

Gilbert Family Vacation



Introduction

Welcome to my vacation story. All of the events you are about to read are completely true. Well... mostly true. I worked hard to keep the story interesting without deviating very far from the truthful intention of the story.

I have changed names to protect the innocent (but you know who you are!).

I would like to thank that garage (which will go nameless so I don't get sued) in North Carolina who rescued us that Friday evening. They stayed late on a Friday to accept our van, squeezed it into their busy schedule, and then worked late on Saturday to finish it for us. If it wasn't for their extra effort, our vacation would have been a disaster. OK. It would have been a bigger disaster.

I would also like to thank our friends in Notlih who looked after our pets and parents. It gave us peace of mind that we only had to worry about ourselves and not worry about life back home.

Finally, a special thanks to the Gordons. Not only did they help with the kids and the van repairs, they were a lot of fun on the trip.

This story is written with a 'glass half empty' view of the world. The truth is – we had a great time and a wonderful adventure. I hope you enjoy reading about it!

Chapter 1 Holiday Road

Ahhhhh... memories of Clark Griswold's cross-country trek to Wally World dance through my head. Loading the family into their new pea-green station wagon, Clark headed out into classic movie history. Who can forget that theme song?
<http://www.evtv1.com/player.aspx?itemnum=8493&aid=19>

There I was, sitting in a meeting at work when conversation drifted off topic and onto Disney. "Have you seen the great deal Disney is offering?" Nick mentioned. "Buy 4 nights, get 3 free. It includes park tickets and a \$200 gift card for only \$1200!"

Immediately, my mind raced through the financials. I have used a Disney Credit card for years, earning 1% toward a Disney vacation. I had built \$1050 worth of points. That, plus the gift card equals FREE DISNEY VACATION!

It took absolutely no convincing Linda - she would live at Disney if she could. If we could simply get to Disney, we could have a free vacation. The economy is difficult, so, our goal? Minimize costs. We'll drive instead fly. And eat picnic lunches, pop-tarts for breakfast and McDonald's dollar meals for dinner. Driving would be 48-hours of "stop touching me!" caged quality family time. I was on the fence about affording the trip, so, I asked Linda to book it (before the vacation offer expired) during the February break so long as we could cancel it. This would allow us to think about it. We could take our time to weigh the costs and consider our options.

Before Christmas, Linda booked the vacation. While at the Disney web site, she selected an offer to have Mickey Mouse call the kids on Christmas to wish them Merry Christmas! On Christmas morning, while the kids were unwrapping gifts and the Disney Parade is on TV, the phone rang and it was Mickey Mouse. We put Mickey on speaker phone: "Merry Christmas Kids! I just heard you are coming to visit me at Disney World. I look forward to seeing you then!"

My jaw dropped - what did Mickey just say? The kid's eyes lit up and they screamed "We are going to Disney!" My jaw was still dropped – what did Mickey just say?

"We are?" I asked in disbelief. We had simply made a reservation, but hadn't decided. I guess Mickey made the decision for us – as far as the kids were concerned: we were going to Disney!

My daughter used her new cell phone (Christmas Present) to immediately text to all of her friends "We are going to Disney!"

Our phone rang again. This time it was our friend Jennifer. "I hear you are going to Disney for the February Break"

"Uhm, yep. I guess news travels fast."

"I just talked to my husband," Jennifer explained, "and asked if we could go with you and he said we could!"

This was very unexpected. It's great – we've known Jennifer for 12 years, her daughter is best friends with our daughter, she's the godmother of one of my sons. My delayed enthusiasm was the slow realization that something out of my control was happening very quickly. This Disney dream was suddenly a done deal and I still hadn't had my first cup of coffee.

"We can stay at the same resort and have adjoining rooms," Jennifer suggested.

"Oh..." I tried to process what I was hearing, "... I'm not sure that's a good idea." My youngest son can be a bit of a terror and difficult to control. He would easily victimize our friends. Besides – we aren't early risers. We usually get to the Disney parks around noon or 1 in the afternoon. Jennifer is a rise-and-shine kinda 7am person.

"Don't worry about it. It'll be fine. I'll just tell Disney that Linda and I are sisters."

The movement of time during the past days (or has it been weeks?) is a blur. You can't simply go to Disney – this is a major event requiring significant planning. Where are we going? What are we doing? How do we get there? What time will Donald Duck be standing on the corner of the park we'll be attending and what angle will the sunlight be to obtain the perfect photograph of our children hugging Donald and screaming "We Love Disney!"? All this has to be carefully and meticulously planned in advance. Does the Turkey sandwich at the ABC Commissary at the Hollywood Studios Park (formally MGM) have tomatoes? Because we don't like tomatoes and can you special order one without? You need to know these things weeks in advance of going! If the fireworks end at 8:30, will we return from the park in time to get Margaritas at the resort so we can drink ourselves into a slosh before closing time? There are many essential things that must be carefully calculated and planned into precise itineraries. Because if you don't, you end up wandering through the flood of people, standing in massive lines, and never really doing anything.

Nearly 4 years ago, I wanted to go to Hershey Pennsylvania on vacation. I hadn't had a vacation in years, and by God – this was going to be a good one. To make the trip, we needed a van. So, we foolishly and impulsively purchased a piece of junk that had a big price tag. We bought it for all the bells and whistles because it had the complete extra package. "Nice radio... good paint job... lets buy it!" The van has been nothing but trouble, and we are still paying on the 5-year loan!

Jim (Jennifer's husband) is an engineer and a hobby mechanic who has done repairs on our van. "Is your van going to make it to Florida?" he asked one morning at breakfast.

"If our van can't drive another 3 thousand miles", I proudly explained, "then we have bigger problems than whether or not it'll get us to Florida!"

Jim is a good friend, so, he didn't question the logic of my statement. He probably should have because we decided to get the van checked out to make sure it could make the trip. The garage called back with a laundry list of problems and a repair estimate that made the dollars start to curl.

"You know," Linda responded to my tirade at the estimate, "there are some great deals on new vans. We could trade-in the van and drive to Florida in a brand new van!" A new van? What happened to keeping this trip cheap? I don't like where this is heading....

Didn't Clark Griswold go to Wally World in a brand new station wagon? All we need to do is find a pea-green mini-van and we'll be all set!

'Holiday Roooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad. Holiday Roooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad.'

Chapter 2

The search for the pea green station wagon.

In the movie RV, Robin Williams traded plane tickets for an RV rental so he could take his family on a cross country journey. I imagined trading our broken mini-van for a new, giant van that had all the modern bells and whistles!

Our current van was a giant mistake, and I was sure not to be taken by another salesman. I did my research. I determined what I was willing to pay per month, how much I would put down, and how much I wanted for a trade-in. So, as we drove to the dealership, I lectured Linda on what we would and would not do. I would be in control of the deal this time. All Linda needed to do was stay quiet let me do all the talking!

When we arrived, Linda dutifully let me be in control. I told the salesman I was interested in two vans: a silver 2008, and if we couldn't afford that, a blue 2006. After a test drive, he showed us a brand new red 2008 that had all the bells and whistles. "OK," I said confidently, "Let's see what the red 2008 would cost too."

Our Salesman, Mr. Tobacco, went to talk with his manager. I don't know why sales guys always talk to their managers, and leave you waiting for twenty minutes. I guess there is a long line at the manager's office, and our sales guy has to argue really hard for us. Tobacco returned with two prices. "The new Red one is \$430 per month."

I laughed, "OK, that isn't happening." I made it clear, I wanted the monthly payment to be under \$250.

"We are in luck then, the silver van is only \$285 per month." Looking back, I understand the sales tactics. But sitting there at the moment, I didn't see what was happening. They knew we couldn't afford the most expensive van on the lot - this was just for contrast. Luckily it didn't work - I was on my game!

"We can't afford that. Besides, you did 72 months on a used van, I'm not doing more then 60. Lets talk about that blue 2006."

Tobacco thought fast, "I don't want to sell you something you don't want. How can we make this work? Could you put more money down? Could you go to, say, \$260 per month?"

At that point, I cracked. I looked to Linda and she gave me the "You are in charge, Mr. Man," look. I looked back to Tobacco and without my knowledge, the initiative shifted to the salesman. He presented me something I wanted and then told me I couldn't have it - a standard salesman ploy and I fell for it! "OK," I offered, "Throw on another \$500 down, but it has to be under \$260/mo."

After another trip from the manager's office, Tobacco explained "I can get your payment between \$240 and \$259 if you go 66 months instead of 60."

I really didn't want to go beyond 5 years... but what's another six months? I looked to Linda and she was clearly taking a hands-off approach, "What ever you want, *dear*," she said sarcastically.

I had lost the initiative and was now nervous. "I need to take another look at the van." Linda and I went outside and looked the van over one more time, then returned.

"What did you decide?" Mr. Tobacco asked.

I still wasn't sure where this was going to land financially and had a hundred questions. "Let's try the 66 months" I started.

To my surprise, Tobacco stood with hand outstretched "Congratulations Mr. Gilbert on purchasing a van." I just did what? "How would you like to take care of the down payment?"

Still shocked, I handed him my credit card. I guess we just agreed to buy the van! The shock wore off and was replaced with excitement! We just bought a van!

When Tobacco left with my credit card, I stood and did my happy dance 'we just bought a va-a-a-an!'

I looked to my lovely bride to join the celebration and found her sitting with arms folded. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," she frowned.

The celebration was crashing. "Come on! We just bought a van. We need to celebrate!," I explained.

Tobacco returned with my credit card receipt. "There are several people in line before you at the business office, so, I'll take care of all the details and call the bank on Monday so you don't have to wait." Gee, that was nice of him!

With that, Tobacco took us to the exit, congratulated us, and pushed us out the front door.

I was still living high from my celebration and doing my happy dance as we walked back to our car. "What did we just do?" Linda asked.

"We just bought a Va-aa-an" I sung.

We got in the car and started driving away. "Yes. But what did we just buy?"

"I don't understand the question."

"How much does the van cost?"

I couldn't understand why she was being so silly. "The van cost between \$240 and \$259 per month."

"Yes, but which one? What was the final price on the van? Does that include an extended warranty? What did we just buy?" The logic of her questions was depressing. "You broke all of your rules. You went longer than 5 years, you put too much down, and you went to high on the

monthly payment. Do you know you are paying them \$200 to take our trade-in?" Wow, was I in the same room with her? Why didn't I see any of this? "You are such a sucker and that guy just ripped you off!" What happened?

Sadly, I called the dealership's business office and confirmed everything Linda had just told me. Linda continued to rub it in, "We don't have time to continue shopping. If we don't take this deal, we'll have to get the old van repaired!" There it was... Mr. Man crumbles into his typical failure.

And so it was. I canceled the deal and we decided to repair the old van. When we returned home, I needed to take the van to the mechanic so he could begin the repairs. However, when I turned the van's ignition, the engine made two clicks and failed to start! Oh no.... I don't like where this is going!

'Holiday Roooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad. Holiday Roooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad.'

Chapter 3 My Aunt Edna

Every chance you get, tell people that you want to live. No matter what the circumstances (location, time of day, what you ate for lunch), tell people you want to live. Because I've never had a Urinary Tract Infection (UTI), but I've come to understand they can be very painful. Recently, a beautiful young model in South America developed a UTI that expanded into her blood stream. Doctors tried saving her by cutting off her hands and feet. I'm uncertain how dismembering someone helps with painful peepees, but that was the medical thinking at the moment. Dismembered and peepeeless, the model died within a week.

My mother has complained about aches and pains for a long time but refused to go to the doctor until one evening (only three weeks from the start of our vacation) the urge struck her to such a degree, she gladly took an ambulance ride to the first doctor they could find. As she was diagnosed with UTI, the nurse asked her to measure her pain on the scale on 1 to 10. Her unfortunate response was "The pain is so bad, I wish I were dead!" And thus the dilemma. In today's modern age of high technology and big thinkers, one cannot wish they were dead (even due to UTI) unless, through obvious conclusion, they have suicidal tendencies. By law of the great state of New York, such a statement prompts a psychological evaluation.

When it comes to purchasing cars, I am much smarter due to a story a friend sent me: Confessions of a Car Salesman. I have learned car salesmen make you wait so the salesman can control you. I guess that is why you have to wait so long at the emergency room: they want to have control over you. They want to beat you submissively until you can no longer question the \$10 Advil.

Even though my mother's ambulance arrived to the hospital at exactly 5:15pm, it wasn't until 1:00am that my mother was diagnosed with UTI and given her first dose of antibiotics. Unfortunately, the story doesn't end there. Remember my mother's rabid attempts at suicide when she arrived at the emergency room (complaining about the pain)? That requires a trip to the county psych ward for the psychological evaluation. My mother's second ambulance ride was to St. Mary's in downtown Rochester. As they loaded her into the ambulance at 1am, after 8 agonizingly long and terribly boring hours waiting at the ER, I only had one thought on my mind: "I wonder if Taco Bell is still open for Fourth Meal?" Because if a man is to stay awake all night, he needs Mexican substance.

After a satisfying Taco run, I allowed my GPS to steer me into the deep bowls of the city. This was clearly not a neighborhood I would want to be caught in after sun-down (much less after 1am). After parking in a very scary parking garage, I couldn't find an unlocked door into the hospital. "This must seem odd," I thought, "I am trying to break into a mental institution."

I stood at the main entrance waving my arms frantically to a security guard within. He seemed un-phased (probably due to how normal my antics to get his attention must have seemed to him). "You have to go to the emergency entrance," he explained.

"How do I get there?"

"It is on the other side of the hospital," he motioned with his hand. After walking completely around the entire city block in the cold dark of night in a neighborhood I should not have been in, I reached the emergency room entrance to find that same security guard that coldly greeted me before. "I am glad you found it," he waved me inside while looking around the parking lot, "This isn't a very safe neighborhood, you know?"

'Then why didn't you let me take the way you took?' I thought, but did not say.

Mom had already been taken in, and after passing through two security check points, I was allowed to see her. I had to leave all my belongings at one of the security check points because the crazies might take them from me and use them. I considered removing my belt because someone might tackle me, rip it from me, and run off to hang themselves. But I've recently lost weight and know the belt was my pants only savior from gravity – I pulled my sweater down to hide my belt from the guards and decided to take my chances.

I found my mother in a large brightly lit completely white room. There were only two items in the room – an uncomfortable gurney, and a TV within a wood plexi-glass cage. From the hall way came screams and incoherent babble from the other guests. If you weren't crazy before entering this place, you had a good fighting chance to become crazy before leaving!

The entire visit to the psych ward was because my mother failed to tell someone she wanted to live. Instead, she admitted the pain was killing her. Therefore, I must repeat and plead with you – please, at every turn in your life, tell people that you wish to live. Anything less and you risk a short trip to St Mary's in the middle of the night.

As we waited for the psychologist, I asked "How long do you think you've had a UTI?"

"At least 2 or 3 months," she admitted. 2 or 3 months? At least? I get ornery if there isn't an ample supply of 2-ply Extra-soft Charmin, and she lived with this for 2 or 3 months?

A psychologist interviewed my mother and determined she possessed the appropriate amount of insanity to be released. But by now it was 4am, and I needed to get up for work in 30 minutes. I was just glad to get to bed before I needed to get up!

The next day, I visited my mother to see how she was doing. She seemed unsatisfied with her eleven hours of medical care. "I still don't feel very good," she admitted. Oh no. We are set to leave in only three weeks. I don't like where this is going!

Holiday Rooooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad. Holiday Rooooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad.'

Chapter 4

The Black Cloud

We often joke there is a black cloud hanging over our house. Our house must have been built atop an old Indian Burial Ground because we've always had the worse luck. I am convinced that someday I'll arrive home from work to a scene right out of Poltergeist where a swirling black cloud sucks our house into oblivion. If it isn't an old Indian Burial Ground, then how else can you explain it?

The van is repaired and my mother is home from her trip to St. Mary's Mental Hospital. We are in the final stretches of vacation preparation with less than three weeks to go. Like the project manager I am, I have developed our Work Breakdown Structure complete with tasks printed on a calendar detailing everyone's responsibilities. The charter has been signed off, the specifications completed, and the executive sponsor (my wife) is onboard. We are knee deep in the execution phase of our family project. Each night, every family member (even the 5-year-old) updates the project with their task progress.

The first week passes and everything is on schedule – a testimony to my acute project management skills. As we enter the second week, my wife calls me. "You Mom wants to go back to the hospital."

I talked with my mother because she didn't feel good, she can't explain it, and she doesn't know what is wrong. I immediately think she is having a panic attack, so I ask her what is going on. "I don't want you to go to Florida," she admits. "You don't realize how much I rely on you!"

"Mom, we have a large network of friends," I calmly explained, "You and John will be fine," (John is my father). "I want you to get a follow-up doctor's appointment to make sure everything with the UTI is fine."

My mother visited her doctor where, as a matter of routine, they check her pulse and determine it was irregular. Now, when I go to the gym, I strive to keep my heart rate around 145. If I can get it to 150 – I am doing a really hard work-out. Her heart was 160 beats per minute. "Can you feel your heart beating that fast?" the doctor asked her.

"No," she answered. "I feel perfectly fine!" And with that, she took her third ambulance ride to a hospital, and I spent another all-nighter in an Emergency room before they finally admitted her into a room.

Doctors practice medicine. They have to practice because they never get it right. That is why people have to be patients. You have to be patient while the doctor practices on you. And so, for a week my mother is poked and prodded and zapped and electrically burned. They gave her medicine that make her heart go nuts just so they could see if they could get it to return to normal. They crammed this down her throat and that in her nose. She has taken it all in stride and only really complains about how long it takes to get ice for her drinking water.

T Minus three days before we depart

I had a lengthy conversation with my Mother's nurse. Should we cancel the vacation? I'd hate to get to the Pennsylvania border and have to turn around! The nurse assured me that everything was fine and we should go enjoy ourselves in Florida. Our concerns immediately shifted to 'who is going to take care of the dog and cat? Who is going to make sure my Dad gets fed (because he is Microwave Illiterate)? Who is going to bring my

mother home from the hospital?’ Luckily, our long list of friends stepped up to the plate and volunteered to help out. Finally, I was able to sit in my easy chair, relax, and take a deep breath. This vacation was really going to happen!

T Minus two days before we depart

“Do you want to buy a new van?” my wife asked.

“Why? Are you having trouble getting our deposit back from my attempt to get us one?” I laughed.

“Well, yes,” she answered, “but that’s not the reason. Our van died on the way to work this morning.”

Have you ever had one of those days when nothing seems to go right? Have you ever had a bad luck stream last for a week? Or a month? How about years – have you ever had a bad luck stream last for years? If your house was built on an old Indian Burial Ground, your answer would be “Why, yes!” If your name was Craig T. Nelson, you would warn me about the big black cloud, dead bodies in the pool, and voices coming out of your television. If, on the other hand, you are part of the normal population – all this must seem very odd to you. For me, this is just ‘A Day in the Life of the Gilberts’.

“Since you had YOUR chance to get us a van,” she chaffed, “it is now MY turn. I am going with my friends tonight to find us a new van.”

There is only one answer any self-respecting husband can provide to such a rude and arrogant remark: “Yes, Dear.”

And so, as a pride of cougars on a nightly hunt, the three women went after unsuspecting salesmen. They tore them apart! They made them squeal! They made them beg for mercy! And they came home with a deal that is... well... let’s just say it is huge Rochester. Huge. “We leave town in 37 hours and you are going to buy a Kia?” I asked my wife.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I really liked the color.”

Oh no. I don’t like where this is going!

Holiday Rooooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad. Holiday Rooooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad.’

Chapter 5 Half Pint

The Little House on the Prairie tells the story of a family in the 19th century who traveled into the wilderness and created a home at Walnut Grove. Their journey in a covered wagon seems completely alien to us today. Imagine what Laura Ingalls would have written about a modern day journey... My father drove our covered wagon deep into the wilderness. For lunch, Ma broke out the Mikey-D's and when night fell, Pa found a room for us at the Comfort Inn. I wonder if our modern journeys across the nation will be viewed in 100 years the same way we view the Ingalls' journey.

"I can't make the school board meeting," I explained to Dean. "My mother is in the hospital and my van just broke down."

"I understand," said Dean. "You'll be in our prayers." And with that, the Board of Christian Education prayed for us at their meeting. I have never doubted the power of praying – and the prayers offered by the board delivered the hand of God to troubled life. My mother's heart rate miraculously snapped into pace so she could come home. And the mechanic (who couldn't find what was wrong with our van for the past 8 months) miraculously discovered what was wrong with our van. Our decision of whether to rent a van for the trip, buy a new Kia, or repair the van was decided for us!

I happily picked up the van on the day we were leaving town, and expected the mechanic to be as excited about the repair as I was! "Well...", he sighed, "We THINK we fixed it. We hope we fixed it." What was this? This wasn't the message I expected. We were leaving in two hours! "The van was sparking and arching – we fixed that. But the coils are all rusty so you might have problem from too much resistance. But you'll probably be fine. Have a nice trip." I tried to ignore how deeply concerned I was from the mechanic's reaction because I needed to pack the van.

Linda had packed nearly all our worldly possession into 37 medium to large sized suit cases. I had the pleasure of loading the van in a 60mph wind storm! Regardless of the challenges, I pushed and I crammed and I got the van loaded. With the kids loaded into the van, we headed out.

...and twenty miles down the road, I hit a pot hole and a dash light came on. "Why is the ABS Break light on?" I asked. It turns out that pot hole knocked our ABS breaks offline for a hundred miles. Thankfully, they came back online as we cross from New York into Pennsylvania.

The second day of our journey was going well as we sailed down the highway into North Carolina going much faster than the law provided for. "What is that smell?" Linda asked as we approached a tractor trailer pulling a flat bed. "That truck is burning oil – you had better pass!"

I crammed on the gas and we started passing the truck. As we approached the tractor, our van was oddly sprayed with water coming out from under the truck's hood. "What the..." I reached for the wipers because I couldn't see out the windshield. As I flipped the wipers on, I could hear Linda yell "No... don't turn on the wipers" but it was too late. I had them flipped on high and they were flapping back and forth before us. "Why isn't the water coming off?" I screamed – trying to keep the van on the road at the incredibly high rate of speed we were traveling while hugging the side of the 18-wheeler.

"Because it isn't water," Linda explained, "It is oil!" That tractor trailer wasn't just burning oil, it was spraying oil too. I carefully guided our van through the blurry windshield to the next exit – which was an incredible feat, I must admit, because I couldn't see anything.

The exit had an automated car wash, so, we pulled up to the console. The console was blurry, scratched and difficult to read. I consider myself to be fairly computer literate – in fact; I’ve tried to make a career out of it. But I could not get that console to take my credit card nor cash. After fifteen minutes trying to cram my ten dollar bill into the machine, there were three or four cars in line behind me. I couldn’t back away from the car wash because of the line that had formed, and I couldn’t go forward due to a gate blocking the car wash that waited for me to pay. What could I do? I was stuck!

I entered the gas station to find a line that stretched around the store. When I finally reached the cashier and explained the situation, she said I needed to buy the carwash from her. Why didn’t they have a sign that said that? By the time I returned to the car wash, there were seven cars in line behind us and I could tell by their single fingered jesters they were upset at a stupid northerner – I just hoped it wasn’t me (since I was the only northerner in site). We went through the car wash with high expectations our windshield would be clean, but as we pulled away, the car wash hadn’t cut through the oil!

I pulled over to fill the tank up with gas (15 cents off with a car wash!) but found there was no way to tell the pump I had just had a car wash. I went back into the station to face the long line. I waited in line. And waited. And waited. Finally, I had my chance, “I already bought a car wash and I didn’t get my 15 cents per gallon off.”

“You have to buy the gas first,” the lady explained in a slow southern drawl. Behind me, somewhere in the long line that stretched around the store, I heard someone say “Hurry up Yankee.” Yankee?

“OK. But I bought the car wash first. I just want the 15 cents per gallon.”

“No, you have to buy the gas first.” She repeated.

The gentleman behind me explained “Friend, it isn’t that easy.” I turned to give him my attention. “She would have to figure out the tax too.”

I turned back to the cashier. “You can keep the tax. I just want my fifteen cents.”

A dollar bill appeared from the gentleman behind me. “I need to get going. Just take this dollar,” he offered.

“Thank you, but, she owes me a lot more than a dollar,” I quickly did the math in my head, “she owes me a dollar and sixty-five cents.” He produced a second dollar bill.

I could see I was going to lose this argument and I didn’t want to start Civil War II. “No... thanks. That’s OK.” With that, I returned to the van disappointed and with plans to quickly hi-tail it out of the area.

“Don’t get into the van until you fix the windshield,” Linda complained. There were still streaks of oil.

“What do you want me to do?” I whined.

“Clean the windshield!”

I returned to the gas station to get a bottle of windshield wiper fluid. As I entered, I could hear the cashier say "There's that Yankee again." Fine. I guess I'm stupid because I don't know you need to buy gas before you buy the car wash!

With the windshield wiper fluid and ample paper towels, I scrubbed the windshield until it was perfectly clean, and we headed back onto the road.

Ten miles up the highway, the van started to chug, then kick and buck! The dashboard started blinking like a Christmas Tree! What the heck! "This is what the van was doing to me before we left," Linda explained. "When the engine light is blinking, we need to stop the van. We need to get off the road!"

I took the next exit to a town named Lumberton and guided the van into small mini-mart gas station where we shut it off. "All we have to do," explained Linda, "is wait 10 minutes for the computer to reset, pray a lot, and restart the van." It sounded good... actually it sounded like our only option. Unfortunately, that didn't work.

I called AAA and explained the situation and the need for a tow. "We have five people in our van," I warned because I know we can't stay in the van while it is being towed.

"I am sorry sir. Only two people can ride in the tow truck," the AAA operator said happily.

"What am I suppose to do with the other three? Sell them?"

"I am sorry sir," she was completely not helpful. It was clear our next step was completely in our hands. We needed to find a hotel for the kids, and then find a garage for the van, then find a car rental for us. With our plan set, we executed it. Using my wife's cell phone's internet connection, we located the hotel, and then used our GPS to plot the fastest path.

We started the van and as it kicked and bucked us down the road. I felt like Han Solo in Star Wars flying the Millennium Falcon while under imperial attack. "One miscalculation kid and we'll fly right into a asteroid field and that would put a real cramp in your day," The GPS was yelling at us to turn around. "It must be wrong" I yelled over the sound of the engine. "The hotel must be just down this road." But after a mile, when it was clear we were headed into the wilderness, I turned the van around and decided to listen to the nagging GPS. Oddly, we found the hotel sat right next to the minimart! If we had known, we would have walked the thirty feet to the hotel rather than try to drive the van two miles.

With the kids unloaded safely into a hotel room, I then unloaded the thirty-seven suitcases into the room. I found a garage that could look at the van on Saturday. I found a place that could rent us a car on Saturday. And I called AAA to tow the van.

It felt odd seeing our empty van get loaded onto a flat-bed tow truck. The van was heading off 38 miles to a garage we never heard of, to a town we had never seen, to be fixed by people we didn't know. "You know," Linda mentioned as we watched the van roll away atop the tow truck, "It is very likely we'll never see that van again!"

Oh no! I don't like where this is headed....

'Holiday Roooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad. Holiday Roooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad.'

Chapter 6

Mission to the Moon

When the Apollo mission passed behind the dark side of the moon, a nation's heart stopped because the astronauts were completely out of touch with earth. Everyone waited for the radio communication announcing they had cleared the moon.

We awoke to an empty world because it's not just your car, it is your freedom. We were stuck somewhere in North Carolina with no vehicle. But not to worry! We could rest easy because Enterprise had reserved us a van if we needed it. If needed, we could leave our van at the mechanic for the week and take the rental to Disney! When I called Enterprise to arrange for the pick-up, the salesman said, "I don't know why they gave you a reservation. We don't have any vehicles."

I was blown away with shock. "You have no vans?" I asked in disbelief.

"We have no cars at all. It is Valentine's Day. The flower shops rent all of our vans so everyone has to take cars. As a result, we are all out of cars," he explained.

"But... I have a confirmation number."

"It doesn't matter. Everyone knows that every rental agency is out of cars on Valentine's Day. It is just a statement of fact," he reasoned.

"No one has cars anywhere?"

"No".

"Will you have a car on Sunday?" I asked hopefully.

"We are closed on Sunday. But you can try back on Monday. We should have cars then."

Oh... this wasn't good. If we were going to be stuck in Nowheresville, we had better tell the Hotel office.

"We don't have any rooms," the hotel office explained.

I was blown away. "You have no rooms?" I asked in disbelief. I mean, it wasn't like I could walk half a mile with 37 pieces of luggage to another hotel!

"We have no rooms at all. It is Valentine's Day. Everyone knows that on Valentine's Day there are no Hotel rooms available," he reasoned.

This was unacceptable. I started to envision us sitting in the parking lot all day atop our giant pile of luggage. "Look... you have to help us out. I have three children and nowhere to go!"

There was a long silence on the phone. Finally, he spoke, "Well... OK. I have a room with one king bed that I could free for you."

I took a giant sigh of relief. Thank God! I didn't even care that the room was on the second floor with no elevator. With minutes remaining before checkout, I carried all 37 pieces of luggage to the new room and collapsed.

"I have good news!" Linda announced.

"What?" I groaned from complete exhaustion.

"Alamo at the airport has a mini-van. I confirmed it. They are holding it for us until midnight. But the airport is thirty miles away!" Great! I could walk there in only ten hours!

Ahhhh... we have options again. If they repaired the van before midnight, we could take our van. If they didn't repair our van by midnight, could take a \$75 taxi ride to the airport and rent the last remaining van in the country!!

We spent the day watching the clock. Would they have the van repaired in time? Or would I need to take an expensive taxi ride to the airport to rent one? Should I start walking? As we approached 10pm, we were running out of time! If we weren't careful, we would be screwed on Sunday with no van!

Finally, the garage called. "The van is repaired. We are loading it on a tow truck and sending it back to you." Hurray!

When the van arrived, I took it for a test ride. The van had 3 bad coils and the mechanic had to replace one of them to get the van running again. But when I gave the van a test drive, I could still feel a subtle misfiring coming from the engine!

Oh no! I don't like where this is going!

"Holiday Ro oh ohohoho ohoh d. Holiday Ro oh ohohoho ohoh d"

Chapter 7 Into the Great Frontier

When Captain Kirk explored our galaxy, he left our solar system with a very weak safety net. He did have an engineer on board, but if the starship broke down, it could be a long time before a rescue mission could be mounted.

The van was back in our hands, so, I took it for a test run. By 11:30, I determined the van was slightly misfiring, but we had no choice – we had to push on. I decided to make a run for Florida to see how far we could make it. We would get up in 4 hours and get an early start.

“Are you getting up?” Linda asked. I looked at the clock and it was past 7am the next morning.

“What happened? Why didn’t the alarm go off?”

Linda explained “You set the alarm to go off at 4pm, not 4am”.

With a late start, we passed into South Carolina and then passed through Georgia. I tried to ignore the vibration from the engine by telling myself it was bumps in the road. But as we approached Florida, Linda could feel the vibration as well.

After crossing the Floridian border, we pulled off for lunch. As we stopped at a red light, the plumb of unspent fuel coming out our tailpipe caught up with us. The smell was foul so Linda said "we had better not stop. Keep going!"

We pulled back on the highway and the vibration was getting worse - especially as we went up hill.

The GPS displayed how many miles remained. I watched and counted them off by tens. "120 miles" and then "110 miles" and then "100 miles".

"We will be OK as long as we keep going," I said. "We can't stop."

When an engine misfires, it means there is gasoline vapor that doesn’t get burned. That vapor gets pushed out the tail pipe. Our van clicked and sputtered down the highway with its plumb of unspent fuel vapor trailing behind. If anyone lit a match, they would blow up half of Jacksonville!

As we approached Daytona, the traffic started slowing. A blimp in the sky told me why. "I think the Daytona 500 is this weekend."

Sure enough, the traffic was slowing to a brisk walking pace due to traffic for the race. This was just our luck! When a friend had heard about our van problems, he jokingly warned us to "watch out for falling asteroids". He should have warned us about major motor racing events. The van didn't like the slower pace and complained loudly. "We aren't going to make it," Linda warned. We were stuck in the middle lane with bumper-to-bumper traffic – if the van died, I wouldn't be able to make it to the side of the road!

When we crept past Daytona, the highway opened up and we were able to return to our normal speed. As the van picked up speed, so did the rhythm of the knocking. On the bright side, we were within towing distance of Disney, so we continued nervously counting off the miles. “60 miles”

and then "50 miles". As long as I didn't see a light on the dash, I was going to keep going.

The Van's misfiring was vibrating the car terribly when a car passed by us, honked its horn and the driver made a motion about the front of our van exploding or something. He knew what we knew: we were in deep crap! I feared our van would break down just miles from Disney! Oh no.... I don't like where this is headed!

"Holiday Ro oh oh oh oh oh oh ad Holiday Ro oh oh oh oh oh oh oad"

Chapter 8

Lost

Who can forget the day Tom Hanks, as a Fedex employee, was riding a jet when it crashed at sea and left him abandoned on a small deserted island. When the storm settled, Tom realized he was all by himself... And lost.

We arrived in the Disney hotel parking lot just moments in front of the plumb of gasoline vapor the trailed behind us. I swung the van into the lot going too fast because I was afraid to slow down and then need to hit the gas again. With a jolt, I hit the breaks to come to an abrupt stop in the van's final resting place. Everyone in the van shot forward until their seat belts yanked them back into their seats.

"We made it!" I cheered. I looked around the van and rather than celebration, I saw fear on my family's face. So, to lighten the mood I jumped out of the van, dropped to my knees, and kissed the ground.

"Dad!" My daughter protested.

Our hotel room at the resort was exactly one quarter of a mile away from the parking lot. This made the room very quiet and peaceful. But with 37 pieces of luggage, it meant a World Gym work-out for me as I made twenty runs to the van carrying giant suitcases, bags, rubber made tubs, coolers, and everything else a modern family of 5 needs to survive for a week. Why did we pack a bicycle?

We arrived at the Magic Kingdom late, but that was OK because it was open until 3am for resort guests, and we had a whole day to catch-up on!

As the evening turned to night, the long drive took its toll and I started to get tired. The family loaded onto the Dumbo Ride, a ride I can't do and keep my super. So, I wandered off to Airl's Cove where I found a comfortable chair. Too comfortable. I fell asleep.

When I woke, the scene looked very different. My family was no longer in line! How long had I been sleeping? What time was it? Was the park still open? Where the busses still running? My family didn't know where I had went and now I didn't know where they were. I was.... Lost!

Oh no! I don't like where this is going....

"Holiday Ro oh oh oh oh oh ad. Holiday Ro oh oh oh oh oh oad."

Chapter 9

I see Dead People

Bruce Willis once met a young boy who could see dead people. It wasn't until the end of the movie that Bruce realized his strong relationship with the boy was due to his very own unfortunate condition of being dead.

After realizing I was lost from my family in the middle of the night at Magic Kingdom, I checked my cell phone and found I had missed three calls from my wife. I called her back. "Where are you?" She asked.

"Oh, its a funny story... You won't believe it... Where are you?"

"We are outside the gate waiting for a bus to take us back to the resort." I met back up with the family. I thought they would be glad to see me and relived I was OK. Instead, they were upset and convinced I abandoned them for a pile of giant cheeseburgers.

We arrived back at the resort near 4 am, and it wasn't much later before we were all asleep.

When Mickey Mouse decided we were coming to Disney, the plan was to ride along with our friends, the Gordon's. Jim Gordon is a hobby car mechanic. The thinking was if our van broke down, he could repair it. But through a calamity of problems, the Gordon's stretched 4 hours and then 8 hours in front of us on the journey to Florida until they were too far ahead to help when we became stranded in North Carolina.

Back at the resort, as I drifted asleep (again) after our first day at Disney, the phone seemed to immediately ring. Actually, I had been asleep for an entire 3 hours but it felt like a blink.

Linda answered the phone. It was the Gordon's in the room next door. Jim was offering to look at the van's problems - and that was an offer I couldn't refuse no matter how much sleep I had!

Jim knew right where the van's two bad coils were, so we headed to the parts store in his car. The return trip, except for getting lost and driving around the Disney complex an hour (we weren't going to stop for directions!), was uneventful.

With new coils in the van, we hit the parks and had several wonderful days. Perhaps it was just me, though, I couldn't help but notice many ill people there were. A little girl throwing up here, a boy barfing in the men's room, a pile of barf on the sidewalk being trampled on by hundreds of people. I was impressed with one lady: she was giving a child a piggy back ride and without missing a step in her stride, barfed on the sidewalk and kept walking!

I learned two very important lessons: First, we spray Lysol on the bottom of our shoes every day when we return to our room; and Second, I question every wet spot I see on the ground - especially if the wet spot has corn in it.

After seeing all these sick people, it became no surprise when it hit my wife right after a wonderful dinner at the Rain Forest Cafe. And then hit my daughter in the middle of the night.

My wife and daughter were sick in bed most of the day. As the afternoon slipped away, Linda wanted to go to Hollywood Studios to see the fireworks at the end of the night. We were standing in a massive line - ten abreast and the line stretch front words and backwards as far as the eye could see. We were sandwich in tight! Suddenly, my daughter says "I am going to be sick!" And then barfed on everyone's shoes.

It took the entire movie of During the Sixth Sense for Bruce Willis to determine that he too was dead. Now I wonder if I too was sick?

Oh no! I don't like where this is going....

"Holiday Ro oh oh oh oh oh oh ad! Holiday Ro oh oh oh oh oh oad!"

Chapter 10 The World of Walt

Leonardo DiCaprio once went to a beach on vacation. There, he met some fellow people who were on the island and became part of their commune. The commune members were from all around the world, but they established order, rules, and a civilization. The vacation was fine until they learned the island was owned by evil drug lords. Well... I guess every vacation can't be a perfect Gilbert vacation!

We assumed Linda and my daughter were ill as a result of a steak they shared at the Rain Forest Cafe. I am sorry, but, I don't think a \$25 steak should make you sick for 2 days (that is \$6 per person per day). On the positive side, we saved a lot on our food budget!

The rest of our stay at Disney was uneventful... Except for Jim Gordon's fight with a hammock. As he was talking along the beach at the resort, he turned to help a small child. Just then, a gust of wind threw the hammock into the air and its wooden support scalped him. Jim picked himself up and made it back to the hotel room to find a large gash in his forehead.

When my oldest son (Mark) returns to school and his teacher asks "what did you do at Disney?" I am sure his answer will be "we walked, then we stood in line. And then we walked. And then we stood in line." It was typical to stand in line for 30 to 45 minutes for everything: Bus, rides, food, etc. For food, you stood in line to order and then stood in line to pick up your food.

When I go through McDonalds drive thru, they have my hot custom ordered food ready for me in the time it takes to drive around the side of the building. I am sorry, Mr. Disney, but McDonalds has set the expectations of your customers. We know it can be done.

We know we can get a hamburger in minutes at McDonalds, so, why the wait? I believe the answer goes back to the car salesman lessons I learned. If you make someone wait, they have control over you. If they have control over you, you'll stop questioning the \$7 hamburger and the \$3 bottle of water.

I have come to believe the wait is intentional. Highway departments make people wait at red lights as a way to control traffic flow. Engineers use boulders and wait pools as a way for controlling river currents. And I believe Disney intentionally makes people wait as a means of crowd control.

The Toy Story ride at Hollywood Studios is one of the newest and most popular. It is a 3D arcade style ride, with a line that is often 60 to 120 minutes long. It was in this line that we were perhaps half way through when a voice came over the speaker. "We are sorry, but due to a technical difficulty, we need to close the ride and we do not know when it will re-open. We recommend you leave and check back in half an hour."

We were already 30 minutes into our wait, so, there was no chance we were going to leave the line! Besides, if enough people left, we could get to the front of the line! We stayed for another 45 minutes (until the park closed) before we abandoned the line.

The ongoing joke was "have you heard about the new ride at Disney? It is called The Line. You stand in line for 30 thrilling minutes! That's the ride."

I stood in line for 20 minutes at a hamburger and fry stand because they ran out of fries. When all you do is hamburger and fries, how can you run

out of fries? When my food finally came, the lady behind the counter gave mine to someone else. After the customer handled my food, ate a few fries, and determined she had the wrong order, she returned it to the counter. "Oh, I am sorry," the Disney employee said and then turned to me, "this must be your order." There was no way I was going to wait another 20 minutes for unhandled food, so, I took it. It was fine; I just wish the previous owner hadn't discarded my tomato and lettuce.

The bus rides at Disney are agonizingly long waits - especially with the rash of motorized scooters that everyone with any ailment has. It is on the bus that you can contrast culture change. Once upon a time, men would give up their bus seats for others - but that tradition has died. After I had given up mine, a woman stood holding a small child while standing before a healthy twenty-something who should have offered his seat to her. Another time, a man with a cane and a crippled leg was forced to stand.

Many traditions that mark civilization have died - for example, not tossing your garbage on the ground, or, not elbowing a 3 year old in the head without apologizing and making sure the child is OK, not cutting in line, and not shoving your way through a crowd so you split-up a family. The great melting pot is creating a stinky and disgusting stew!

We are developing the nation of babble as many park visitors had difficulty with English. My daughter has taken 3 years of Spanish and was unable to explain to 3 Spanish speaking girls where the line was to order ice cream. Perhaps it is just me, but, I find a deep southern accent to be like another language too! I recognized probably a dozen different languages being spoken - and that was just from the Disney employees!

At the conclusion of the week, we packed our items into those 37 suitcase cases. We had only used a third of the clothes we brought. I did the world gym work-out to reload the van. After checking out of the hotel, we were ready for the long drive home.

I stuck the keys in the ignition and gave the van a start. Just our luck! It started rough causing the Check Engine light to come on again!

Oh no! I don't like where this is going....

"Holiday Ro oh oh oh oh oh oad. Holiday Ro oh oh oh oh oh oad!"

Chapter 11

The journey home

In many World War II movies, you see the story of a bomber returning home from a mission over Germany. Shot up, and torn apart, the plane comes to a crash landing on only one wheel. The crew is a mess, the plane is a mess, but at least they made it back alive!

Before leaving Disney, we had an engine light on our van. Jim Gordon checked the error code and said, "it is just an evaporated error. Stay close to us on the way home and let me know at the first sign of trouble."

I tried to stay in front of the Gordon's by several minutes for the entire first day of the journey home. The challenge was our misdiagnosis of the food poisoning. Come to find out... It wasn't that \$25 steak at all because two hours out of Disney, Mark (my oldest son) surrendered his breakfast to a barf bag.

During the first day, Mark would throw up a total of ten times. Linda spent most of the trip riding backwards in the front seat, hung over her chair and holding the barf bag. It must have been an interesting site for passing cars!

At least all the barf went in the bag because I've been on trips where we weren't that fortunate, and the stench of barf is repulsive. This time, the van would flood with the stench of barf, but we could close the bag and drop off the barf bags at the next gas station.

Unfortunately, I am a sympathetic barfer myself. If someone around me barfs, I have a tendency to follow. So, when the barfing started, I would roll down the window and hang my head out of the van (while traveling 80mph, of course - we had to stay in front of the Gordon's!).

We entered the Virginia Mountains at dark. Driving in the dark through the mountains at a high rate of speed is about as close to the video game Mario Kart as you'd ever want to get in real life. When they report the highway dead statistics, I am convinced the majority of those deaths occur in the Virginia Mountains. In fact, due to the steep cliffs, I would bet there are more deaths than known - there are just piles of crumpled cars at the bottom of the ravine.

In one situation I saw, a tractor trailer was so heavy that, while traveling down the mountain slopes, he couldn't hit his breaks and stop before hitting the car in front on him. So, to avoid an accident, he kept yanking his rig into the passing lane. That was a good strategy until a small black car was passing. The truck suddenly jumped into the car's lane! With nowhere to go, the car was riding between a guard rail and the truck at 75 mph!

We arrived at the Comfort Inn exhausted. The Comfort Inn was carved into the side of a mountain such that everything was uphill. I loaded our overnight luggage (only 12 of the 37 pieces of luggage) onto a luggage rack and then pushed the rack uphill from the van to the hotel. When I reached the hotel, I made the mistake of letting go of the luggage rack so I could pull the door open wide enough to push it through. You can probably imagine the results without my elaboration, but please permit me to describe seeing the cart roll back down the hill with me in chase yelling and trying to reach the cart. It slammed into the front of the van and then dumped its contents all over the parking lot while the van's alarm system fired off. I now have a nice two inch dent in the front of my van from this.

We had a late start the following morning, but I managed to stay in front of the Gordon's even though we grabbed an early lunch at a gas station. Mark was feeling much better because Linda had stayed up all night hydrating him.

Around noon, the Gordon's called to see if we wanted to stop for lunch. We were racing to stay in front of a snow storm, we had already eaten, and I feared getting sick before getting home. Nevertheless, we agreed. Instead of eating another meal, we would just get ice cream. While my family got a table at McDonalds, I retrieved a large tray of ice cream. When I returned to the table, the Gordon's were gone! "Where did they go?" I asked. As I looked out the window, I saw them with food in their hands, climbing in their car to leave. Why did they ask us to stop for lunch if they had no intention of stopping for lunch? There was no time for questions! "Oh no! We need to stay in front of them!" I shouted. We grabbed our ice cream and ran for our van as the Gordon's pulled back onto the highway.

"What do we do with the ice cream?" Linda asked as I revved up the van in pursuit.

"Eat it!" And with the ice cream in one hand, spoon in the other, driving with my knees, and rocketing to 80mph, I woofed down a hot fudge sundae with only two splashes on my jacket.

We were catching up to the Gordon's until we neared Mansfield, Pa where Rt 15 joins Rt. 80 and 180 and 122. The GPS was screaming at me to take the ramp to the right, but I was convinced it was wrong (regardless of its protests) to take the ramp to the left. 15 miles later, Linda read a road sign, then looked at her map and said "Oh gee, we aren't supposed to be way out here. We are headed to Ohio!"

After correcting our course, I apologized to the GPS for not listening and yelling at it. Even though I apologized, the GPS refused to talk to me for ten miles! I guess it was really upset.

Other than an engine light at the start of the trip, the van ran pretty good. We have a bad front passenger tire that caused the van to vibrate every time we went above 65 mph (which was most of time). Somewhere in Pennsylvania, the transmission started doing a long shift. The van has had this problem before, so we kept going. Then, as we approached Rochester, the alternator went. I had to drive the final hour with one foot on the break and one on the gas!

Just like bringing in a torn-up World War II bomber, I bought that van home! We made it to the house, and slid the van into our ice covered driveway. What an incredible adventure!

'Holiday Roooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad. Holiday Roooooo oh oh oh oh oh oad.'

Conclusion

36 hours before arriving home, while in Florida, I gave my surroundings a good look. Green grass, blue skies, warm weather, palm trees, flowers - it was beautiful. During the trip home, we traded paradise for crappy New York in February where everything is brown and gray and covered with dirty looking snow. As we came out of the Allegany Mountains in Pennsylvania, we could see heavy gray clouds so I said "It looks like we are heading back into New York!" In fact Rochester ranks in the list of cities with the most cloudy days.

My journey has raised questions. I have seen life in other states. I listened to their local talk shows, looked at their local papers, shopped their grocery stores and have returned with many questions.

Why is gasoline \$.40 more expensive in NY than other states? Why are property taxes ten times more expensive? Why do NY public schools cost twice the amount as other states? Why aren't our roads as well maintained? Why is the speed limit 70mph in other states, but New York doesn't trust me to go faster than 65mph? Why is our sales tax higher (sometimes dramatically higher)? Why are most common everyday things cheaper in the south? Why is there construction occurring in the south and not in New York? Why do I see factories in the south, but other than the failing Kodak, I see none in New York? And, perhaps the biggest question: why do we put up with 8 months of crappy weather in addition to all of these issues? New York should be paying us to live here, not vice versa!

On another topic: the van. Was it the right decision to repair the van instead of purchasing the Kia? Hindsight is 20/20. Twice during the trip, I suggested we find a Kia dealership and dump the van. I stand by that suggestion and believe it was a terrible mistake to take our old van on this vacation. We were just lucky we found a garage in North Carolina who didn't rip us off, and that we made it back home. For our next vacation, we will be taking a different vehicle!

Overall, the trip was good. If I had a better van, I would do it all over again!