beale Street was busy, with the spirit of the blues music in the air. Outside dining was the only option. Again, bars and restaurants were hopping with people, as horse-drawn carriages trotted around the classic town.

Not the same vibe in Nashville, TN, home of country music. We stayed on the 13th floor of a Hilton. We walked the town on a Sunday morning and had it practically to ourselves. Nashville offered a lot of museums, sporting events and concert venues; a lot to do, but there was no one there to do it.

Macon, GA was our next stop. We stayed in a Comfort Inn. We found a tasty restaurant called Ocmulgee Brewpub. The manager came out to visit with us and talk about our journey, and we asked about her take on the pandemic. She said the shutdown was difficult for that college town, but things were get-

ting back to the "new norm." Talk about Southern hospitality, everyone in that town was so kind, helpful, and friendly.

There were billboards throughout the Bible-Belt with eye-catching Christian messages ranging from pro-life, to depression, to zombies. Some of the most interesting were the hand painted, religious signs leaving Macon on I-75. When we crossed the Florida line, the billboards changed to ads for Ron Jon's, bars, and strippers. (Oh yeah! We know how to party in the Sunshine State!) Across the nation there were Trump supporter signs everywhere, with very few for Biden.

One more night on the road was spent in Naples, FL. I was surprised that few were wearing masks there. Naples was bustling. We spoke with a real estate agent who said people are leaving big cities in droves and there are currently more buyers than sellers in her area.

I'm happy to report, that after this trip, I'm alive and feeling fine. I had a little congestion and a cough, possibly from breathing the wildfire's smoke. I lost my sense of smell for about 5 days. Two of my friends in Cali tested positive for Covid. They too lost their sense of smell, had a slight cold, but have completely recovered. Badge lost her smell but is doing well. She drove back safely to Los Angeles solo. We followed the CDC guidelines, and everyone involved is healthy.

I am so grateful to have taken the Cross-Country Covid Covert Tour. Our nation's economy has really taken a toll in travel and tourism; I'd like to think that we helped some Thanks for riding along virtually!

