

Ten Thousand Miles across America

by Rosie Nguyen

This summer I spent two months in a road trip across the United States. Uncle Terry, an old friend of mine and a retired park ranger, was my companion.

We set off from the Blue Ridge Parkway, in between the mountain ranges close to the Eastern Seaboard, driving southward along the legendary Route 66, through the quiet flat lands of Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas, to the wild deserts of New Mexico and Arizona. Here we began our visits to the national parks of Grand Canyon, Zion, and Arches, up north again stopping at Grand Teton and Yellowstone before following the Pacific Coast Highway down the West Coast and popping in California's Redwood and Yosemite along the way. We then headed back to Wisconsin where I was based. The trip lasted 65 days, visiting 19 national parks across 25 different states. I wrote ten thousand miles in the title, but the road trip actually covered all of thirteen thousand miles, or more than half the Earth's circumference.

Two months on the road offered unforgettable experiences. I remembered the night of the full moon over the Grand Canyon, when the perfectly round moon slowly appeared, rising like a giant lightbulb in the sky, casting its light down on the magnificent landscape of majestic towering cliffs. I remembered the hiking trip in Mount Rainier National Park, on the winding trails through the valleys full of innumerable colorful wildflowers, just like in a wonderland. I remembered Antelope Island where I watched in awe as hundreds of bison thundered across the dusty road, as mighty as a tank brigade. And the night when Uncle Terry and I walked in Redwood National Park, among the giant old redwood trees that pierced the sky at more than one hundred meters tall, like godly guardians of peace on Earth. There were countless times when I gasped at the scenes ahead because the landscapes were just breathtaking, so much so that I sometimes thought we were no longer on Earth, but on another planet in some faraway galaxy.

During the trip I also witnessed some odd and even ugly sights. When we drove across the Midwest plains, from miles away I could smell the terrible odors of feedlots where thousands of cattle were being raised in cramped and confined conditions, knee deep in manure and exposed to the burning sun of 40 degrees Celsius, being fattening up with feed additives and antibiotics while waiting for their ticket to the slaughterhouse. I saw long trains left to rust in the desert because the cost to move them to a waste management facility exceeded any profits to be made, creating colossal heaps of

unrecycled waste. Material consumerism and the ideology of “Profit First” impose burdens on both humans and the environment.

The trip also helped me learn a lot about nature in America. This tract of land is so rich, with various types of terrains, landscapes, and geographical features. I came to realize how vast and affluent our Earth is, and how I was just a tiny speck of dust in an immense universe. The liveliness of nature was felt most clearly during the long road trip, where day by day the scenery changed dramatically through the car window. I also learned a lot about camping and survival skills, as well as about the animals and plants of North America. Uncle Terry taught me about the local plants and herbs in the places we passed through, how to distinguish the footprints of wild animals like bear, moose, bison, how to make fire without matches or a lighter, how to go wilderness and backcountry camping or hiking safely without harming the environment.

On top of that, the trip reminded me of our position on Earth. After nearly a year of confining myself within the walls of my home due to the pandemic, I felt the healing power now that I was out in nature. Camping in the forests for more than two months, every morning waking up to the sounds of the grand mountains, bathing in the clear water of streams, rivers, ponds and lakes, cycling around on dew wetted trails under the shade of trees, breathing the fresh clean air, I felt like being brought back to life, filling my soul with vitality and positive energy. I was so grateful that even during the midst of a pandemic, I was still able to get in tune with nature and the universe around me. Thanks to this trip, I realized that connecting with nature was also connecting with my inner world.

Yet what surprised me most during the trip was what I learned about my travel companion and myself. I met Uncle Terry in Taiwan, where I accidentally learned that he was the ambassador of Couchsurfing, a forum I was an active member of. Before this road trip in America, we had explored Taipei together, and met again when he travelled to Vietnam. When I came to the United States, we kept in touch and planned to undertake a road trip together. In April, both fully jabbed, we got ready to go.

The road trip brought one surprise after another about my travel companion. We both shared a passion for reading and agreed that books could change people’s lives. We spent hours talking about the books we both loved, from works by Paulo Coelho and Khaled Hosseini, children’s stories like *The Wind in the Willows*, *Charlotte’s Web*, *The Little Prince*, to such recently published bestsellers as *Educated*, *Sapiens* and *Where the Crawdads Sing*. We had the same taste in music, from the classic songs of ABBA, The Beatles, Secret Garden, the soft whispering story-telling voice of Leonard Cohen, to the smooth, honeyed voice of the Japanese singer Emi Fujita. We both loved

outdoor activities like hiking, trekking, cycling, swimming, sailing and scuba diving, and we shared the same viewpoints on politics and contemporary issues such as women's rights, LGBT, and immigration. We also embraced the same core values of sincerity, empathy, kindness, and modesty. Uncle Terry and I made a great team, effectively working together to successfully tackle various tasks, from planning day trips, setting up tents, cooking and cleaning, packing and unpacking, to solving unexpected problems along the way. I have never had a friend so compatible in terms of hobbies, worldview, and value system.

The trip with Uncle Terry also taught me a lot about life, relationships, and human connections. At first it might have seemed that we had little in common, but this road trip brought two people from two different cultures, two generations, and two different personalities closer together. Our many hours of conversation made me realize that we humans can connect with each other on many different levels, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. The trip fortuitously created an intergenerational friendship that overcame our age gap as well as different values, genders, and backgrounds. I was reminded that despite seemingly glaring disparities in physical appearances, social status, family background, or religious beliefs, at the core of each human being lies a pure soul that desires to connect with its inner and outer worlds, to become one with life. Our unique friendship reminded me that when we can see through someone's outer surface, we can find the sparkling beauty of their soul underneath.

The trip made me understand that one of the greatest challenges brought about by the COVID-19 outbreak was the loss of connection between people. When I moved to the United States to pursue my master's degree during the peak of the pandemic, there were many times when I felt lonely, isolated, and set apart from the human world. I missed those hugging arms and holding hands of my loved ones. I missed those warm cozy family meals and cheerful gatherings with friends. The road trip helped bring back the connection that was seemingly lost. Uncle Terry treated me like a family member, and cared for me with sincerity and kindness. I also supported him as much as I could by pitching tents, arranging things, booking campgrounds, and so on, and I really appreciated how he treated me as an equal. The deep conversations between us warmed my heart, and the simple meals by the campfires made me feel fulfilled. In an unexpected way, the trip brought to me a new family member, a senior friend, creating a strong sense of connection and belonging between human beings that I had been deprived of during the year of the pandemic.

Back from the road trip I felt more at peace, more joyful, with more faith in life and humanity. I had a chance to see "the Good, the Bad and the Ugly" of the United States, but I was very hopeful when I returned. More than ever, the COVID-19 pandemic

made me consider how all of us are somehow connected, both with each other and to nature around us; that each of us is a small link in the chain of the whole universe; and that taking care of and connecting with others and nature are ways of taking care of and connecting with my inner self. I hope that in the near future, with the determination, courage, and patience within us, we will overcome the pandemic and move forward, more strongly, more calmly. I want each and every one of us to step out of the pandemic and appreciate the connection with people, nature, community, and the larger world around us. When we are aware of our roles and mindful of our impact on the Earth, maybe we can live with greater kindness and selflessness. I yearn for human beings to rise up from the pandemic, with gratitude, intentionality, and conscientiousness, to build a more peaceful and sustainable world than ever before.