

A Drive Through The Western States



July 2020

Bob and Molly Hillery

This was our first long trip of the year since returning from England In January. We had had a “trial run” a few weeks earlier with a driving trip into Kentucky but this would be a ten day drive through the western states—and include a flight to Salt lake City.

Although we chose a route that we have followed several times in the past (with just a few new sections) we always find that there is something new to experience. And it is always nice to see something for a second (or third) time.

This experience was especially welcome after almost six months of “quarantine” and it felt really good to be out and about again. In addition, we were able to spend an evening with friends along the way.

It was a great trip.

Western States Driving Trip, July 2020

Friday July 3

We left home at 7pm and had dinner at Artemis in Montgomery before driving to the airport Marriott for the night. We had an early morning flight on Saturday and wished to be close to the airport, get free parking and use the shuttle to get to the terminal. We have done this many times, but were disappointed to find this time that, with restrictions on the number of people in the shuttle, we couldn't get one until it was a little late. Consequently, we ordered a taxi for 7am.

Saturday July 4 (Independence Day)

We were up at 6:15 and got our taxi at 7. Check-in and Security took only 20 minutes and the airport was very quiet, but everyone was wearing a mask as requested. We saw only one teenager who was not wearing his mask, but had one around his neck

Delta required wearing masks at all times on board and, again, everyone seemed to be complying.

Service on board was significantly limited with only pre-packaged snacks and no hot drinks. Why this should be is not obvious as the things that were served were handled by the flight attendants. However, we were able to enjoy one of these snacks - and a glass (or two) of wine on our way to Salt Lake City.

Other than these obvious differences, the flight was uneventful, and we arrived there on time shortly after 10am local time. Major terminal construction at SLC caused us to wait for a gate so it was about 10:30 by the time we disembarked.

Getting our bags and the rental car went quickly and we were soon on Interstate 80 West heading for Nevada. It really felt good to be on a highway - especially one as scenic as this - and it was a very pleasant drive to Wendover, just across the state line. Here we stopped for a McDonald's lunch (dine in for the first time in months) before completing the easy 220 mile run to Elko, our destination for the day.

We checked in about 2pm (now Pacific time) and I went for a 2 3/4 mile walk before relaxing in the room until dinner time.

The nice Italian restaurant that we usually have tried in the past in Elko was closed for the Holiday, so we went to the Star Hotel, one of several Basque restaurants in town. Basque meals are served family style at long tables, so social distancing was difficult, but we were given a table for the two of us – albeit quite close to an adjoining family party of ten!

The meal was essentially set for us; all we had to do was select an entrée; trout for Molly, cod for me. The rest was out of our control! First, there was a bowl of cabbage soup (very good) with about a loaf of bread. This was followed by an “endless” salad, something like a Caesar with a rich dressing. With the entrees came a huge serving of fries, a plate of spaghetti, a dish of two kinds of beans and a large plate of green beans. The fish itself was also a large portion.





We did our best, but I'm afraid there was a lot left over. Nevertheless, we did take dessert: flan for Molly and an affogato (with another name on the menu) with bourbon and two shots of espresso for me. All in all it was a very good meal in interesting surroundings. Many men were in what we assume was traditional headgear; a bright neckerchief and a French-style beret. Many others were dressed in some variation of the American flag in honor of the Holiday.

Sunday July 5

We were up about 8 and went downtown for breakfast at the Coffee Mug. Again, social distancing seemed to be optional and the tables were quite closely packed. However, the service and meal were very good.

Around ten we left Elko to go west to our next destination in Reno.

Instead of driving exclusively on I-80 (300 miles) we chose to head south about 90 miles to join US 50 in Eureka. This turned out to be a good move as the road south was very quiet and we went through some gorgeous scenery. We had a coffee and cake at an otherwise deserted bar in Eureka, although the proprietor told us that she had had a busy weekend and a relatively busy early summer after being shut down for 2 ½ months.

The 300 miles along US Route 50 ("The Loneliest Road") was extremely pleasant; quiet with some gorgeous and grand scenery. We crossed several passes ranging between 4500 and over 7000 feet and saw a few snow-capped peaks as we had done further east yesterday.

At the town of Fallon, we left US 50 and headed northeast to I-80 and then west to our destination in Sparks, just east of Reno, arriving at 4pm. This gave me time for a short walk before relaxing and getting ready for dinner, which tonight was at Morton's Steakhouse in one of the casinos.

It took us about 30 minutes to get inside the casino! All ground floor doors were locked so we had to go through the parking garage (we had originally parked on the street as it was very quiet) on the fourth floor and find our way to the lobby and then the restaurant. The meal was worth the aggravation, however.

Monday July 6

We had breakfast at the McDonald's next to the hotel (dine in) and then left for our trip north into Oregon. From Reno we went pretty much due north which soon took us across the border into California. The route was similar to that we had experienced yesterday; we climbed from Reno to a wide alpine valley at about 5000 feet and stopped at a Starbucks in Susanville. We were stopping more for the facilities than the coffee (the café was open but no seating – and no restrooms!) so we got our drinks and drove out of town, climbing again through pine forests.

We found a nice place to stop and drink and then continued to a very small hamlet – but it had a gas station and toilets. We were now in northern California and in more open farmland, still at a relatively high elevation.

We took a 30-mile detour from the main road to visit the Lava Beds National Monument. This is a huge

area of lava flow (500,000 years old) but the main attraction are the caves that have formed within the rocky lava. We drove around a loop that went close to many of the caves but, since neither of us is particularly fond of caves, we only briefly went to the entrance of a couple. It was an interesting side trip, nevertheless.



Lava Beds National Monument

From the Monument it was only about an hour to Klamath Falls and our stop for the night.

We found a restaurant quite close to the hotel and had a very good meal – although the restaurant was almost empty.

Tuesday July 7, 2020

We ate at Denny's near the hotel and then drove to the south entrance to Crater Lake National Park. When we reached the crater rim it was only 48F but it didn't feel too cold in brilliant sunshine with no breeze.

Parts of the rim drive were still close (snow removed, but fixing potholes) so we drove around the west side as far as possible, stopping at several of the lookouts. The crowds were minimal – presumably as a result of Covid, but we were earlier in the day than our usual visits – but the lake and snow (quite a bit still) were as spectacular as always.





Crater



Lake

We then drove north to Bend where we were to stay the night and have dinner with our friends Dave and Kathy from Cincinnati. I had time for a three-mile walk before we met them.

We had a very nice meal sitting outside overlooking the river and it was great to see our friends again. We were back at the hotel by 9pm.

Wednesday July 8

We had breakfast at iHOP and then began our drive to Hood River. Rather than go the most direct route, which would have taken about 2 ½ hours, we went east and north, before turning west to head north again to the Columbia River east of The Dalles.

This provided us with some fabulous scenery and a drive past the John Day fossil beds. We stopped there for a rest but didn't venture along the paths as we had done that a year ago and found it a little disappointing.

The extended drive took us about six hours and we arrived at Hood River right on 4pm. I took a walk into town and we went to the 3 Rivers Grill in town for dinner. We had enjoyed a meal there last year and tonight was just as good.

Thursday July 9

Today we had a relatively lazy day in and around Hood River. We had a leisurely breakfast on the hotel deck and then I went for a 3-mile walk. Late morning, we drove across the bridge to Washington State and turned east along the river. We stopped overlooking the Columbia for a while and then went into The Dalles and got a Starbucks coffee. We drove to a nearby park to drink before taking Historic US30 back to the hotel, stopping at a high overlook for about an hour.



I had another short walk and then we relaxed in the room until dinner time. Tonight we drove a few miles west on I-84 to Simon's Cliffhouse restaurant. The restaurant was part of an elegant old hotel and, although there were very few patrons, we had a very good meal with excellent service. It was a very pleasant evening and the weather had changed from the cloudiness we had experienced most of the day to a wonderful clear sky.

Friday July 10

We had breakfast on the hotel deck again on a bright and mild morning. We then drove east along I-84 all the way to Boise, Idaho, a distance of about 400 miles. The scenery was magnificent all the way and we made just two stops; one to pick up coffee and another to consume it. We arrived at the Courtyard in Boise about 4pm after a one-hour time change.

Tonight we went to the Cottonwood Grill, adjacent to the river in downtown. Most patrons were outside on the patio but we had a very nice table inside. The meal was very good – far better than the online menu implied – and we had excellent service.

Saturday July 11

We checked out and went to IHOP for breakfast on the way to I-84. We went east for about 100 miles (almost to Twin Falls) and then left the expressway to travel south on US93. We had done almost the entire length of 93 from the Canadian Border to Phoenix some years back. This 100+ mile stretch through Idaho and Nevada is just a two-lane road but generally relatively fast – and has magnificent scenery. We had picked up coffee in Twin Falls and stopped at the side of the road to drink it and take in the mountainous scenery.

We then continued to Wells, Nevada, where we picked up I-80 for the remaining 180 miles to Salt Lake City – right across the salt flats and at the side of the lake.

We arrived at the downtown Marriott right at 4pm. I went for a short walk (it was over 95F) and then we relaxed until dinner at the Market Street Grill, 2 ½ blocks from the hotel. It was a good meal and we particularly enjoyed the late fifties/early sixties music – we knew all the words!



Sunday July 12

There was no restaurant or lounge service in the hotel so we drove a couple of miles to a local IHOP for breakfast. We drove back via State Street and the Capitol and then went for a 2-mile walk around Temple Square. The square is in the first phase of a four-year renovation with much of the property off-limits. Most of the statues, flower beds and water features have been removed and a large part of the temple itself is in scaffolding. One of the Visitor Centers has been demolished; obviously this is a major piece of work.



Major Renovation on Temple Square

But parts are as beautiful as ever

Back at the hotel we had a Starbucks coffee and then we relaxed in the room for a while and I took another short walk. Tonight we ate at Ruth's Chris.

Monday July 13

We had breakfast at the same IHOP as yesterday and then I went for a short walk before finishing packing and checking out. We then drove to Park City and walked along the (steep) main street, stopping for a coffee and cookie. Then it was time to drive slowly back to the airport via SLC and we spent a couple of hours in the Sky Club before our 6pm flight home.

