

Western States Driving Trip

April 2021



Bob and Molly Hillery

West Driving Trip, April 2021

Tuesday April 13

We had stayed at the airport Marriott, after dinner Monday evening at the Capital Grille, and were up at 6:30 to take the 7am shuttle. We were quickly through check-in and security and left for Minneapolis on time at 8:15. It was less than a two-hour flight, after which we had some time in the lounge before the 2 ½ hour flight to Salt Lake City.

We picked up our rental car and left Salt Lake right away for the 3 ½ drive to Elko, Nevada. It was easy enough (80MPH most of the way) and the scenery was great – snow capped mountains to about 11,000 feet. We crossed two passes of 6000 and 7000 feet and just reached the snow line at the highest elevation. We made on stop in Wendover for a McDonald's lunch.

In Elko I had time for a walk and we both had a short nap before dinner at Luciano's, an Italian favorite of ours. It was a good meal as usual.

Wednesday April 14

When Molly looked out of the hotel window at 6:30 it was snowing! There was a covering on the parking lot, but the streets looked fine but by the time we checked out (soon after 7:30) there was about 3 inches on the car. Driving into town for breakfast at the Coffee Mug was okay and the expressway was wet but clear of snow by the time we left Elko.

The 120 miles west towards Winnemucca was clear but the snow continued, and visibility was poor so we couldn't see much of the surrounding mountains. About 20 miles east of Winnemucca the skies lifted considerably, and



we even saw a little sun so that the new snow on the hilltops looked beautiful. We stopped here for gas and some snacks and then set off on

US95 north towards Oregon. It was now dry and quite bright, so the drive was very pleasant – farmland, desert and mountains to east and west. We made one stop for a 45-minute nap and then proceeded to the small town of Burns where we had a reservation for the night. I took a 3-mile walk and we went to what seems to be the only decent restaurant in town.

It turned out that it was a very good meal, reasonably priced, and had a pleasant ambience.

Thursday April 15

It was cold (27F) as we went to McDonald's for breakfast before leaving for Hood River about 8:30. Today was another 300+ mile drive but we couldn't have asked for a more scenic journey. The weather was perfect – clear blue skies and clear – as we drove north and then more westerly as we drove through the John Day River Valley and along the fossil beds of the National Monument. When we climbed out of the valley, we had superb views of Mt Hood and Mt St Helens, each with far more snow than we have normally seen. Then it was down to the Columbia

River for the final forty miles – more beautiful scenery and now the temperature was close to 80F!

I had time for a walk into town before we drove there for dinner at Celilo's – an excellent meal at a leisurely two-hour pace.

Friday April 16



We had breakfast at the hotel sitting outside on the deck. It was only 45F but with no wind it felt quite comfortable in the sun.

After breakfast we drove about 12 miles east to the Rowena Overlook on Historic Route 30 – the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Route, at an elevation of about 500 feet above the river. Molly walked several times around the overlook (about a mile) while I took a longer walk along a trail that climbed 1000 feet higher in two miles. It was a hard walk up but very pleasant and I had some great views of Mt Hood and Mt St Helens. There were literally hundreds of walkers and everyone was wearing a mask or put one on as they approached. The walk down was much easier.



We drove back to the hotel, picking up a Starbucks lunch to eat on our deck. Later I went for another walk along the river. Tonight, we ate at the Three Rivers restaurant in town, sitting outside on their patio overlooking the Columbia River. It was a very good meal in superb surroundings.

Saturday April 17

We had breakfast on the hotel deck again and then drove to the Rowena Overlook again where Molly did another mile, and I took a three-mile walk on the "plateau". It was easier than yesterday but seemed quite hard (probably because of yesterday!) and the uphill section was on the return. We then drove to The Dalles and across the river into Washington. We found an overlook (almost opposite Rowena as it turned out) and took a short nap before returning to the hotel.



Tonight, we had another excellent meal at Celilo's.

Sunday April 18

We had breakfast outside again and then set off for Clarkston, WA. We decided to take the road on the north side of the Columbia (in Washington) so we were in that state the entire day except for a very short spell in Oregon around Umatilla.

We stopped once alongside the river for a nap and again in Walla Walla for a light lunch, again sitting outside on an 80F day. From there it was less than two hours to Clarkston, with fabulous scenery the entire day. We arrived in time for me to take a short walk before dinner at Roosters, overlooking the Snake River. It was a little spartan, but the food and service were good. Not much of a view, however, as there was a large tent set up just outside the restaurant between us and the river.

Monday April 19

We checked out and drove into Lewiston (Idaho) for breakfast at a local diner. It was very good (way too much food) and the service was efficient – and like the last time we were in Idaho, not a mask was in sight.



We then drove the 240 miles along Route 12 all the way to Missoula. It was much cooler today (the high along the route was about 50F) but the scenery was spectacular. We drove along the Clearwater and the Lochsa Rivers to the highest point at Lolo Pass (5200 feet) before following Lolo Creek to Missoula. There was fresh snow at the side of the road most of the way and several feet piled up at the visitor center at the pass.



We arrive in Missoula about 4pm (Mountain Time) and I went for a walk before dinner. Tonight, we ate at The Keep, a castle-like structure on the hillside south of the city with spectacular views to the mountains to the north and west. The meal and service were also very good.

Tuesday April 20

We had breakfast at a local IHop and later drove about an hour to the National Bison Range. As with our visit last summer, the high loop road was closed (Covid) but the road along the river was open and this is where the bison are usually seen. We were luck again and saw a herd of about 20 (right in front of us on the road) as well as several "loners". We also saw a number of deer and, later I met an elk on a short hiking trail. This cut short my walk (!) but we were able to watch her in a clearing for about 20 minutes before our return drive. The weather was beauti-



ful – almost clear blue skies and temperatures reaching 50F after a below-freezing start to the day.

Tonight, we ate at the 1889 Steakhouse in town – another new find for us – and another good meal.

Wednesday April 21

We had breakfast at IHop again and then checked out for the relatively short 165-mile drive to Great Falls. We followed Route 200 all the way and once again went through some stunning scenery with much more snow than I had anticipated as we drove further and further east.



We arrived in Great Falls about 2:30 and I went for a 3.5 mile walk along the river front. The weather was still very pleasant with temperatures in the mid-fifties and clear blue skies.

Tonight, we ate at Dante's, where we both enjoyed the walleye.

Thursday April 22

We had breakfast at a local Perkins and then set off on a circular drive to the northwest. It was cold and light snow was in the forecast, but we decided on the drive anyway, although visibility was poor, and we couldn't see the mountains very clearly. After about an hour, it started to snow lightly, and it was blowing quite briskly across the road, but nothing stuck on the pavement. Soon there was a dusting on the fields, but it wasn't until we were almost at our most northwesterly point that the road got a little slushy. This lasted only a few miles and the 80 miles back on I-15 was clear.

We drove about 150 miles in all and enjoyed it despite the weather, but we kept remarking how impressive it was that Lewis and Clerk had covered a similar area to ours today – and they were just exploring the area away from the river on which they were traveling. It really was a remarkable journey.



On returning to Great Falls, we had lunch at McDonald's and then I went for a three-mile walk in bitterly cold conditions.

Tonight, we ate at Jakers, a Montana and Idaho institution, where we ate on our first visit to Great Falls in 2006. It was a good meal with good service in a pleasant, rustic ambiance.

Friday April 23



We had breakfast at Perkins again on a very cold morning with snow flurries in the area. We decided to start our drive south a little later so returned to the hotel until about 11am. We then drove west and south (avoiding I-15 until we were forty miles from our destination) and arrived in Helena about 2:30. It was another very scenic drive and the fresh snow on the hills and the flurries throughout just added to the scene.

Tonight, we ate at the Mediterranean Grille in Helena, which we had enjoyed last August when we were here. It was an excellent meal!

Saturday April 24

At breakfast (Perkins again) we decided to take a circular drive to the Headwaters of the Missouri. No trip to this part of the world is complete, it seems, without seeing this most important Lewis and Clark site. The weather stayed dry and relatively mild (into the low fifties) for the entire drive – but rain was just starting as we arrived back at the hotel.

Tonight, we ate at Lucca's Italian restaurant where we have enjoyed meals in the past. Maybe not quite as good as we remembered but still a nice meal in pleasant surroundings. There was a heavy snow shower while we were inside, but it was more like sleet when we left.

Sunday April 25

We checked out, went to Perkins for breakfast and then followed US Route 287 south through Montana and into Idaho before joining US 20 that took us to Idaho Falls. It was cold (30s and low 40s most of the way) and the cloud cover was heavy, so we didn't see very far up the mountains that surrounded us the whole way. Nevertheless, it was a nice way to spend a few hours on back roads, rather than taking the expressway. I took a walk (in the rain) along the river front in Idaho Falls and we went to Jakers for dinner.



Monday April 26

We checked out and went to a local Black Bear Diner for breakfast. We then set off for Salt Lake City but avoided the direct expressway route and went first east and then south. We skirted the south end of the Tetons – although we could see only about the bottom 3000 feet of the mountains, the rest being cloud-covered – and then across western Wyoming.



The weather was fair for the first couple of hours but then we ran into rain,

sleet, snow, and thick clouds for the rest of the way. At times, the precipitation was heavy but, even in the densest snow fall we didn't run into any icy or slushy roads. What we could see of the scenery was great but long-distance viewing was not to be today. Despite this, we enjoyed the ride, with the possible exception of the final stretch on I-80 where we fought trucks and heavy traffic as well as the heaviest of the rain.

We arrived in Salt Lake City a little before 4pm and finished this trip with another nice meal at Ruth's Chris.

Tuesday April 27

We were up and checked out by 7:30 and had breakfast in the Delta lounge before our 10:15 flight home after a great vacation – with fabulous scenery and lots of different weather!

