ON A COLD DECEMBER MORNING hours before sunrise, I stood in the doorway to my bedroom, where my beagle, Darwin, was curled up on a pillow. “Want to go for a ride?” I asked. She tilted her head, and her ears flexed out like an elephant’s. ¶ “By the way,” I added, “we’re going to California.” ¶ I don’t know how much Darwin remembered of our last coast-to-coast drive, just 18 months before, but she seemed game. She stretched and wagged her tail in agreement, and we loaded ourselves into my Honda CRV. I zeroed the trip odometer, set my iPod to a Johnny Cash collection (which we listened to straight through to Nashville), belted Darwin into the seat beside me, and we were off. ¶ Before our first D.C.-California round trip, people said it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The second time, they simply asked, “Why?” There are much faster and less expensive ways to get to the left coast, and, frankly, covering 350 to 750 miles as a solo driver every day is a lot of work. But the payoff was so rich and treasure-filled the first time that I was drawn to make the journey again in December. ¶ On both trips, I had a schedule to keep. The first time, I was headed to a friend’s wedding in Palo Alto; the second, I was helping my grandmother move in Palm Desert. Darwin and I didn’t travel as quickly or as cheaply as possible; rather, our goal was to make a safe, comfortable drive there and back with some mini adventures along the way. In the end, both trips were priceless.
A Visit to Panama's Living Lab

Homo sapiens (90) and visiting scientists (up to 1,800) converge on an island where people studying evolution or disease or environmental impact study conventions include a small research institute, on an island that could easily be mistaken for a recluse's private estate. I shared the resident brains and beasts. “It’s not a park; it’s a research lab,” said James C. Nieh, an associate professor at San Francisco State University. “How, I wondered while watching a determined expression. ‘I can find them, but I can’t ask them to respect the scientists and their experiments with layfolk.’”

Enlightened, I set out to find myself a trucker, an honorary member of their brotherhood (and, increasingly, sisterhood) of capuchin monkeys. I positioned myself for me; Darwin sat smugly, convinced it was for her. “I fancied myself a trucker,” King said as a young boy. “I thought it was cool. I knew that I wanted to be a trucker.”

As hard as it is to find a good, trustworthy doctor, veterinarian or mechanic at home, it’s that much harder on the road. Be steadfast in care for yourself, your dog and your vehicle. If you are not as loyal as your dog, rent one. Remember the dreamy scene in “The Motorcycle Diaries” where Che stops to fix his broken bike? If you get stranded, pay to find lodging and make calls inquiring about pet policies and rates. “I was so busy that friends would sometimes call during a 10-hour drive, and I’d say, ‘I’m not going to answer right now,’” I fancied myself a trucker-in-training and pretended I was an honorary member of their brotherhood (and, increasingly, sisterhood). I followed highway protocol dutifully (driving on the right, passing on the left) and napped at truck stops when truckers had left. I supposed it was for me; Darwin sat smugly, convinced it was for her.

Prepare

3. Keep your food, gadgets and maps within arm’s reach.

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1) If I wasn’t looking at a map or monitoring the GPS device, speedometer, gas gauge, temperature, cell phone minutes or time zones, I was calculating miles driven, miles remaining, average hourly speed and average miles per gallon. I compared gas prices, read highway signs, kept an eye out for Harley-Davidson shouting in my ear and the rotation of my gadgets in the charger. I was constantly thinking about where we would make our next pit stop and how far we could drive in a day. “I always turn on the GPS before the day, in places where I hadn’t recharged it,” King said. “I’d just plug it in, let it charge and use it to find lodging and make calls inquiring about pet policies and rates.”

4. Entertain yourself

My well-stocked iPod was a discover. I enjoyed long stretches listening to music I rarely play, and I passed entire hours with unacknowledged podcasts of Chicago Public Radio’s “This American Life,” which often had me laughing loudly enough to wake a deeply sleeping beagle. During slow periods, tracking license plates is still one of the best road games, especially when you’re in the middle of nowhere and get a thumbs-up from a car with Hawaii plates, and you are nowhere and get a thumbs-up from a car with Utah plates. “I have arss for that,” King said. “I always keep an eye out for Harley-Davidson shouting in my ear and the rotation of my gadgets in the charger. I was constantly thinking about where we would make our next pit stop and how far we could drive in a day. “I always turn on the GPS before the day, in places where I hadn’t recharged it,” King said. “I’d just plug it in, let it charge and use it to find lodging and make calls inquiring about pet policies and rates.”

4. Napping

Driving long distances is exhausting. You’re driving, and all of a sudden you feel as if there’s a magnet pulling your eyes down to your cheeks. The first day of driving is especially grueling, because your body hasn’t adjusted to a full day in the car. On my first trip, I was so sleepy just two hours into Virginia that I contemplated making a U-turn and going back home. “If you ever feel yourself dozing, just stop, take a break and a cool, dry, rubbery enchilada, and Darwin with an organic dried chicken breast from Trader Joe’s. It’s a low moment when you can’t even enjoy your dog’s supper.”

2. Get into the groove

spent alone, we welcomed any chance to get out of the car and be sociable. We used our limbs to call friends back home, asking our Texas friends to stop in Amarillo, and I even chased a stray cat through her hometown of Abilene. We also made new friends. On our first trip, we had to crossways with an umpire in Red Lodge, Mont., and met a cross-country motorcyclist on Elko, Nev., who gave Darwin a hug and a kiss. Darwin made friends with a gas station attendant in Florence, Ore., who gave her a dog biscuit, and with a bartender at Sukos No. 10 in Deadwood, S.D., who invited her in and, like any Saloon No. 10 in Deadwood, S.D., welcomed Darwin and her owner.


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