

2014 National Parks Tour #1

(May 6 to July 3, 2014)

One of my life time goals has been to visit all the national parks in the US. The term “national parks” in my case, includes only those parks which have been officially labeled that by the US National Park Service. However, when Donna & I travel, we also go out of our way, in many cases, to visit national monuments, seashores, memorials, battlefields, preserves, parkways, recreation areas, rivers, scenic trails, lakeshores and national historic sites. So, you may wonder - why have I chosen this as a goal? The answer is simple – as a citizen of this great country, I, like you, am one of the many owners of these national treasures. As such, I consider it a priority to go visit what I own and enjoy the scenic wonders, the incredible memorials, and the cherished wilderness that so many have fought and died to give us this privilege. Having said that, I dedicate this document, as well as several others I have written, to my parents, my kids and grandkids; and the rest of my family, especially my wife, who have put up with my traveling addiction over the last several decades. All of my travel photos, videos, blogs and trip reports like this one, whether traveling in the United States, or elsewhere in the world are presented on my website that anyone may visit. The site is: careystravelsite.shutterfly.com

Having traveled within the US for many years, we have already visited at least half of the national parks in this country, many of which I’ve written about and photographed in years past. This trip, as well as the 2014 National Parks Tour #2, was the first trip where the primary purpose was to visit national parks and other “official” national areas. By the end of the year we will probably have added 50-60 national “entities” to our list of those visited.

This particular trip began on Tuesday, May 6, 2014 as we left our home in Santa Teresa, NM with our little dog Josie, who always travels with us in the camper, for Big Bend National Park. We arrived, with our trailer in tow, at the Rio Grande Campground at the far southern tip of Big Bend late in the afternoon. The weather was hot, hotter than we expected, with dark rain clouds and spotty showers throughout the rest of the evening.



Entrance to Big Bend NP



Traveling inside the park



Tunnel leading to our campground



Our campsite at Rio Grand Village

The next day, Wednesday, May 7, we began our 3 day adventure in the park. Big Bend National Park borders Mexico along the Rio Grande River. It is in a very remote part of Texas that only the dedicated typically reach. At the same time it has its own beauty and wonder; including Chihuahuan desert vegetation, bunchgrasses, creosote bushes, yuccas, sotols and more. We took a ½ mile hike to the Homer Wilson Ranch, but turned around half way because we saw a sign that said “beware of rattlesnakes in the ranch building.” We didn’t see any snakes, only a chameleon.



Big Bend is a very large park (over 800,000 acres), with its main headquarters at the Panther Junction visitors center. Part of our tour of the park included a visit to the Santa Elena Canyon overlook, which was a few miles past the Castelon visitor's center. We were surprised to see how dry it was in this area.



We did several other hikes during our three-day stay, including the Windows Trail in the Chisos Basin area; a ranger-led hike at Dugout Wells; the Hot Springs trail, and the Rio Grande Nature Trail.



Windows Trail at Sunset

Ranger-led hike at Dugout Wells

Hot Springs Trail

Rio Grande Nature Trail

On Friday, May 9 we headed east too Seminole Canyon State Park in Texas. On the way we stopped at Judge Roy Bean museum in Langtry, TX. **Roy Bean, Jr.** (1825 – March 16, 1903) was an eccentric saloon-keeper and Justice of the Peace in Val Verde County, Texas, who called himself "The Law West of the Pecos". According to legend, Judge Roy Bean held court in his saloon along the Rio Grande in this desolate stretch of the Chihuahuan Desert of southwest Texas. After his death, Western films and books cast him as a hanging judge, though he is known to have sentenced only two men to hang, one of whom escaped.



Judge Roy Bean Museum

Home & Saloon of Judge Bean

Inside the saloon

Garden & walking path at the museum

We arrived at Seminole Canyon late in the afternoon, set up camp and spent the rest of the evening relaxing. The next day we went on a private ranger-guided tour of the canyon around its cliffs and petroglyphs. The Fate Bell Shelter Tour, as it was called, involved a fairly-rugged hike to the bottom of the canyon and then up to the shelter to view examples of American Indian rock paintings at a huge overhanging cliff.



Park Entrance



Our campsite at Seminole Canyon



Cliff paintings & artifacts



Indian Park Sculpture

Later that day we drove to the Padre Island National Seashore, our first visit to this part of Texas. The longest stretch of undeveloped barrier island in the world, Padre Island National Seashore separates the Gulf of Mexico from the Laguna Madre, one of a few hyper saline lagoons in the world. The park protects 70 miles of coastline, dunes, prairies, and wind tidal flats teeming with life. It is a safe nesting ground for the Kemp's ridley sea turtle and a haven for 380 bird species. We camped in the park at Malaquiet campground, an area only a few steps from the beach. It was hot and humid with plenty of sea breeze.



Our campsite



The beach



Josie walking in the seaweed



Park sign

On Sunday we spent several hours at the South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center before heading back to our campsite.



On Monday, May 12, we began making our way to Florida. We had an overnight stop at Frenchman's Wilderness campground in Louisiana, then proceeded to Buloxi, Mississippi to visit the home and library of Confederate President Jefferson Davis.



Frenchman's Wilderness



--- Jefferson Davis Home ---



Carriage ride around the estate



Inside the museum

That night, Tuesday, May 13, we camped overnight at Florida's Manatee Springs State Park, one of the nicest campgrounds we've ever been to. Unfortunately recent flooding in the area prevented us from seeing the manatees. We did see some deer.



Campfire at Manatee Springs



Flooding at the boardwalk



Deer in the area



A hike around the park

After several days of driving, then making a quick stop at the Big Cypress National Preserve’s Visitor Center, we camped at a place in Homestead, Florida that was centrally located between Everglades and Biscayne National parks, so we could spend some time at each park. We visited Everglades National Park the following day. This 1.5 million acre park is at the southern tip of Florida. It’s a 100 mile long subtropical wilderness of saw grass prairie, jungle and mangrove swamp. Oh yeah – it also has alligators, birds of all types, and mosquitoes, lots of them. Later in the afternoon we drove to Biscayne and hiked a short trail after spending some time at the visitor’s center. Most National Parks have theaters that show a 15-30 movie about the park, so we always stop and watch the movie before visiting the park. It helps us understand what the park is about and the best things to see and do while we are visiting.



Biscayne National Park is an underwater wilderness consisting of around 40 small barrier coral reef islands with mangrove shorelines. Only 5% of the park is land.

On Saturday, May 17, we left Homestead and drove 150 miles to Key West where we camped in a very crowded campground within the city. On Sunday we left Josie in the camper and took the ferry to Dry Tortugas National Park in the Gulf of Mexico, about 70 miles west of Key West. The only way to get there is by ferry or seaplane. Fort Jefferson is the highlight of the park. The fort was built to protect one of the most strategic deep water anchorages in North America. By fortifying this spacious harbor, the United States maintained an important “advance post” for ships patrolling the Gulf of Mexico and the Straits of Florida during the Civil War.



Model of Fort Jefferson



Dry Tortugas NP Ferry



Nearing Fort Jefferson



Entrance Sign



Inside Fort Jefferson



As seen from the boat



Walking along the top ridge



Walking along the moat

The 70 mile trip over some rough water on the open sea was a challenging but enjoyable, all-day adventure. The admission price for the ferry included breakfast and lunch on the way to the fort, and a cash bar on the trip back to Key West. The previous day we made a stop at the southern-most point in the continental US. (90 miles from Cuba) See below.



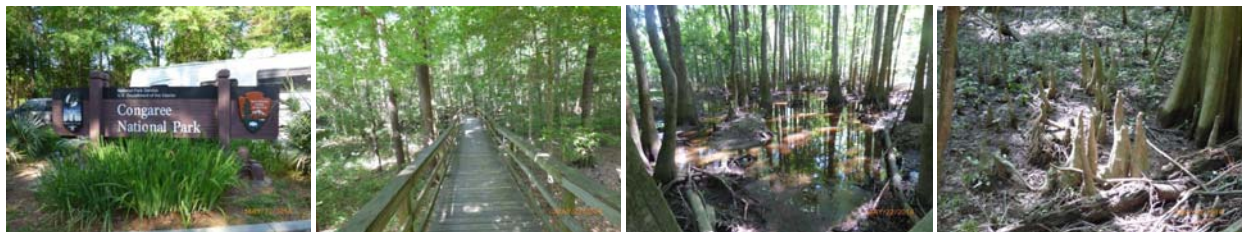
Now we were on our way up the eastern coast of Florida with a planned stop at the Kennedy Space Center near Cape Canaveral, which is "our nation's gateway to exploring, discovering and understanding our universe." It really was an interesting, educational stop for us. We spent most of the day there, learning all about past missions and future space exploration plans. This was one of the highlights of the whole trip.



Realizing that we are not getting any younger, we decided to make our next stop Ponce de Leon's famous Fountain of Youth. We drank the water, but there were no miracles to be had that day. We did get a great history lesson and saw a few colorful peacocks, even one albino.



Do you know there is a national park in the center of South Carolina? It's called Congaree and it became a National Park in Nov. 2003. It is an ancient forest with towering trees and incredible diversity. It was originally established as Congaree Swamp National Monument (1976) to protect the largest remaining tract of old-growth bottomland hardwood forest in the United States. It was named after a native-American tribe that lived here centuries ago.



As we continued our journey north, on Friday, May 23rd we were camping in Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, along the beautiful Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline Drive. We arrived early to insure we had a place to camp for the Memorial Day weekend. We stayed at Loft Mountain campground in the park for two nights, and saw four bears the first day, one on a hike and three (momma and 2 cubs) at the outdoor amphitheater prior to the start of one evening's ranger talk. The following day we drove the rest of the 105 mile length of Skyline Drive.



Shenandoah NP was our last stop before arriving in Pennsylvania & Delaware to spend a month with family.



Charlie & Barb's House in York

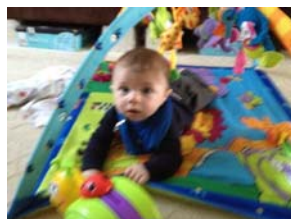
Jacob breaking the Piñata

Audrey's house for dinner

Avery's gymnastic recital



Kevin & kids at Dover Race Track



Kade



Charlie at Root's Auction



Steve & Cheryl's Award Ceremony

Donna & I took one of the grandkids, Julia, with us to visit the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall in Philadelphia and the Benjamin Franklin museum on Wednesday, June 11th.



Independence Hall



Room where they signed the Declaration of Independence



Donna/Julia in the newspaper room of the Franklin Museum

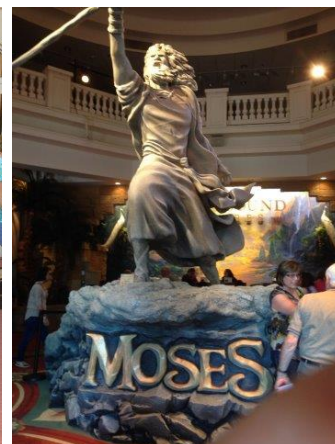


Carey/Julia at the Liberty Bell

We stayed in the area for another week, entertaining the grandkids, including one day at Lowes for a class on making a bat wing aircraft; and another day at Lake Tobias Animal Park with the “fab five.”



On Thursday, June 19th we went to the Sight & Sound Theater with Steve and Dana and their family to see Moses. It was excellent.



We spent another day with the “fab five” at a local indoor fun house; ate our packed lunch, then took them home, so we could rest.



On Sunday, June 22nd, we said good-bye to the family and headed southwest toward the New River Gorge in West Virginia. This was our first stop on the way to meet the Rotary RVF group for our annual rally in Bowling Green, Kentucky.



New River Gorge – West Virginia

Gorge Bridge

Walkway to the river view

Taking a nap at the campsite

The RVF rally in Bowling Green was held at the Bowling Green KOA from June 24-28. It included tours of the Corvette Museum, the Corvette Assembly Plant, Mammoth Cave National Park, a local railroad museum, and Shaker Village.



Corvette Museum

One of the early corvette's

Sink hole in the museum

One of the cars from the sinkhole



RVF Rally Group in Bowling Green

Getting ready to enter the cave

Our friends Jim & Sandy in the cave

Exiting Mammoth Cave



Model train display at Museum

Early era Railcar Post Office

---- Inside the Post Office Rail Car ----

Who are the Shakers? The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, known as the Shakers, was a religious sect founded in the 18th century in England, having branched off from a Quaker community. They were known as "Shaking Quakers" because of their ecstatic behavior during worship services. The Shaker movement was at its height between 1820 and 1860. It was at this time that the sect had its most members, and the period was considered its "golden age". It had expanded from New England to the Midwestern states of Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio. It was during this period that it became known for its furniture design and craftsmanship. They had a very large community near Bowling Green.



Communal home of the Shakers



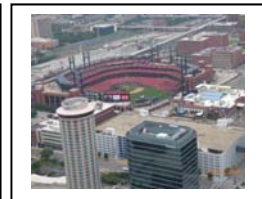
Lunch at their restaurant



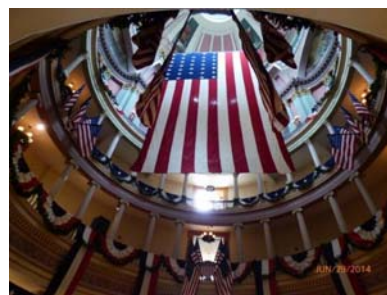
---- Inside the communal home ----



After leaving the Bowling Green rally we headed to St. Louis to visit the Gateway Arch which is a 630-foot-high monument clad in stainless steel and built in the form of a flattened catenary arch. It is the tallest man-made monument in the Western Hemisphere. We camped in the middle of the city of St. Louis, only minutes from the Gateway Arch. We arrived on Friday night, June 27th, and toured the arch, the museum and the courthouse the following day.



Courthouse Building



Flag inside the courthouse



Courtroom for the Dred Scott decision

St. Louis was our final stop on this two month tour. We travelled over 9,000 miles, visited 15 National Parks and several state parks, spent a month with our family in Pennsylvania, and hiked over 50 miles within the various parks. National Park trip #2 is scheduled for August with plans to visit 17 more National Parks & Monuments. Stay tuned.