

To San Miguel (SMA)

62

to Nathan. Gas up and on the road at 12:45.

(Susan went to a candelaria "pastorela" in Tocuaro yesterday and the costumes looked amazing! It's an open air street performance of devils trying to prevent the baby Jesus from making it to the temple. It starts at 6pm and lasts about an hour.)

The drive took about 3.5 hours. The section across Cuitzeo lake is beautiful, ~~but~~ with many pelicans, ibis, pintail, and other birds, but there is no place to stop to look at them.

Google maps took us on a tope detour to avoid a construction delay. Lesson learned: stay on the cuota even if it's slower!

~~We~~ Instead of going through Salamanca we took the 45 through Celaya, then the 51 north to San Miguel. Tolls 397 p (\$20).

I was ~~on~~ white knuckle most of the way. I really wish I could get over my fear of driving down here. Grant stopped to buy a ripe pineapple ~ delicious and sweet!

Arrived at the San Miguel campground about 4:15. Eight other rigs here. Ralph & Patti returned after dinner and we sat around our fire pit for a while. They said the other campers aren't social.

Grant had a tamale and pineapple for dinner, I had leftover mashed potatoes. 64° at 8:15.

I mentioned to Patti that I haven't been feeling my usual adventurous travel self, and have had little interest in much exploring or excursions. She reminded me how normal this is in this first year after losing my dad.

Burglaries are up in SMA, and Patti thinks it's due to drug use.

Fri Feb 4

45° at 7 am. Grant slept til almost 10...

Finally we went for a walk around the San Antonio neighborhood about 11, to see what stores are there. Checked out the Greek deli but prices are high. After lunch at campsite walked to new City Market store to see if they had stirfry sauce. Nope. It's an obscure place, super high end, for rich people only.

Shower, then had a nice chat with Mike and Terry Church, who now rent one of the apartments here at the campground. They are such nice people, and easy to talk to. They said there's really only two good routes back to the US from here: McAllen, TX, or Mazatlan and up the coast. Grant slept...

I went out to look for chicken and could only find it at Mercado Sano. I made a stir fry which wasn't very good. Bill Sloan stopped by to visit. About 5:45 I walked over to Parque Juarez to hear the bands. Geo Equihua was a singer-songwriter with mellow

music but a beautiful voice. Riko was a rocker but I didn't like his voice so I headed back. meanwhile Grant had singlehandedly rearranged camp. We had talked about doing it in the morning. The van was in full sun today, so we wanted to turn it around so the canopy and sitting area would be on the north side of the van and the sliding door would be on the north side and the sun wouldn't blast in all day. It got really hot in the sun, and we were constantly rearranging chairs to get some shade. Also our cooking area was in the sun. We like this spot on the west side, farther away from the main tennis court noise, and not under a tree. Anyway, I got really mad at moving Grant for moving everything by himself. He did a great job, but it really could have gone south with one person, especially moving the canopy.

I was feeling sad and depressed today, and crabby. Living in such tight quarters is getting on my nerves a bit...

SMA

Sat Feb 5

65

36° at 7 am. Brrr! AA meeting at noon, lunch with AA folks at La Frontera (nothing special, but enough outdoor seating for a big group). I had a quesadilla (cheese) and Grant had nachos with arachera. He said his was very good. I enjoyed chatting with Leslie and Brenda. Back to camp to meet up with Leslie Kate and Darrell at the church courtyard. They're painting a mural on the terrace of a house above the campground (next door). Chatted with Ralph and Patti before heading over to the park at 16 to hear a Latin jazz band (Doug Robinson and Media Noche). We found it kind of boring so headed back to camp to eat our leftover lunch food. High today was 72°. Overcast until 10:30. The day flew by and I never even had time to do tai chi, guitar, or stretching!

Sunday Feb 6

39° at 7:30. I sleep so much on these trips, often 10 hours. Don't know if that's good or bad. Sun reaches camp at 8 am.

Last night Ralph told us his life story. His mom died when he was five. He spent six years in a children's home, then lived with his dad and stepmom and an assortment of relatives and foster homes. He says it never felt traumatic,

just normal.

Family feud at the campground. Maria has three sons: Walter, Michael, and Hans. Michael is suing his mom for his share of the family property (he and Walter are on the deed). It's in court, which could take years. Meanwhile Michael has "seized" the old bathroom and some of the parking spaces. So sad.

Claude and Erica, a delightful older Swiss couple, are parked next to us. They leave tomorrow. Two rigs left today. A young couple with two kids arrived.

After lunch we walked into town. It was mobbed with well-to-do Mexicans.

The library was closed, and the travel photo exhibition that was supposed to be open. We walked to Fabrica Aurora to see Leslie's boats, which were amazing.

Had fabulous mantecado and nuez ice cream on Insurgentes. Bought peanut brittles from a shop on Juarez. Walked back on El Chorro past the Lavaderos del Chorro. 4.2 miles today.

Church bells going crazy all evening. Stir fry for dinner with chicken from Mercado Sano and a few tired mushrooms and an orange bell pepper from the little fruteria on Ancha San Antonio.

The new arrivals are Leo and Haley from White Salmon WA and their kids Marcus (9) and Olivia (~7). His family owns

land south of Lake Chapala and will be raising sword agave for mezcal. High today 75° (thermometer said 78).

I notice fewer street dogs in San Miguel. The trap-neuter-release and trap-neuter-adopt programs have really helped.

Monday Feb 7

50° this morning, much warmer than predicted low of 41. Cloudy with a chance of rain!

Walked over to see Bill's house after lunch. Charming two-bedroom bungalow with a fenced yard, walls covered with his bright paintings.

He got his Mexican residency last week.

Ran into Leslie + Darrell, but it didn't work out for us to visit the mural.

Walked to the park to see dancing, which I thought was at 4 pm but was actually at 6. Today was a holiday and the park was still too crowded for our comfort (Covid), so we didn't go back at 6.

Mashed potatoes and carnitas for dinner. NA meeting at 6:30. Seven other people with not much to say.

Mary Preus called today. She is giving Eve's move to New Zealand.

Tues Feb 8

Rain in the night. 43° this morning and overcast. The day looms large. I love traveling and escaping Seattle winter, but this year my heart isn't really in it. Plus there are so many things we can't do this year: busses, taxis, yoga classes, indoor gatherings. This limits our options.

Walked south on Ancha San Antonio then left on the cute little alley (Pila Seca?), down to the arroyo, across a bridge, and back on Canal to Bellas Artes and the library, then back to camp about 12:30. 3.2 miles.

Leslie invited me up to see her mural, which is beautiful but hard to photograph in the afternoon light. The house is owned by a couple named David and Renell. It's a long climb up to the terrace, but the view is great, almost 360°. Aerial view of the campground.

Bacon and eggs for dinner (mix of canned bayo & negro beans) with sauteed spinach. Not my favorite meal but Grant loved it.

60° at 7 pm. Supposed to get down to 34° tonight!

Wed Feb 9

36° this morning but blue sky and warm as soon as the sun came up. I went out to look for bread. Panini on Stirling Dickinson was \$5 a loaf! The paraderia on Ancha San Antonio had already run out before 10 am.

Said goodbye to Leo, Haley, Marcus, and Olivia. Dawn & Brian also left, and the Belgian couple who pulled in yesterday. Quiet around here.

We took a taxi up to the Botanical Garden (El Chasco del Ingenio). 10 p but I gave him 80. <sup>The</sup> ~~taxi~~ driver told me how he used to play in what is now the garden when he was a kid. There were only two houses up there and lots of horses and corrals. They <sup>kids</sup> would dive into the water. He said the pool below the spring is deep. He talked about how much the city has changed since he grew up here. The city proposed closing more streets to cars, but people pushed back.

The garden costs 50 p each (\$2.50). It's quiet and serene, with several miles of trails. We walked for about two hours. There are also great views of the city from the lower trails. Saw stilts, avocets, and canvasbacks? on the reservoir.

Walked back on the steep streets to town, past all the huge fancy houses that now fill the hillside. Ice cream in the plaza by Templo de San Francisco. Bought bread at Paraderia

54° delish ↑

Buena Vida across from Bellas Artes. Tired walk back to camp. 5.5 miles for me today, 5 for Grant. 68°, cool wind, some clouds, 2:15. We bought more souvenir palanquetas (round peanut brittle) at a dulcería next to the mercado, which has the best price.

Chatted with Ralph about routes back to AZ. They know so many good places!

Bearns & greens for dinner. Really good with our new bread.

Thurs Feb. 10

37° on phone, 39° on thermometer.  
No heater needed. Windy with lots of dust blowing around.

The lavanderia on the Ancha wasn't open so we found one on Potranca, just past Parque Guadiana. 30¢ per kilo. We had 1.5 kilos but they round up. For future reference, bring extra items to add, just in case.

Parque Guadiana is lovely, with little trails winding through. The surrounding houses are beautiful.

Ralph told us about a tienda right next to San Antonio church (right next to the front door). Can't believe we'd never noticed it. They have ham, cheese, milk, veggies. No ice.

Walked to Hotel Quinta Loreto for chiles en nogada. It's right next to the artisan market. We were the only ones there. We split a bowl of lentil soup and the entree. They also brought us a delicious green salad and bread with butter. It's not pomegranate season, so the top <sup>of the chiles en nogada</sup> was sprinkled with walnuts. The plate also came with tasty rice and perfectly steamed carrot medallions and broccoli. Just the right amount of food for two. 300p (\$15) with tip.

The artisan market was quiet so we walked through. Good place for tin work. We wonder how many of the items are in fact made in China...

We bought a whole chicken at Pollería D' Daniel on Insurgentes. Small chicken 115p (\$6). We don't get the tortillas or salsa that come with, as the salsa is too hot and the corn tortillas get stale too quick.

The cash machines on the main square were all out of money (we need to pay for another week). Back to camp at 2:30. Shower (the solar shower has very hot water). 72° and windy.

Chicken and mashed potato cakes for dinner. Grant gave a thumbs up to the chicken. I walked to the jardín for a tango show at 6, but it didn't hold my interest.

5.2 miles for me today, 4.1 for Grant.

Fri Feb 11

41° this morning, which felt quite pleasant. Walked up to the mirador. Grant struggled a bit but made it. Lots of egrets roosting in the trees above the park, their lacy feathers blowing in the breeze. I like the callejon up to the top. Steep stairs and charming doorways. Cassin's Kingbird perched in a tree at the mirador.

Back to camp at 11:30 for sandwiches (Grant said the ham we got at the church tienda was tough and flavorless). Oops, it's cutlets, not ham... sure hope it was cooked. The package doesn't say...

Walked to ATM inside city market. Ralph recommended it and said it has a good exchange rate. Picked up our laundry, beautifully folded. 3.6 miles today.

68° at 2:30 with chilly, dusty wind. Pesto pasta and chicken for dinner. Walked to jardín by myself to see Morganna Love perform. She is a San Miguel native, opera & pop singer, much beloved in Mexico for her trans advocacy. She wore a beautiful mermaid dress and sparkly earrings and wowed everyone. I was hoping she'd sing pop, but she sang opera style, so I left after a few songs. Chatted with Ralph and Patti for a while in their enclosed porch. They use a little propane heater.

It's unusually cold in San Miguel right now.

Sat Feb 12

41° at 7 am, overcast. We're a bit discouraged by the weather, and I'm feeling a bit melancholy. missing my activities at home, and wishing for more community here. Also wishing for an end to Covid so we could do more indoor activities like yoga classes, or meetings w/o masks.

Decided to walk to La Coner to get a few grocery items we can't find in town. Luckily Grant suggested taking Stirling Dickinson, which reminded us of the delightful street that parallels the miserable, noisy main drag. The alternate road is Camino Viejo al Panteón. From there it's an easy block or two on pretty good sidewalks to La Coner. The intersection is now very pedestrian friendly, with crosswalks and walk signals. We'd forgotten what a pleasant place La Coner is to shop (city market, in contrast, is soul sucking and embarrassingly opulent). La Coner is good prices too. The loaf of whole wheat bread we paid 54 p for in town was 19 p! Avoiding main drag made it easy pleasant walk.

Back to camp for tuna sandwiches, then to noon AA meeting. Lunch after at La Frontera (we didn't eat) and very enjoyable socializing. So glad we went.

Ran into Darrell and Leslie on the way back from La Comer. She leaves Tues for Mexico City, so we probably won't see them before we go. We heard a rumor that they aren't going to meetings anymore, and we sure hope they haven't relapsed...

Very cold ( $66^{\circ}$ ) back at camp and a few drops of rain.

A cute young couple with an adorable dark brown Corgi arrived yesterday in a Promaster. They are climbing their way around Mexico before heading to Europe.

I was having such beautiful dreams this morning, I didn't want to wake up. Grant and I were on a train traveling to some of the most beautiful places imaginable, so much color, ~~and~~ architecture, boats, like a fantasy land.

Leftover pesto pasta and chicken for dinner. Rained a little. Sat outside around the fire until our propane ran out.  $61^{\circ}$  at 8pm. No campers outside. Another rig pulled in this afternoon, European.

Sunday Feb. 13  $46^{\circ}$  7:45

Today would be dad's  $86^{\text{th}}$  birthday. So sad. Another first milestone without him. Family Zoom call with mom at 2:00. Still overcast, chilly wind.

Grant got tamales at the church and I got chocolate atole. Neither was great. DJs playing loud cumbia music in the churchyard.

I walked up to take pictures of the egrets nesting above Juarez Park. Gorgeous breeding plumage with lacy white peacock tail feathers and neon green eye patches. Continued up to mirador, taking lots of pictures along the way.

Family zoom call for dad's birthday. Mom spent the morning looking at pictures alone. Mark went over for the Zoom call. Michael and Christine arrive this evening, and ~~mom~~ also has a super bowl party.

Grant and I went on a really nice walk, through the San Antonio neighborhood and into the Juan de Dios market, which had a lot of Valentine's Day booths set up. I was looking for a festive cupcake to honor dad's birthday. A street vendor was selling mini tres leches cakes with whipped cream frosting. Delicious, and not too sweet.

Then we walked around the San Rafael and Nuevo Progreso neighborhoods, which we really enjoyed. More working class Mexican feel, and lots to look at. Great people watching, everyone carrying cakes & flowers & teddy bears for tomorrow, 5.2 miles for me, 3 for Grant. (Valentine's Day).

Pork and beans for dinner (we pan fried the chuletas and chopped them into a pot of bayo and negro beans).

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52° at 7:15. Sitting in van to stay warm. Sure wish it wasn't so cold here this year.

Mon Feb 14

45° and overcast, again... Went for a nice long walk, up to Fabrica Aurora and west on a nice trail along the south side of the arroyo, then through the Guadalupe neighborhood to see murals. Sat to drink atole on the corner of Calz. de la Luz and Hidalgo. I like arroz con leche (like liquid rice pudding) and canela. I don't like guayaba or chocolate. It was a lovely corner to sit on and watch the tamale/atole vendor, the flower sellers, and people walking by. No other gringos in sight.

Neighborhood walks are interesting, but can be noisy, and you really have to be very careful, as there are so many tripping hazards. 4.7 miles today.

I joined the <sup>Kirkland</sup> Spanish conversation Zoom group at 2:30. It was fun to see everyone, and actually speak Spanish, which is surprisingly hard to do in Mex. b/c so many speak English.

Two new rigs pulled in. Young climbing couple from CA, Zoë + JB. 70-something couple from San Diego; Sandy + Mike.

The sun finally broke through about 4pm and we sat in the sun with Ralph and Patti like lizards absorbing the heat.

Leftover pork and beans with tortillas and sour cream. Light rain and 63° at 7:30.

Ralph and Patti eat breakfast in their van and go out for one other meal about 3 pm. They know all the restaurants in town. No hot showers again today because no sun.

Tues Feb 15

45° at 7 am, but clear sky at last! Walk to La Comer for veggies and supplies. Meet Rebecca and Paul for lunch at Dilas at the Mercado Sano. We did not like the food (Sri Lankan curry with kale, asparagus, beets? and chunks of spices you had to avoid biting into). It cost almost \$25. Rebecca and Paul came back to the campground to see our van and we had a nice visit. They left at 4:30, then Bill stopped by to visit.

Excellent stir fry for dinner, with tofu from Mercado Sano. Three new rigs arrived, including an adorable young French couple with two little kids (also adorable).

Grant was exhausted from all the socializing, but I went over to visit with Ralph, Patti, Sandy, and Mike. Lots of Mexico stories!

High today 75°! So wonderful to have the warm sun back. Full moon tonight.

Wed Feb 16

45° at 7 am. Hot air balloons. Sun!

Sat in the sun and chatted with Sandy, Mike, Ralph, and a guy in a JW camper who only is staying one night.

I walked to the cemetery, which was very peaceful and lovely. Grant and I walked down to Orizaba to look at murals and up to Dulcería Regaliz on Calzada de la Estación. A whole store filled with sweets of every kind, and piñatas. We bought some cocadas and multi-colored dulce de leche. Found a cat in the artisanal market! 350 pesos

Back at camp for lunch, tai chi, guitar, and a hot shower.

Carole & Brad's Shaw Island friends Alex & Willie live in San Miguel 7 months a year at #3 Suspiros, just a 10-minute walk from the campground. They invited us over for drinks at 2. Their house is filled with art, color, light, cats, talavera, a fountain, gas fireplace. From their third floor rooftop terrace they have a view of the parroquia and all over town. An elevator ensures they can grow old there. She has a painting studio up top. The second floor is a study and guest suite. We had a really nice 2-hour visit. Alex was managing editor at Seattle Times for many years.

Back at camp we had a nice visit with Ralph and Patti, made another yummy stir fry (Grant added al pastor

To Texas

Also bought pistachio & pecan cocadas at the dulceria on Ancha San Antonio.

79

to his) and packed up everything except the canopy. Everything was very dusty.

High 78° today. 4.2 miles for me, 3 miles for Grant. Said goodbye to Ralph, Patti, and Bill.

Thurs Feb 17

On the road at 7:40. Next time, if we're driving to TX, don't leave SMA so early! It's 6 clock hours to the rest area, and it's way too far to drive to the park in China, 3-4 hours past the rest area and through the mountains.

miles of giant yucca trees on the 57 north, and tree prickly pear. Many squares of asphalt scraped for repaving, like fork marks in icing. Bump down, bump up - not pleasant. We followed a small tanker truck that was deftly dodging them, and went where he went. 57 is a major semi route, long strings of them in both directions.

Stop for gas at noon. Station #06414 near Matchuala. They swindled us. They used smiles, English, and distraction. He showed us the pump was zeroed, but at the end it read 2355 pesos. We never take more than 1500. The pump didn't display the liters. He said we took 98 litres. Our van doesn't even hold that much. Guys were

swarming all around, wanting to check our tires and oil and wash our windshield. Then the credit card didn't work and they would only take cash. There was no receipt. I just paid cash, figuring I didn't have a choice, but I should have pushed back. I felt so angry afterward. Lesson learned: I get out before we pull up to pump, and watch the guy the whole time. He really disarmed us with his charm, and ability to speak English. I reported it on iOverlander and RV'ing in Mexico, but couldn't find a way to report it to a Mexican authority online.

Arrived at Parador Turistico San Pedro at 1:40 - 6 hours after leaving SMA. It's really nice and would be a great place to spend the night. Big clear building with a restaurant, many tables, a gift and snack shop, gas station, and flat parking spaces. Easy access from both sides of highway. A cute VW bug truck painted in bright colors has "57" painted on the side. Two people were washing the truck, the "Nuevo Leon" sign, and even the planter pots. Grant saw tooled leather car seat covers, and bought a pineapple-flavored cocada. He also saw heart-shaped peanut brittle planquetas. 75° at 2 pm.

118 p tolls on 57. (\$16) Next time: Leave SMA at 11 or 12, and go for a walk first!

## Montemorelos

81

3.5 hours to the <sup>state</sup> park in China where we heard you could spend the night by the lake. We naively thought we could make it, forgetting how exhausting driving in Mexico can be.

The 58 to Linares is a beautiful rural road with no semis. Giant yuccas, creosote? bushes, rolling hills. As we climbed higher to cross the Sierra Madre Occidental, there were juniper and pine trees. Soon we were in the mountains, with windy roads, dropoffs, craggy chiseled peaks, deep valleys and gorges. Stunning scenery if you don't have to keep your eyes on the road! I drove due to the dropoffs. There were no scenic pullouts for photos.

Highway 85 north is a bit frantic - narrow, sometimes no shoulders, trucks, bumpy. By the time we got to the highway 35 cutoff I was exhausted (even though Grant was driving now) and knew there was no way I wanted to do another 75+ minutes of driving on another mountain road, plus take a chance the park would be closed when we got there. We saw a big hospital, Hospital General Nuevo, just south of Montemorelos. We're hoping the big flat parking lot is a safe place to spend the night. We figure that staff cars will be here overnight. We saw a camper van here. Our van is pretty stealth. Cold stir fry was good. We're lying low, staying in the van, don't want people to know there

are gringos in here. No exercise today...

A man with two bored young children in the car next to us, waiting for...? The children alternately chirping and fussing. Two young adults and an elderly woman sitting in chairs in the parking lot, having a picnic. Waiting for...?

I'm reading Road Fever by Tim Cahill, a great travel adventure book. Trying to stay awake until at least 9. Trains roared past, sounding inches away. Stray dogs barking no topes today!

Friday Feb 18

I slept great. No trains or barking dogs. Lots of cars all night (parked). Quiet. The lot is well lit. Up at 6, 49°. The guy with the two little kids is back. A woman sleeping in the back seat - her eyes widened in surprise when she saw me. I took a short stroll around the parking lot to stretch my legs. There was a guard sitting in the booth. On road 7:10, 48°.

It's easy to miss the right turn to stay on 35 as you enter Montemorelos, to avoid going through the town. The road skirts the edge of town. School zone with a few topes. Topes in town of General Terán. Watch Google maps so you don't miss the turn to stay on 35.

Vendors selling "glorias" - goat milk and pecan confections. Try them next time.

Pemex refineries. 35 is flat, agricultural, nothing special. Ralph takes 9 instead. Scenery changed to low trees and prickly pear. Road goes thru middle of China, no traffic early morning.

At the town of General Bravo we missed the turn left to the 40D cuota. The 40 libre was fine though, and not that far. A couple small towns, no topes, narrow with ~~the~~ no shoulder in places, a bit bumpy.

The 40 & 40D merge. Military checkpoint. Enter Tamaulipas, another checkpoint.

In Reynosa, follow signs to Anzaldñas International Bridge. After you go around a big cloverleaf you have to move left. The road splits, and ~~to the right~~ if you go right you go back toward Monterrey. Google maps knows an easy correction (take the next cloverleaf and then do a retorno). Continue to follow signs to the bridge. A cluster of buildings on the left is the Aduana. There's a small Banjercito building kiosk along the curb for returning the vehicle permit.

45 p bridge toll.<sup>border</sup> Line starts on bridge at 10:18. No vendors. Sign says vehicles over 9' use lane 4, but the height bar says 8'6", so we had to change to the far left lane.

51° at 11 am. Slow line; because it's Friday?

Took exactly two hours to get across.

57° at 12:30. Texas gas \$3.20/gal. Exxon station on Military Rd. had a very slow pump.

Back on US roads where Grant doesn't feel I'm always backseat driving.

It's only 1 pm but Grant has run out of energy for the day, alas. We headed the short distance to Americana RV Park in Mission. They wanted \$40/night even without hookups, but came down to \$25. It's a weird place, but seems to be the only option in the area. Bentsen has walk-in tent sites for \$15, but don't know if those would work for us. We'll check tomorrow.

Americana is mobile homes and big rigs, but has lots of trees and birds. 60° here. Feels cool when the breeze blows. The sky is nice and blue. The place is under new management. They were friendly but a bit disorganized, and no one is wearing masks. Welcome to Texas...

Walked the bird loop here in the campground and saw green jays, cardinals, and many red-winged blackbirds.

A woman here has a loud motorcycle and seemed to spend half the afternoon driving it from place to place in the campground. Strange to see a UPS truck making deliveries to mobile homes.

Leftover stir fry with quesadilla for dinner. Dark by 7. 57° at 8 pm.

# Mission TX

Sat Feb 19

85

48° at 6:30. Lots of birdsong. Grant and I are on different schedules. He's up half the night and sleeps in; I'm up at 7 and racing to go. Birdwatching is best in the morning.

Ugly 30-minute freeway drive to Estero Llano Grande State Park, past strip malls and injury lawyer billboards. ~~the state park~~ is a beautiful place, with lakes, ponds, birds galore, and 5+ miles of trail. It was crowded (weekend).

We arrived at 9 am. Saw a pauraque sleeping on the ground, great horned owl pair with fuzzy white baby, hundreds of black-bellied whistling ducks, snowy egrets. There is no camping at this park. We've been here twice now, and although it's a great place, we don't feel the need to slog back there again. Once again there were no alligators, but lots of night herons. Left at 11:20.

Stopped at H-E-B for groceries. Many Mexicans shopping and working, everything bilingual, many Mexican products, food items. The freeway was very congested driving back.



\$5 per person  
entrance fee  
got us into  
both parks on  
the same day



Drove to Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park near the RV Park, arriving about 1 pm. It's another birding mecca, with 7 miles of trails and car-free roads. A tram circulates once per hour, hop on and off. I was devastated to see a big section of border wall being built right by the park entrance. Made me heartsick and angry. We walked about a mile down to the bird blind where we saw hummingbirds, cardinals, green jays, and altamira and Audubon's orioles. A CBP helicopter flew overhead...

We caught the tram back to the nature center, and had a nice roadrunner sighting along the way. It's an open air tram that moves slowly and is a great way to see the park.

Back at the nature center (one of several feeding stations in the park) the ranger fed dozens of chachalacas a mix of peanut butter, shortening, and cornmeal. Also saw an adorable black-crested titmouse.

The tram operator said that overnight parking is allowed in the parking lot! Total today 4.6 miles, high 73 degrees.

Back at camp we had a kit ~~Caesar~~ Caesar salad for a snack - yum. My shower was cold. Chicken tacos for dinner. I feel sore and tired and a bit

To Del Rio

87

Crabby. Too much togetherness?

I love the birds, but I do not like Texas, and this trailer park is kind of depressing.

Man + kids living in trailer next to us (5<sup>th</sup> wheel). Sounds of child crying, and running inside, reverberates like inside a house.

Sun Feb 20

Warm night, 52° at 6:30. On the road at 8:30. Stop for ice and fill a gallon of water at a machine for 25¢. Tap water in Texas tastes mineraly. Glad goodbye to Americana RV Park. Now that we know you can park for free at Bentsen SP, we will not be back. The ugliness of this area ground us down. West on hiway 83. The sky is packed with clouds. Saw gas for \$2.70/gal in Rio Grande City. It had a charming old town center, but sadly quite a few storefronts were empty. The towns along this road exude poverty. Dilapidated houses, payday loans. Signs and names in Spanish. So many billboards. Campaign signs so thick they're like a solid fence along the roads. ~~An~~ An election is apparently happening now. The whole effect is depressing, but the cemeteries are a bright splash of color in the dusty, dreary landscape, with large artificial flower wreaths galore. WIC clinic, so many accident

lawyer billboards. ~~Los~~ ~~los~~ ~~districts~~ ~~are~~ ~~not~~ ~~speaking~~

The Roma middle School mariachi bands featured prominently on school signs. Blimps hover over the border like a dystopian nightmare.

We turned off to Salinero Wildlife viewing area, through a tiny town with a series of "speed breakers" (topes!). A dirt road goes a short distance to a parking lot. From there it's a short walk to a feeding area with chairs, where you can sit and see what shows up. Green jays, altamira orioles, orange-crowned warbler, olive sparrow, long-billed thrasher, cardinal, chachalaca. They wanted a \$10 per person donation, which I thought was a bit high. The UTexas student group we saw at Estero yesterday were there and talking loudly (one of the profs was). We walked down to the river and saw a couple white pelicans fly by.

We decided to drive back to Roma to see its ntl. Historic District. The town dates from 1765. Steamboats plied the river here until 1907. The Rio Grande is called the Rio Bravo in Mexico. Mexico is visible across the not-very-wide river. Roma sits on a bluff looking down on the river. The old town was deserted and would have been quiet except for the dueling churches. The Catholic church on the square was actually broadcasting through

# Roma TX

89

a loud PA onto the plaza. The evangelical church two blocks away had a rock band playing so loud inside we practically needed earplugs across the street. The old buildings ooze history and interesting historic signs abound.

Next we drove a short distance to Falcon County Park, where dozens of rigs park for free in a big dusty area with scattered trees, picnic tables, a decent bathroom, & water spigots. Good place to boondock for a night. Then we checked out next-door Falcon St Pk. Campsites with water only are \$10 a night, with covered picnic tables and a restroom that looked nice from the outside. The park is on a reservoir, but the terrain is bleak desert. It just didn't interest us to walk on the trails through desert scrub in 71° heat (it felt hot with no shade). So we continued on to Amistad reservoir near Del Rio, leaving at 12:45.

83 west: windfarms, bleak expanses of yucca, scrubby shrubs and stunted trees, ranches. The sky finally turned blue. Prosperous ranch houses spaced far apart. Took the bypass around Laredo - ugly outskirts. Briefly battled semis on 35N, then back on 83 West, grabbing a map from the Texas info center at the junction. 83 had rough spots but mostly it was 75 mph, flying past vast ranches. 78° at 3 pm. Bleak prickly pear scrub. Soldiers stationed along the road for some reason.

## Del Rio

90

Pulled into Governor's Landing Campground on Amistad Reservoir at 5:30. near Del Rio. \$5 with senior pass. Covered picnic table, water, outhouse, view of reservoir. Leftovers for dinner (refried beans, chicken, and cheese quesadillas). 66° at 7:30. Most of the 14 sites here are full. Right next to highway, but pretty quiet in the van.

Mon Feb 21

60° at 7 am. Walk down to lake on a short, easy trail. It's pretty for a reservoir, even with the highway bridge passing over. Cloudy, moody sky. We're moody too. Not really enjoying this part of Texas. Wishing we had stayed in Mexico longer, wishing we could just head home.

Decided not to stop at Seminole S.P. because it's all about the petroglyphs, but by tour only, and there are no tours on Mondays. So we headed west to Big Bend. Featureless grey-brown landscape blending into gray sky. note to self: don't come this way again.

Stopped at the "Judge Roy Bean Museum" in the tiny town of Langtry. Two friendly women staffed the visitor center;

we were the only people there, and I wondered what they do all day, and what it would be like to live in this remote rural area. They gave us a "Big Bend" info packet stuffed full of brochures and magazines. Feels so wasteful, though there was some useful information.

A guy with a long grey beard, working in his yard, a donkey nearby, sign on the fence said "not quite a ranch yet."

Grant stopped to buy a soda. There was no one in the store. He left the money on the counter.

Towns with names like Dryden and Runville, attest to the paucity of water here. A few blue patches in the sky ~~often~~ rendered us and the scenery cheerier. As we drove past one dilapidated town after another, we wondered if their populations are shrinking. Is there a rural exodus?

Gas up in Sanderson. At last the scenery is relieved by mesas. A bit of sun really livened things up too. It got windy, the gusts pushing on the van and making it noisy for talking.

In Marathon we stopped at The French Grocery Store for bread, beans, tortillas. It's a fun place with an eclectic selection of everything from tofu and hummus to outdoor gear. Grant bought a "Cherry mash," which turned out to be a very sweet chocolate nut ball with a gooey cherry-flavored center. (We split it.) The store was quite pricey.

i happened to check FB and marilyn said to  
be sure to check out the Gage Hotel.

The historic Gage Hotel has a charming old lobby with very old ornate wood furnishings. Unfortunately we missed the 27-acre garden. Marathon is a cute town, and a gateway to Big Bend n.P.

We slogged our way south to the Panther Junction Visitor Center, only to find out you have to reserve campsites months in advance online. I forgot my rule to avoid NPs for this reason, and because of the crowds. This is also a 3-day weekend, and probably spring break. The park has a list of camping outside the park, but we found a spot on iOverlander that looked good. I got frustrated and crabby.

118 west is sculpted buttes and mesas. Lots of ocotillo. Lupine blooming along the road. Once you enter Big Bend Ranch State Park you are next to the river and there are low trees instead of endless desert (the Chihuahuan Desert is my least favorite type). This is supposed to be one of ntl. Geo's Top 10 Scenic US drives, called "The River Road." It's pretty, but I suspect it's prettier in the sun.

Forgot to say that you take 170 west from 118, and that is the river road.

83° at 3 pm. The SP has a \$30 entrance fee! We're staying at a picnic site with teepee shelters. It's quite nice, very quiet, by the river.

## Big Bend TX

We're the only people here. Big gusts of wind and a few raindrops. The forecast was for full sun... It's pretty warm though, especially between wind gusts. Arrived at 3 pm.

93

Refries, chicken, cheese quesadillas again. Fierce gusts of wind rockin' the van; glad we're not sideways to it. Also glad we can cook inside, out of the wind.

It's a beautiful spot here, with rocky canyon walls rising around us. The river is narrow and green.

No cell signal here.

Tues Feb 22

56° outside

66° inside van at 6:30<sup>A</sup>. Venus, 2/3 moon, sky streaked with pink. Quiet night. No one checked on us in the night, to make sure we weren't waiting for mexicans to cross the river (which is quite narrow here).

On the road at 7:30, sun! A truly lovely sunrise. Beautiful scenery. Serpentine road winds up and down. The river is so narrow here, at least this time of year. Stopped to watch the sun come up over the hoodoos at the Hoodoo Trail trailhead. 62° at 8 am. Once you leave the State Park boundary the scenery isn't as spectacular - no more canyon walls. Saw two roadrunners today!

In Presidio we walked from the small St. Francis plaza down the quiet main street to St. Teresa de Jesus church, founded in 1683. We went into a hardware store to look for propane and were pleased to hear everyone speaking Spanish. (There appears to be a shortage of propane bottles - one pounds - as we haven't been able to find them anywhere.)

The road to Marfa was nice - juniper, yucca, a reddish asphalt road, and hills on the horizon. Very few cars. Marfa itself is a quiet, pleasant town that seems to be prospering. There's an "elegant, Second Empire-style domed" courthouse, and the historic Paisano hotel, which hosted movie stars filming "Giant" in 1956.

The drive from Marfa to Fort Davis is lovely, on an empty road across high plains fields of tawny grass, sotol yucca, and trees with leaves (so many trees we've seen have been winter bare). It's only about 25 miles. The Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute was great. \$16.50 admission. It's at about 5000'.

First we walked through the botanical garden, with many Chihuahuan Desert trees, shrubs, and cacti. Then the cactus greenhouse, with many species from all over the desert, including Mexico. Then the mining museum, with examples of different ores, including beautiful blues and greens. Not much fun to spot McDonald Observatory in the distance.

# Marfa TX

95

The road from Fort Davis itself didn't have much to see. We did a short hike, but the climb down to the springs was a bit too steep and rocky, so we only went halfway. Although it was only 73°, it felt quite warm in the sun. It was also quite windy.

Fort Davis itself didn't have much to see.

The road to Alpine was beautiful, with rimrock all around. High plains.

In Alpine we parked by the football field and split a bagged caesar salad. Then we drove down "revitalized," "historic" Murphy Street, but there was only one short block with half a dozen cute little shops.

The road back toward Marfa was nice; the juniper dotting the hillsides like pom poms. Arrived at the Marfa Ghost Lights viewing area about 4 pm. A dozen other rigs here. Nice bathrooms.<sup>no sinks</sup> The lights, visible on clear nights, are not well understood, but they're certainly not UFOs. Walked three miles today.

Bacon with bread and butter for dinner.

Windy out, so we had to cook inside. Lots of stars, but too cold to look for ghost lights.

Wed Feb 23

28° this morning, with a stiff icy wind. Overcast. We're at 4900 feet. Nearby train did not wake me in the night. On the road 8:45. This road is part of the Texas Mt. Trail.

There are relatively frequent picnic areas along the road. They allow overnight parking but don't have restrooms.

Highway 90 is high plains grassland dotted with sotol. A mini Prada store along the road is quite a surprise - it's an art installation! Near Lobo a dusty yard was filled with whimsical metal art, including a charming mariachi band.

Stopped at Pilot in Van Horn to gratefully avail ourselves of the warm bathrooms. Took 54 north to avoid I-10. 31° with a cold wind but blue patches of sky appearing. A serene blue highway with sweeping vistas to mountains all around.

Passed Blue Origin Launch Site One. Lovely view of the Guadalupe Mts. ahead. Very hazy air due to the wind. West on 180 to El Paso through featureless terrain. Called numerous hardware stores until we found a Home Depot with propane canisters. On the way we got gas. After buying the propane (\$6 per canister, two-pack only, plus tax!), we walked "across the street" to buy cheese at Target grocery. This involved an unpleasant walk on a noisy street and across a busy intersection. Navigating around town "we" ran a ~~red light~~ stop sign we never saw, and went down a one-way exit from the parking lot. It's tricky driving in unfamiliar places.

# Columbus, NM

97

These incidents, plus the soul-sucking shopping and urban ugliness left us both feeling drained.

375 north loop around the city goes through Franklin State Park and mountains. We did not like El Paso: This too shall Paso. 178~~49~~ west to Columbus NM (about two hours). Intense winds and dust blowing across the road.  
Intense cross wind. Crossed into mountain Time.

Arrived at Pancho Villa SP about 3pm local time. Cold showers were a big disappointment. Boondocking is free but you have to pay if you use the ~~showers~~<sup>restrooms</sup>. Cheapest sites are \$8 for no hookups (includes day use fee).

Way too windy to cook, so we drove across the road (also too windy to walk) to Borderlands Cafe. Ran into a couple from WA who said they'd been trying to drive to Dening, but ~~the~~ road was closed due to the sandstorm.

Grant had a chicken-bacon-ranch salad, and I had a chicken-walnut-cranberry salad, both delicious. Lots of burgers on the menu. Cheesecake to go. \$32 with tip. Our waitress was a beautiful 32-year-old from Orcas Island. She was a volunteer fire fighter. She ~~rode~~ her bicycle from CA to FL last summer. She's going to Duke in the fall, and until then decided to learn Spanish by working at the cafe and living across the border in Paloma. She says many Mexican women from Paloma give birth at the hospital in Dening, and their kids are US

citizens who cross the border to go to school. She says crossing the border every day is a hassle and can take several hours.

No walk today due to the bitter cold wind.

Thurs Feb 24

37° at 6 am. Gets light at 6 now. Wind buffeted the car all night. Sunny. I'm so ready to be warm. Wish we were still in Mexico! Grant had a shower and said it was hot. Sit in sun by cafe to use wifi.

Way too cold to go walking. Drove up the road to see the City of Sun, a new age intentional community with artistic and unusual houses. Filled our big propane tank - 11 lbs. - for only \$7.

Drove back to the campground to use the facilities and read the historic information.

The park is on the site of camp Furlong, which was raided by Pancho Villa in 1916. Several old adobe buildings from the fort remain.

Hiway 9 west to Hatchita, a very tiny ranching enclave. Some fields plowed for planting, but the area is mostly ranching, big black beef cattle. The road is punctuated by cattle guards. It's a serene blue highway with few cars, lots of drainage dips, and jiggly pavement. Crossed the Continental

Divide at 4520'.

In the slightly larger town of Animas we stopped for gas, bread, and beans at Valley Feed and Mercantile, a store that had everything from food to hardware, tools, clothes, books, locally made jewelry, and baby chicks! Just a short while later we crossed into Arizona, through the little town of Portal, and stopped at the Cave Creek information center. We didn't see any maps of the area, so we continued up the road to the Sunny Flat Forest Service campground. We got the second to last spot. \$10 with our discount.

It's absolutely gorgeous here! Soaring rock formations; pine, sycamore (with white trunks + branches that practically glow against the blue sky), juniper, and yucca forest; blue sky; sunshine.

47° and light wind. Such a delight to be out of the wind and haze, and back in a forest. I didn't realize how much I've missed trees.

Arrived about 11:30, had lunch, and went for a walk. Grant said this is the first place we've been to on this trip that he would actually consider living in. The Cave Creek trail goes about one mile along a creek to the visitor center. It's a nice, easy trail and a lovely hike through the forest, with rock formations towering all around.

At the visitor center we found trail maps, and learned that the beautiful white trees are Arizona sycamore. The towering rocky spire

visible all over the Valley is Cathedral Rock. Grant mentioned that the area reminded him of Yosemite, and we learned that it is in fact called "The little Yosemite of Arizona." We met Marilyn, a volunteer who fell in love with the area two years ago when she traveled through, bought property, moved here in October, and is building a house. She loves it here and says it attracts liberal scientist, nature lovers from all over. She told us about a neighborhood called Sky Village that imposes light restrictions on homes to preserve the dark sky for stargazing.

Then we walked to Cave Creek Ranch, where a trogon has been reported at the feeding station. It was quiet, so we decided to come back tomorrow. Took the road back to camp. Gentle uphill, and the warm sun felt wonderful. 4.35 miles total.

Back at camp we sat in the sun and ate cheesecake. Beans and crackers for dinner. Too cold to cook outside; so glad we can cook inside. It's supposed to get down to 32 tonight. The Little Buddy heater is a godsend. Dark at 6:30, no signal here so I don't know what the outside temp is.

Portal, AZ

101

Friday Feb 25

33° in the van this morning! Between running the heater last night and this morning we used up a whole propane canister. The heater was on low. It lasted ~~maybe~~ 3-5 ~~three~~ hours. Light at 6:30. At 9:20 we finally had enough sun over the mountain to go walking. It was very cold, especially in the shade.

We walked uphill toward the research station (American Museum of Natural History Southwest Research Institute). Ran into two bicyclists who said the facility was still closed due to Covid, but it had a skeleton crew and open wifi. We were able to check email. The facility looks like a college student's dream, with picnic tables, pool, ping pong table, bird feeders, gift shop. We walked for two hours, 4.6 miles.

Lots of pretty Mexican jays, with chubby white bellies and turquoise blue backs.

Back at camp we decided to do our hot meal for lunch, when it was warmer and easier to cook outside. A smidge chilly with a light breeze, but pleasant. Potatoes and eggs hit the spot after the long walk. After washing an absolute mountain of dishes, we discovered that there is a water spigot in the host site (the one by the outhouse is turned off), so we were able to fill our water jugs.

There are 11 sites here, plus the host site. Sites 8-11 get the most sun.

68° at 1:30! Drove to the Portal store for ice, but they didn't have any, so we drove out to

Sky Island Grill and Grocery. Prices were shocking, but that's often the case at small rural stores. Got ice, beans, onion, and two canisters of propane for almost \$19 each!

The Portal Cafe was really busy, many people dining al fresco in the warm sun. It's also a lodge.

We parked next to the visitor's center and realized they had free wifi. Walked to Cave Creek Ranch (half a mile eachway) and spent about an hour at the feeding area. Bridled titmouse, cactus wren, acorn woodpeckers, dozens of lesser goldfinch, pyrrhaloxia, yellow-rumped warbler, curve-billed thrasher, cardinal, and a gorgeous blue-throated hummingbird. Then, at the very end, an elegant trogon came! He grabbed pyracantha berries then flew into a nearby tree to gulp them down. He stayed for about 10 minutes and we got a great look. His red chest wasn't as bright as the ones I saw in Mexico.

Drove up to see John Hardy falls, but there wasn't much water.

Back to camp at 5. 64°. Total walk today 6.13 miles. Sandwiches for dinner. It's so much warmer in the van tonight! No heater needed so far.

Lots of campsites opened up today, and new people arrived.

# Portal, AZ

103

Grant said it was so quiet last night it was like being in a sensory-deprivation tank. It was also pitch black.

Sat Feb 26

43° in the van this morning and 28° outside! Sunny but too cold to be outside.

Van name ideas: Boondocor, Carlos Vantana, Van Moresun

The Chiricahuas are known as a Sky Island. They are a volcanic plug that rose out of a caldera. The location at the confluence of the Sierra Madre and Rocky Mountains, and the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts, plus the range of elevations make them incredibly biodiverse. Portal is at 5000'. We can see snow on the highest peaks. Note: sotol yucca is the Chihuahuan Desert indicator species.

At 9:20 it had risen to 35° outside and it was pretty comfortable in the sun. We packed up the van, said a reluctant goodbye to Sunny Flat, and drove up the South Fork Road. It's dirt, one-mile long, and ends at a trail head. I walked a short distance up the trail; it's easy and beautiful. Definitely want to hike it next time. Gorgeous canyon views up here.

On the way down the canyon we stopped at Vista Point. It's a short easy walk to

a stunning view up the canyon. If it were a national park there would have been people elbow to elbow, but we had it all to ourselves. It was one of the most beautiful places I've ever been and it was hard to tear myself away.

At the visitor's center we saw a magnificent hummingbird (also called Rivoli's), and they truly are magnificent, with crimson head and an intensely iridescent emerald throat. It's up there with the most beautiful birds I've seen.

We walked down to Cave Creek Ranch about 10:30. The trogon returned! what a treat. Again it spent 5 or 10 minutes gorging on pyracantha berries before zooming off. Also saw a white-breasted nuthatch and another blue-throated mountain gem (hummingbird).

Drove to Portal Cafe, ate a picnic lunch, and walked the very short Main St to the post office and library. 60° at noon, perfect. Drove south through Rodeo, already missing the beauty of Cave Creek Canyon. The road to Douglas is serene, desert scrub, lots of ocotilla. Grabbed a few staples at the Pirtleville STORE Grocery, which mostly sold junk food, but was the only grocery store Google maps could find in the whole area. Heading toward town to look for cell signal, we saw a Tractor Supply and found Grant a long sleeved shirt.

## Whitewater Draw, AZ

He was looking for a lighter weight zip hoodie (the one he brought is very thick), but they didn't have any. 105

Driving north we saw so many border patrol. The phrase "The border is like Mordor" popped into our heads.

Arrived at Whitewater Draw Wildlife Refuge at 3pm. Thousands of Sandhill Cranes settling in for the night! There was one overnight spot left, but we decided to go one mile down the road to the overflow spot so we could have more privacy for sponge baths and a haircut for Grant. No restroom, and it's just a dirt lot, but there is only one other rig here and two tents.

I walked the dirt road for about a mile and saw a flock of over 100 snow geese flashing and turning in the sun. 3.8 miles for me today.

Pinto and black beans with sauteed onion, garlic powder, salt, and a package of brown & wild Ready Rice. Served with cheese, sour cream, salsa. Tasty.

51° at 8 pm; 60° in the van. Grant heard coyotes ~~howl~~ howling in the night. Turned out to be cranes!

Sunday Feb 27

32° in the van at 5:30. Van says it's 19° outside, nearby weather station says 31°.

We trust the weather station.

Crescent moon and a pink dawn.

About 6:25 ribbons of cranes began to flow over us. The undulating, gabbling streams continued for 30 minutes.

Some snow geese mixed in. A truly majestic sight! In the distance an enormous cloud of smaller birds shimmered and shimmied like a school of fish.

Drove down to main parking lot to wait for it to warm up enough to walk. Glad we parked in overflow lot last night, as we really had a great view of the cranes flying over us. 37° at 8 am.

Went for a nice walk on the quiet trails. Yellow-headed blackbird, vermilion flycatcher, pintail, shoveler, wigeon, green-winged teal. About 10 am hordes of people arrived to watch the cranes return. It was quite a sight watching clouds of them approach, wheel, and float to the ground, feet extended like landing gear.

After lunch a few of the campers left and we moved into one of the overnight spots. Unfortunately a big RV is running its generator ~~to~~ to keep their fridge going, since there's no power here. The couple next door is from Quebec and they have a cat. 68° at 1:30. Toasty in the sun, perfect when the breeze blows.

Spent the afternoon putting, reading, playing guitar, and walking the trails. Hot in the sun, cold in the shade!

# Whitewater Draw, AZ

107

I sat and watched the cranes for a while.  
Both entertaining and meditative.

I overheard the neighbor telling another  
camper that her cat loved my guitar playing!  
Leftover rice and beans for dinner. 59° at  
7:30.

Mon Feb 28

47° at 6 am, clouds and a pink sunrise.  
We drove down to watch the cranes fly off.  
At first it was quiet. Then we began to hear  
gabbling, which got louder and louder, and  
soon the sky was filled with thousands of  
cranes that looked like plumes of smoke from  
horizon to horizon. The sound of so many  
birds calling had a pulsing quality, like a  
giant machine. Most cranes flew north in  
big groups, but some individuals seemed  
uncertain and flew south, or came back to  
where they started. The masses of grey  
cranes were interspersed with clumps of bright  
white snow geese. The cranes in the pond  
in front of us didn't take off all at once,  
but in ones and twos.

At 6:50 we headed for Douglas. Saw a  
male hawk land on a female sitting atop  
a power pole for a very quick tryst. Cranes  
feeding in the fields.

The Douglas Aquatic Center costs \$1.50 for  
seniors and has hot showers, sinks with

running water, mirrors, and the bathroom was heated! These are all things you truly appreciate after being without them for days. It felt so good to be clean and groomed. Two women talking in the locker room: "Are you in a Bible study group?" "No, because my husband and I are taking this amazing twenty-week ~~plus~~ prophecy class!" Welcome to Arizona...

This is our first trip with Grant's insulin pump and glucose monitor and it's made a difference in his moods and has reduced blood sugar swings and granola bar consumption.

Arrived in Bisbee at 9 am and were just driving up to Mike Foster's house when he called to say his 99-year-old mom had just died. We parked at his house and he came down to say a quick hello before heading off to Green Valley.

OK Street is a terrifyingly narrow two-way street on a cliff. If another car is coming things get really dicey! Mike suggested some places to explore. There are many stairways on the steep hills, and although many dead end at houses, all are public access. Most have broken railings, if they have any railings at all. One led to a charming Buddhist shrine. The downtown is a bit seedy, and there is clearly a drug

## Bisbee, AZ

problem. We saw sketchy characters in both parks.

109

About 10 we went to Sam's (also on OK street). He built a charming bungalow painted tangerine on the outside, yellow and turquoise on the inside. He has a lap pool squeezed in between his retaining wall and the back wall of his house!

He took us for a short walk around town, then drove us out to his property near Naco, where he is building a house on six acres. Bisbee is getting too busy for him. He said many of the houses there are now AirBnBs. Also they did a study that showed that only 2% of the town's economy is fueled by tourism. The biggest employer is the prison, and despite looking like an artsy, counterculture place, it's in fact pretty conservative.

His new house is made of "rastra" bricks, which are a mix of styrofoam and cement-fascinating. He has a sweeping view of desert, mountains, and the nearby town of Naco. He said the wall has divided families, who have to deal with the border crossing to visit each other.

Back in Bisbee we said goodbye to Sam and climbed up the hill to get our car. Coming down OK Street was too scary for me, so I had to walk while Grant pulled over to the cliff edge to let cars squeak by coming up the hill.

We stopped at Safeway on the way back to boondock at Sam's property (yay,

Naco, AZ

110

a real grocery store!)

As we were cooking dinner, Sam pulled up to see how we were doing.

It's beautiful and peaceful here. Two hawks nearby. Potatoes and eggs for dinner and we sat around our firepit.

I played guitar for a while. Coyotes yipping at sunset. Lots of lights in Naco, and along the border wall. Sam left at 8, 55° at 8:30.

Sam is 78, and can tell stories for days. He's very upbeat and funny. He also has a lot of interesting life experience and we learn a lot from talking to him. He and Grant share an interest in tools and motorcycles.

Walked 3 miles today.

Tues Mar 1

Board 42° this morning, mostly sunny. A sharp-shinned hawk flew right past the van window. Also saw a pyrrhuloxia. Sam calls his property Happy Acres (Tierra Contenta).

We said a reluctant goodbye, hit the grocery store, gas, and water machine, and were on the road at 9. 80 north to Tombstone is mostly serene and somewhat scenic. Blue sky!

The Catalina mountains are also a

"sky island" surrounded by a "desert sea." <sup>111</sup>  
The islands have a lot of biodiversity due to elevations.

Tombstone was quiet at 9:30 on a Tuesday morning, and it was great to walk the wide dusty car-free streets without hordes of tourists. It's kitschy, but I really enjoyed seeing all the old buildings. The cowboy actors waiting for customers looked like the real deal who simply show up to work as their actual hard-drinking, chain smoking, rumpled selves.

North on 80 we saw pecan and pistachio farms. In Benson we got brochures at the visitor's center and learned how to drive the model trains from an actual train engineer's console. The volunteer working there built the console and was a real train buff. The trains hung from the ceiling. Took a short walk around the not-very-interesting town. It's mostly known as the access to Kartchner Caverns. (Sam says Coronado Cave is just as cool, but it's free and there's no one there.)

Got on I-10 for 38 miles and boy was that a shock! Finally saw the first saguaro 20 miles east of Tucson. On our way to lunch we heard a funny dragging noise under the car. We pulled over and found that a bolt holding an aluminum exhaust system shroud had sheared, and the shroud was dragging. Grant had to climb under the car and disconnect it, getting quite dirty in the process.

## Tucson

#3 112

We had lunch at the El Guerro Canelo on 22nd St. I had a Sonoran hot dog. It was good but I was disappointed that it had beans and no bacon. Grant had a Don Chucho, which was bigger and had bacon. The flan was good but comes from a factory in Nogales.

The interior of this location is smaller and quieter than the big one on Oracle. The hot dogs in Alamos are better.

Drove up to mt. Lemmon. Forests of ~~soldiers~~ saguaro standing like <sup>green</sup> terra cotta warriors massed on the hillsides. Hoodoos and craggy rock faces standing in sharp relief against the impossibly blue sky. Soon we were up in pine trees, and then there was snow on the roadsides. Last time we came up here Grant developed a raging headache. He wondered if it was altitude sickness, but no headache today. We drove up to the ski run parking lot, where there is not much to do or see. It's a little over 8000'. A narrow road continues 1 mile to the 9100' summit. This road just reopened today, but it looked a bit narrow for my comfort. The scenery in the middle part of the 27-mile drive is gorgeous. I drove on the way down because parts were a bit exposed for me. We stopped at Molino CG on the way down, near the bottom. It's beautiful, \$10 a night with senior pass, and there were plenty of sites open, but it was 3 pm and Grant wanted to keep going.

## Florence AZ

113

It's Coronado ntl. Forest. We talked to a very fit-looking biker who said it took him about 4 hours to ride to the top and would be about an hour down, with a top speed of about 40 mph. Lots of bicycles on the road.

82° at 3:30 in Tucson. We zigzagged through the congested outskirts of the city, enduring endless traffic lights and miles of strip malls. Soul-sucking and utterly draining. A pickup threw a rock and cracked our windshield.

Finally turned north onto hiway 79, which is blue and scenic, but I was tired and crabby. Arrived at BLM land on Cottonwood Canyon Rd. north of Florence at 5:20 pm. A few other rigs scattered about. Sat with the door open and sun pouring in. Some road noise, but otherwise peaceful here. Kit salad for dinner with a grilled cheese sandwich for me and El Guerro leftovers for Grant. 67° at 8 pm. We walked 1.5 miles today.

Wed Mar 2

50° this morning. Peaceful night. Toy haulers pouring in, getting ready to tear up the desert with their ATVs and make a lot of noise. On the road

## Scottsdale

about 8:30. Arrive at Mark's about 9:30. Did two loads of laundry and took showers. Bought stuff for dinner then went to mom's to visit with Susan and Kylie. They went to 6 pm Ash Wednesday mass with mom. Grant and I went back to Mark's and made a big stir fry. Then back to mom's. 90° today. Went for a 2.7 mile walk on the trail near Mark's in the morning.

HS 114

Thurs March 3 High 86° Low 60°

Walk with Grant in morning, then with Susan after that. We walked west on Mountain View ~~to~~ a block or so to a trail that runs south next to Gainey Ranch, down to a nice park. Total for both walks 6.3 miles. Played dad's ukulele, which I will happily inherit. Hung out by the pool (after working out a bit in the weight room with Susan and Kylie). Mark & Denise came over. Mom made yummy salmon, potatoes, and broccoli for dinner, with lavender ice cream for dessert.

Fri Mar 4 High 70° Low 51°

Walk with Grant. Old Town with mom, Susan, Kylie. Lunch at The Original Chop Shop. My morrocan salad sandwich OK not great. Walk and shop a bit, then it started (Grant brought his own sandwich.)

# Redlands

115

Raining pretty hard. Watch Concrete Cowboy with mom & Kylie. Rain in the night.

Sat Mar 5      High 69° Low 45°

Walk to Fry's with Grant. Hang out at condo all day. Short but nice visit with Ernie before he and Susan and Kylie left to get Brandon at airport. Watched final 3 episodes of Inventing Anna. Overcast, windy, chilly. About 3.5 miles walking today.

Sun Mar 6

42° and sunny at 7 am. Ice, gas, and on the road at 7:15. nice light traffic. I-10 north to detour around an I-10 closure. Gain an hour crossing into CA.

Tahquitz Canyon in Palm Springs now costs \$15 per person! And it was at capacity. So we walked an hour on nearby streets then drove to Palm Desert for a nice 2.5 hour visit with Debbie Sinick & David. Arrived in Redlands at 5 at the house where Gretchen is dog sitting on Monterey St. Rudy made roast chicken & veggies, Gretchen made a really yummy broccoli salad & a chocolate tart. 73° in Palm Desert at 4 pm. 45° in Redlands at 9 pm. Sleep on street in front of house. Slightly tilted but OK.

Fresno

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Mon Mar 7

38° at 6 am. Walk up to Hillside Memorial Park, a beautiful cemetery with huge old trees and many birds. Sidewalks missing on busy roads made for nervous walking. Walk Highlands Ave next time: rows of palms, dirt trail, cool houses. 2.5 miles. ~~Stop~~  
Say goodbye to Gretchen. Stop for gas (the cheapest we could find in town was \$5.77!) and on the road by 10.

1-10 to 215 to 138 to 14. 14 was fairly blue, with few semis and lots of Joshua trees. A strong wind blowing. This route completely bypassed LA, which was great.

Got off at an exit for lunch and to change drivers (I drove all morning). A semi had jackknifed, blocking the road, so we watched the tow truck for a bit.

58 west: windfarms, train tracks, brown hills. New word: serenery (scenery plus serene). Crossed a couple of 4000+ foot passes today. Soon we were surrounded by green hills, boulder piles, oaks (Sam says they are rooted in rock), poppies and other orange flowers blooming. Lots of bumpy patched roads today. Tehachapi.

99 North. Bakersfield is industrial. North of there are orchards and table grape vineyards. Lots of insects splattering windshield. Drove past of the Fresno Blossom Trail, but we caught the very tail end and there wasn't much still blooming. Stopped at Simonian Farms. A bit kitschy and overpriced, but we

bought some dried nectarines. Tasty but not worth buying again. Roadside vendors selling fruta fresca.

99 north traffic through Fresno was frantic and we were tired and a bit crabby. Arrived at Turlock rest area at 5 pm. 65°. Potato soup and Godfrey cabbage for dinner. Nice rest area with a water spigot.

Tues Mar 8

37°. On the road at 7. Decided to take back roads and avoid 99 & I-5. Turlock, Oakdale, morning rush hour a smidge frantic. Beautiful old brick building in Oakdale. Escalon had a livestock market. A big sign at the entrance to a farm said, "Nothing for Sale. Keep Out." Flowering orchards. Bucolic. Hundreds of houses being built on outskirts of Stockton. All new homes in CA are required to have solar. \*Cross Sacramento River and canals. Stop for drawbridge. Watch scrub jays, dusty blue and gray. Windfarms, yellow flowers blooming (mustard?). Sheep grazing, round and compact. Lupine blooming.

Arrive in Winters at 10. Growlers at Lorenzo's. Short walk through the charming downtown. Meet Kathleen, Richard, and Mo at 11 at Putah Creek Cafe. Nice ambiance,

Another new word: seranity (serenity + sanity).

\* Sod, grapes, sunflower seed processing plant but no fields visible. 12 west: fields full of Ross's and Snow Geese, strings of them filling the air. A dozen white-faced ibis (?) in a flooded field. Cross the Sacramento River and various irrigation canals. → back to previous page

Loved their collection of colorful fiestaware. My BLT was yummy, with crunchy local organic bacon. Said goodbye to everyone. (Kathleen paid for lunch when we weren't looking!) Grant and I walked the lovely trail along Putah Creek by the railroad bridge, about 2 miles round trip. On the road at 1:30. 75°. 505 south to 80 west.

Vista Point rest area in Vallejo would be a good place to spend the night if needed. 37 West. Estuary, wildlife refuge, beautiful. Trailheads, parking areas. Spring! Green grassy hills, oaks leafed out.

Looked for boondocking places approaching Point Reyes Station (the town of) but nothing on iOverlander looked great. The two spots in town looked better. Drove out to Bear Valley Visitor Center, near town, to get a brochure. Made dinner here (leftover potato soup and half of my lunch BLT). Slept on B Street next to the Dance Palace Community Center. Campgrounds in the Ntl. Seashore are expensive, by pre-reservation online only. Nearby State

# Point Reyes CA

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parks are pricey. Watched a martial arts class in the dance center. Layed low so as to not attract attention. Don't know how people feel about van sleepers. 56° at 7:30. (Fun to watch gophers burrowing at visitor center today.)

Wed Mar 9 High 65° Low 42°

Quiet night. 44° at 6:30. Drive to Drakes Beach, half hour from town. Inverness beach-front town is charming. Very windy today. Several huge elephant seals and many harbor seals hauled up on the beach. Beautiful beach. We walked about a mile. Shorebirds with long curved beaks; curlews? Sunshine, blue sky, fog, but lots of wind. Elephant seal pups are bigger than harbor seals and have more pronounced snouts. There are both here. Lots of vocalizing, but I'm not sure if it was the harbor or elephant seal pups. The adults are enormous (<sup>up to 13</sup> ~~20~~ feet long?) and look just like beach logs.

Drove to Chimney Rock Viewpoint. A few elephant seals on the beach far below. Beautiful scenery up here; wide vistas of land and water. Walked to Chimney Rock, 2 miles round trip. Wildflowers blooming: red paintbrush, purple iris, pink checker-bloom, and others in orange, yellow, white. We met a volunteer who told us the flowers had bloomed

quite early this year. She was helping to count elephant seals. The trail ends on a promontory overlooking the ocean - wild and scenic! more seals tucked in a cove below ~~is~~ the trail; precipitous cliffs. Back to Drakes Beach, past a herd of Tule Elk. The wind is intense.

At Drakes I went back down to the beach to take more pictures of elephant seals. There were more big ones out on the beach.

Drove to Abbotts Lagoon. I walked about 1.2 miles of the 3-mile (round trip) trail. It's gorgeous there, with views of lagoon, dunes, and ocean. The trail is wide, smooth, flat, and easy.

There are many cattle ranches on the peninsula, and lots of grazing cattle.

Back to town about 3 for a few supplies <sup>block ice!</sup> and then we drove to the visitor center. Walked the Earthquake trail to see the San Andreas fault line. 52° at 5 pm and almost no wind. Sponge baths in Jan.

I walked 5.8 miles today and Grant walked a bit over 4. Rice + beans for dinner. Parked at our spot between the Dance Palace and the Community Health Center at 6:30. Wind buffeting the van.

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Thurs Mar 10

36° on van thermometer, 44° on weather app. On the road at 6:20. A little fog inland. Highway 1 to Petaluma. Serpentine road, rolling green hills. Charming old houses standing proud on the main road through Petaluma.

101 north lots of traffic. Gorgeous sunny day. 128 west to Fort Bragg curvy and gorgeous scenery: vineyards, lichen-draped oak trees, Mendocino County wineries, apple farms selling cider, and then-Redwood trees! Suddenly we were in a tunnel of towering majestic trees that took your breath away. Then the road followed the Navarro River, and we caught glimpses of sparkly blue through openings in the forest.

Highway 1 north, coastal scenery in all its glory, white waves crashing against haystacks. Daffodils blooming along the road. Past Mendocini, oozing charm like a fishing town out of a movie set.

Pulled into Noyo Headlands Trail (aka Glass Beach) in Fort Bragg at 10 am and met up with friends Carole Davis and Brud Joslin from Shaw Island, who were heading south in their Pleasure Way Van. We walked on the Coast Trail, a delightful paved trail that runs for miles. We couldn't

had better weather, and the scenery was stunning. Looked for glass on Glass Beach, but people have taken it, despite signs begging them not to, and there are only tiny pieces left.

We all drove to the harbor for lunch at Noyo Fish Company. Grant had fish & chips (\$16) and I opted to bring a sandwich. The harbor is uber picturesque, and filled with fishing boats. We watched sea lions floating on their backs with their fins in the air.

Adorable!  $57^{\circ}$  with a light breeze - idyllic.

On the road at 1:45. 1 north along the coast is beautiful, but curvy and exhausting. 101 north is high speed and inland. Logging trucks barreling. Arrive Trinidad rest area, a few miles north of the town, at 5:30. It's in a redwood forest! no bright lights. Leftover rice + beans for dinner.  $49^{\circ}$  when we arrived. Warm bathrooms. This rest area is as good as they get.

Friday Mar 11

$37^{\circ}$ , on the road at 7:30. Although we're on a time crunch and weren't able to stop and explore, we enjoyed views of Redwoods, beaches, and other glorious scenery. There are many places to access the Coastal Trail, which runs along many parts of the coast. No traffic this early. Scary, curvy sections of road. Note to self: drive the coast northbound so we're on the inside edge!

# "Be Here Now... Go There Soon"

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199 takes off in Crescent City and angles north ~~east~~ up to Grant's Pass. Goes through Redwoods and along the Smith River. Gorgeous, but I had to drive due to dropoffs. Very curvy. Super scenic. The Collier Tunnel rest area is very nice. Blue sky again today!

Gas up in Grant's Pass and head to Medford. Arrive at friend Mary Zuschlag's at 1 pm. She and I hiked the loop trail on Roxy Ann peak. Easy 3-mile gravel trail with views of stunning 9500' Mount McLoughlin. Really nice hike. Views of the whole Medford area, and Mary even pointed out the rim of Crater Lake in the distance. We took showers, and she cooked us stir fry with chicken and cashews. On the road about 6:30.

Spending the night at Jordan Creek rest area near Seven Feathers Casino at exit 99. It's up above the freeway and fairly quiet. ~~at~~<sup>51°</sup> at 9 pm.

Sat Mar 12

35°, on the road at 7:30. Blue sky. This is a pretty section of I-5. Rural, light traffic. A few patches of fog in the river bottoms. Arrived at Al & Marilyn Dechter's in Eugene at 9:30. We met them three years ago in Patzcuaro. They live

Eugene OR

"Let go and let Google"

Newport OR

in a charming house on 1/2 an acre in 1124  
a quiet neighborhood on the south side of  
town. She served us homemade Kombucha,  
gave me a wonderful painting she did  
of a Mexican man with a guitar on his  
back, plus some hand painted cards, showed  
me her beautiful huipil collection from  
Guatemala, and gave me a tour of  
their yard. They told us stories of their  
travels. They were in San Cristóbal when  
the Zapatistas took over! We gave them a  
palanqueta from Mexico and they were so happy.  
We tore ourselves away at 11:30. All gave Grant a tour of his leather workshop.

Drove 99 west to highway 20, the Corvallis-  
Newport Road. Arrived at Mike Gerlach's in  
Depoe Bay a little after 2, in the rain. His  
girlfriend, Carol, got home from work just after  
we arrived. Mike bought a cute, small  
bungalow on a big lot just above town and  
has been fixing it up. We stayed for about  
3 hours. Conversation didn't flow easily, but  
it was nice to see Mike, and I like Carol.

Big storm blowing in. We got deli salads  
at Fred Meyer in Newport, then parked in  
front of my friend Louann's at 1078 NE Benton.  
The wind is blowing and the rain is pounding  
on the roof. 49° at 7 pm.

Sunday Mar 13

Rained hard most of the night. 45° at 7<sup>30</sup> am.  
Stopped at Fred Meyer to use their warm, clean  
bathroom, then drove to Nye Beach to watch the

Newport OR

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Waves roll in and listen them roar.

Drove back to Louann's at 11:30. She and I were in the Peace Corps together. Grant and I had last visited her 11 years ago, in 2011, when she lived in Willits CA. She has a charming bungalow. I loved her collection of Yupik grass and seal intestine baskets collected during her 15 years working in rural development in the arctic. (Alaska) She served us a delicious meal of clam chowder, baguettes, brie, herbed butter, and chocolate cookies.

She's a great cook. She has a beautiful garden that includes a tree collard!

Left there at 3 (Grant had gone out to the van to take a nap after lunch, giving Louanne and me some alone time).

Stopped at Freddie's to buy a can of soup for dinner. North on 101 to 18. Van Duzer rest area at 4:30. Time change today, so it will get dark later. Grilled cheese sandwiches and Progresso Chicken Corn Chowder. The soup was pretty edible. The rain and wind have stopped. 46° at 6:40.

Mon Mar 14

44°, light at 7:30. Leave at 8:30. The rain and wind have stopped. The rest area was great, and the sinks had hot water. Arrived at dear friend Judy Gregoire's

Vancouver WA

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in Newberg at 9:30. She made us apple strudel! It's the first time I've seen her since her son died and my dad died. It was a wonderful visit. She is now 82. We left at 12:30.

We stopped at the Tualatin River Ntl. Wildlife Refuge and went for a rain-free 2-mile walk on the river trail.

At 2:30 we arrived at Don and Lorlyn Arner's in Beaverton. He's my 5<sup>th</sup> cousin and we've been working on genealogy together. They served us (me) apple crisp with apples from their garden. He gave me a box of Arner family papers for safe keeping and scanning.

We left there at 4:30 and drove to a Subway in Vancouver (exit 7A). Pouring rain felt depressing and also scary to drive in.

We had planned to spend the night at Gee rest area, but luckily they had a sign saying it was closed, so we are parked at a 24-hour Winco in east Vancouver.

Tues Mar 15

Today is Ian's 32nd birthday. It was a quiet night at WinCo. 48°. Went for a short 1.4-mile walk around the neighborhood of stark new treeless developments. Several really ratty motorhomes parked along the street.

Visit Grant's 2nd cousin Mike Day and his wife Laura at their house in Vancouver. Stayed about 1.5 hours and left about 10:45.

## Home

Sun breaking through! 205 north to I-5. 55°, Leftover Subway sandwiches at exit 54 rest area. Raining on & off with a few cheery patches of blue. Stop at Freddie's for groceries and home at 3pm.