

## TRAVELING 101

I've been back on the East Coast for three weeks and my flannel shirt still smells like Nevada: musky sage, that heavy desert perfume. It will take one more week of adjunct teaching to pay for the Kia Forte I drove from Reno to Baker, on famed US 50, America's Loneliest Highway. They make you pay extra for that—taking the car one way. A drop charge it's called, as if you've abandoned the car in the middle, as if all journeys are meant to be circular.

My final destination was Great Basin National Park, one of the "undiscovered" national parks, the ranger will tell me when I register for the backcountry. By "undiscovered" he means "too far away from an interstate for most people to bother." But on the right side of Carson City, some 300 miles from the park, I felt embarrassed to learn that I was already *in* the Great Basin, that it is in fact a mighty tear of land, so called for its self-contained system of rivers and streams. A derelict watershed, an inland empire of vapor and dust.

If you were to trace US 50 onto a blank sheet of paper, the line you drew would mimic the landscape the road shears in two: great heaves of mountains ranges, looming like the hesitant crests of black ocean waves. Between them, valleys of verbena explode like fireworks and the rain-starved earth cracks open like peanut shells. Heading east, the scenery reinvents itself endlessly: naked hills surrender to scrub-smothered mountainsides that will, if you insist on driving long enough, transform before you into the alpine peaks you probably think of when you think of the American West.

The majority of the road passes through public land; in fact, the majority of Nevada (around 85 percent) is public land. This means that the dizzying number of dirt paths that peel off the highway like the skin of ripened fruit—the ones that dissolve into the horizon or disappear beyond ridges before giving away their secrets—are accessible to just about anybody with hiking boots or 4-wheel drive. If this is the Loneliest Road, I thought, coveting each one, what does that make these splintering trails? These million rocky mysteries?

Reminders of how many roads there are to choose from and how many more we leave behind.

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I'm not sure when US 50 lodged itself into my consciousness, but I was probably 16, maybe 17. It almost definitely happened in the back room of the AAA office on Ludlow Street in downtown Dayton, Ohio. My father, the mailroom supervisor, who was affable and well-liked there, got me the summer job. We drove to the squat, yellow brick building separately every morning, even though we worked just a flight of stairs apart. I felt more grown-up that way.

My job was to assemble TripTiks, now a seemingly ancient tradition. These totems of middle-class travel were invented by an industrious AAA branch manager in Cleveland, but the word itself has etymological roots in the French "triftyque," which was essentially a passport for a vehicle. And AAA's TripTik was a passport, in a way, too, but also so much more: a hand-curated collection of routes, reservations, and brochures to—not just get the driver where she needed

to go—but to provide her with the answers to questions that, today, she would simply ask her passenger to tap into Google.

It worked like this. Say I received a request for a TripTik from Dayton (the rusty city where I was born) to Baltimore (the rusty city where I live now). Sitting at my large desk, which was actually a mosaic of three unwanted desks salvaged from the storage room, I would carefully unfold the map of the eastern United States. I would smooth it out before me like wrapping paper. I would identify the most logical route, using two or three of my fingers as wayfinders. I would apply circular stamps to delineate alpha and omega, and another to mark possible roadwork delays or congestion-prone areas. Last, I would highlight the route in an authoritative shade of orange. The finished project looked like a Christmas tree, bright and baubled, transforming the map from something foreign into something festive: in short, a holiday. Your holiday.

The real fun came in assembling the journey into a flipbook, pulling individual pages from a hulking wall of inserts, each representative of one chunk of American asphalt, dirt, and sand; parks and parking lots; city blocks and farmers' fields. These long, rectangular pages were the descendants of AAA's very first maps, called stripmaps: large cardboard panels distributed to the earliest American drivers, when cars had cranks and most of the country's roads looked like the ones I peered down in Nevada.

These inserts were numbered and corresponded to a key, so that you could create virtually any route you wanted, following any sequence of roads you could imagine. I had recently squeaked through statistics class, and I marveled often about how many unique combinations the system offered.

For the TripTik from Dayton to Baltimore, the first page would lead the driver from Dayton to Columbus, some 71 miles of flattened ground and fattened cows between them. After Columbus, I would pull another insert that showed the way to Wheeling, WV. Because the Pennsylvania Turnpike was under heavy construction that summer, I would then direct my invisible customer south through Morgantown, WV, and on to Cumberland, MD, along Interstate 68 that slices through the Alleghany Mountains before meeting back up with Interstate 70, which ultimately dead-ends and deposits its passengers into the humble suburbs of West Baltimore.

The backs of these inserts were like prototypical Wikipedia pages, an instructive antidote for road-trip tedium, containing need-to-know facts and less-than-vital trivia. That Columbus was almost called Ohio City, for instance, or that in 1926 Ohio State crowned a heifer as its homecoming queen. That the stone tavern outside of Uniontown, PA, is both an old Civil War encampment and a great place to get a cheeseburger. Where to stop for the night if you lose your verve. Where to pull over for family photos. Where to go to the bathroom. The whole thing was designed to, of course, get you there. But also to enlighten you—to prevent the paralysis of autopilot—and to delight you, when, every 50 miles or so, you could flip to the next page, feeling like you had been somewhere even if you had been nowhere at all.

Once this book—like the annotated bibliography of your trip—was bound with an official-looking curl of plastic, I'd stuff it and the map into a white envelope scribbled with a last name. I would scan the bookshelf behind my desk for the official AAA guidebook to the Mid-Atlantic States. I would insert the Baltimore tourism brochure, and—why not?—information on Washington, DC. Maybe this party would never be so close again.

I was a teenager. The architect behind hundreds of family vacations. That was me.

It wasn't long before I began pilfering brochures from the purple filing cabinets where the books and guides were kept in bulk, huge troves of possibility. I would stash them away in my own makeshift desk at home. But it was the maps I loved most. These maps were a literature, written in a nearly indecipherable language that drove me wild with desire. They were a primary text, and over the next few years I would supplement them with the supporting materials easy enough for a kid to find: Kerouac, Muir, Dillard, Heat-Moon, McPhee. My curriculum in wandering, *Traveling 101*.

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I don't remember pulling pages for US 50 across Nevada, but I'm sure I did; a lot of well-intentioned parents liked to take their kids out west on the back roads—not just a passage, a rite of passage, they thought.

I would guess that the highway is divided into two TripTik inserts, one from Carson City to Austin, and another from Austin to Baker, not far from the entrance to Great Basin National Park. The first page would surely detail the roadside petroglyphs just outside Fallon: 7000-year-old etchings on boulders strewn around the dirt like bowling balls. It would have trumpeted Sand Mountain, a lone two-mile-long dune left over from a lake that dried up 9,000 years ago, standing tall and ominous as a shark's fin. Pony Express stops would be noted, and maybe Stokes Castle, an imposing three-story home built by a mining magnate on the side of a mountain. His family lived there for a month before leaving Nevada for good.

The second page would have taught me all about the Silver Rush, of towns that boomed and busted in short order—like Hamilton, its ghostly homes and headstones still to be found 10 bumpy miles down a forest service road—and cities that managed to survive, like Ely, where today copper is the new silver.

And somewhere I would have gleaned that the Great Basin wasn't a single co-ordinance but a constellation of open land. A collection of tangents blooming around me at varying angles and distances, a huge trove of possibility.

Today, AAA offers internet TripTiks, similar to any other web mapping service, with options for “rest areas” and “scenic route.” It's just a print-off though, one you can make and modify at home without anybody's input. A page or two that you can staple together or just fold in half and stuff in your bag. Certainly not designed to be tucked away as a keepsake, as my

grandfather did with all of his TripTiks, each one scribbled with notes: gas mileage, motel reviews, what the kids ate.

My dad remained at AAA until very recently. It wasn't the rheumatoid arthritis that ended his 27-year tenure in the mailroom. Not the chronic leukemia that came later. Rather one of the last in a wave of layoffs that had slowly siphoned the people I knew, the folks my Dad worked with, from the yellow brick building. Last year, the office officially closed.

In my mid-30s, I'm too young to feel wistful for the good ol' days. But I do. I feel that way.

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An ex used to complain that our vacations were never relaxing or restorative experiences, notable for the hours we didn't spend prostrate in a beach chair or face-down on some greasy massage table. That couldn't we visit *a place* sometime, not a road or a region or a whole goddamned temperate zone? Take a trip that didn't involve a stack of maps as well as ample opportunities for conflict and disaster, bearings and love lost in perfect tandem?

But I had long ago rejected the easy sophism of *a place* for the hard-won syllogism of the road.

I think about them a lot: all those harried road-trip dads, relying on a map drawn by a girl who had been approximately nowhere, who barely had her driver's license. I used to laugh at the irony of that. But more and more I realize that's the way I still want to travel. With the hunger of naivety and the tenacity of a novice. So when I push my nose into a flannel shirt that smells like Nevada, it's the whole of the Great Basin I inhale. Like the land itself, it's a memory wide enough to get lost in, with space to contain the joy of wonder sated and the grief of roads I've left behind.

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