



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second-hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 4 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Deserts

American Southwest 2013

This trip actually began last year at the same time in mid-April, originally planned as a road trip from Los Angeles to Vancouver but cut short by a bicycle accident coming off the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Three days into the trip I had just walked over the bridge and was picking up downhill speed on a rented bicycle when the wind blew my hat off and I hit the brakes, which I'm told caused me to fly over the handle bars and bounce off the pavement.

When I came to, after about a minute, I didn't know what happened and was sitting on the guard rail at the side of the road with two men telling me not to try to stand. As I was being lifted into the ambulance I saw a pool of blood on the asphalt. But I felt no pain and would feel no pain until a doctor pushed a badly dislocated finger back into place in the ER of Marin General Hospital. I spent a couple of hours in the ER being scanned, stitched, x-rayed and questioned by medical personnel who seemed to believe I had suffered a serious injury to my back or neck. Aside from the dislocated pinky on my left hand, there were bruises, scrapes, a torn-up right ear, banged up knees and cracked ribs which would prove to be the most painful and crippling injury. I spent two days in a hospital which was very nice but maybe not worth the \$67,000 bill.

Travel insurance covered the bill and a ticket home since I was pretty much incapacitated by the injuries. The trip had seemed pointless from the start: it never gelled into anything cohesive and was, in every

sense, aborted, but the accident itself was interesting. It felt like a leap into the Abyss and, since I was left with no memories of the way it unfolded – no gory images or sounds of the violence of the impact – it took on a kind of dreamlike quality, a not unpleasant interlude when for the first time ever I was cared for by strangers, then forced to sit quietly at home for three weeks and guiltlessly do nothing but watch the body heal itself.

The mission of this year's trek is to visit some deserts and national parks and finally make it down from the bridge to Sausalito on the anniversary of the accident. I'll visit my son in Orange County, take lots of photos and find some old books. I start the trip with Paul Auster's *Winter Journal*, an autobiographical account of a body's history at the onset of winter (old age) which is exactly where I am. Just last week I told a youngster that one of the few good things about getting old is expectations lowered to a point where it feels good just to wake up alive and well in the morning. No more big plans or yearnings of any kind for the future; the future needs to be now. Live every day like it's my first and last.

I land in Las Vegas at about noon on April 12, 2013, bask in the warmth as I leave the airport to pick up the car, then go directly to one of the used bookstores I found on the Web. At Plaza Books I find two Thomas Merton books: *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*, and *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*, the latter consisting mostly of photos of (and taken by) the famous monk.

I punch the address of my hotel into the GPS and don't linger in Sin City before driving north to Beatty, Nevada, where I check in, then continue a few more miles into Death Valley for a quick peek at beautiful desert landscapes before it gets dark. I almost die choking on too much Tabasco sauce in a Denny's located in a dingy, roadside casino near my hotel but nobody notices, not even the waitress. Will I make it to the Bridge?



Death Valley

Death Valley, the lowest elevation in North America with the world's record for highest temperature recorded (134 F in 1913), is even more beautiful the next morning. And the temperature is a perfect 75 F. This is what I came to see. I take my time driving through the park on my way to the next motel in Visalia, California, close to Yosemite. I pull over often and, whenever I step out of the car to take a shot, I always take a moment to savor the silence and emptiness of the desert around me. I feel more defined and alive in this environment.

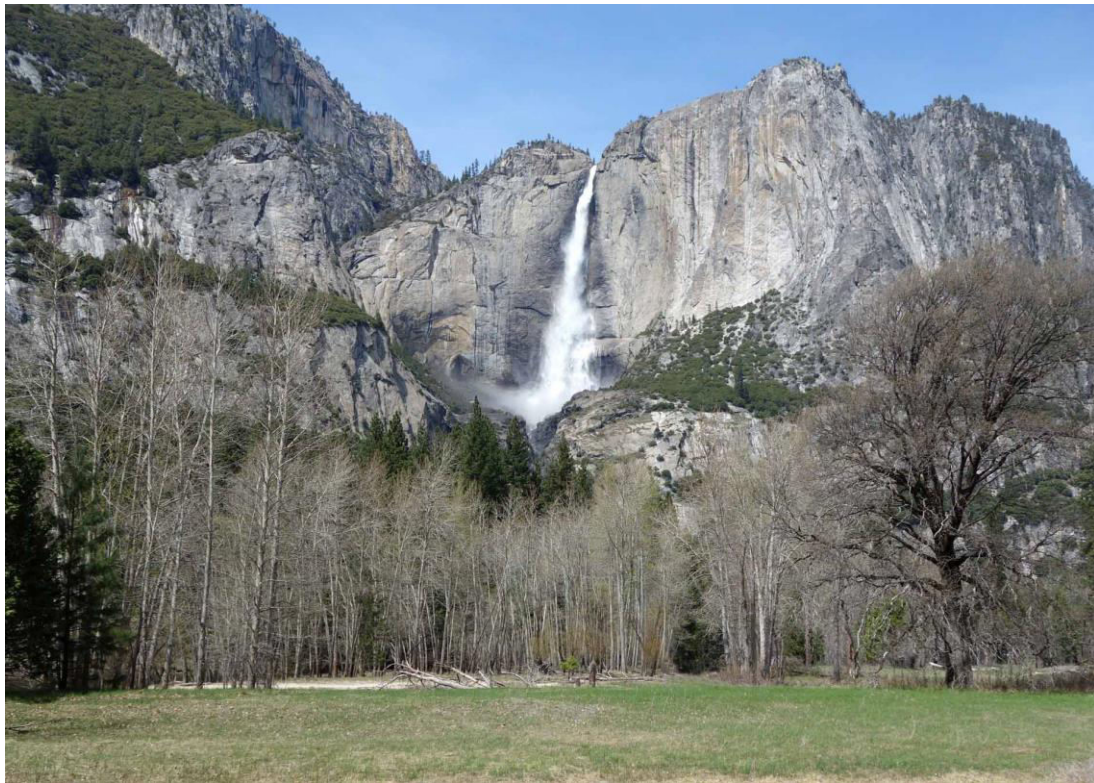
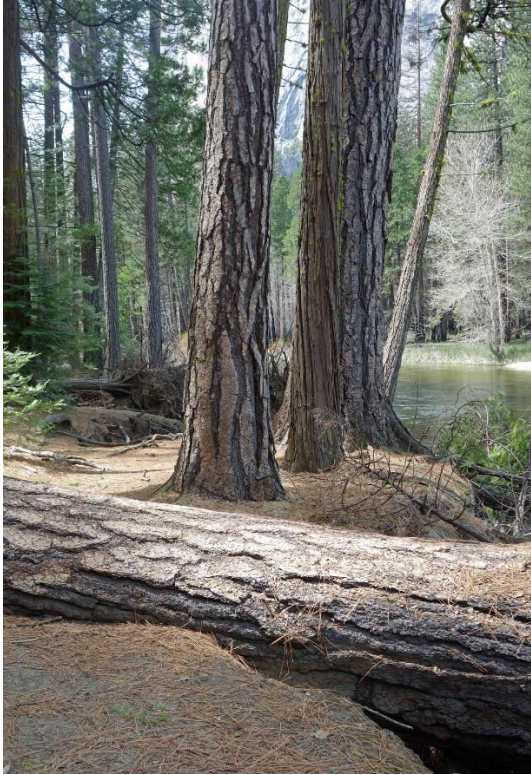
As usual on the road, I wake up ridiculously early the next morning in Visalia, hours before sunrise, and have trouble falling back asleep. Yosemite is beautiful but the light is white and hazy, not good for landscape photography. And it's hard to keep Ansel Adams out of my head: this really is his territory. But the giant redwoods are magnificent and I have a lot of fun with the camera anyway.

I wake up the next morning in Jamestown, California and immediately hit the road for San Francisco. The GPS puts me on an extremely twisty highway making it impossible to maintain more than thirty miles an hour for three hours through steep mountains with not a soul in sight, which is stressful, but eventually I make it to San Mateo outside of San Francisco where, sitting in a food court in a generic mall waiting for my room to be ready, I start to feel already tired of slick and uniform suburban California. Maybe I'll slowly make my way east to New Mexico after Los Angeles.

In San Francisco I find *Eric Hoffer: An American Odyssey*, by Calvin Tomkins at the Book Bay Fort Mason on the waterfront. Driving in the city induces vertigo more than once when I stop at an intersection with the car pointed almost straight up, the windshield showing only sky. I'm not sure I like it here. So windy, so many homeless. I'm having second thoughts about renting a bike because of the strong winds. Maybe I'll walk across the bridge and down to Sausalito the day after tomorrow.



Death Valley



Yosemite, California



Yosemite, California

On my second day in San Francisco I'm forced to enter a hipster café to re-charge the camera – there are no franchise stores permitted in this city (no Starbucks in San Francisco) and no ordinary cafés in this neighborhood. I order something called a pear galette which turns out to be a hot, spicy pastry, a foul combination I will make sure to avoid in the future. Even the overpriced coffee, which takes about five noisy minutes to prepare, isn't very good. But the stomach is faring well so far on this trip and I'm eating less and better. I think I overeat at home out of boredom.

I'm settling into life on the road on day five, catching my rhythm. Just keep moving, I tell myself. Lands End Trail, with views of the bay and the Bridge in the morning, is beautiful but 70km. winds almost knock me over the cliffs. I'm almost knocked over by the wind again later at Twin Peaks, the highest point in the city. I shut the door and sit for a while, listening to the leaves and twigs hitting the car which is actually being jostled by the wind. I'm close to the edge of the bluff with no fence to stop me from being blown into oblivion. I read a bit in the shelter of the car before deciding what to do next.

The next day is April 16: Bridge Day has arrived but there are obstacles everywhere. First, I'm blocked from entering the city on the Great Highway which hugs the coast, because it's closed, probably due to wind-blown sand dunes on the road. Then the GPS can't get me to where I want to park the car to take the bus up to the Bridge due to another detour; three times the gadget actually loops me back to the Bridge itself, so I surrender and park the car on an unpaved strip of ground close to the entrance and decide to walk over the Bridge and down to Sausalito.

Inexplicably, as soon as I step onto the Bridge the wind disappears for the first time since I arrived in this city. I savor a slow walk over the Bridge on a perfect day, but when I get close to the scene of The Fall, there is yet another barrier just a hundred feet from my destination, with barriers and workers blocking the road and shoulder. The pavement I had soaked with my blood is gone, torn up and replaced with new asphalt, and so is the railing I was sitting on when I regained consciousness. The worker blocking my way says they are redesigning the slope next to the crash site because it was "unstable". I'm only allowed to walk within fifty feet of Ground Zero before I have to turn back.



The Bridge



Access denied



View from Twin Peaks

What does it mean? Maybe I'm being protected from an evil entity lurking in the slope that isn't finished with me yet. I walk back across the bridge and consider the chapter closed. I guess I'll never see Sausalito.

I revisit Haight Street to find a place to eat and maybe visit the bike shop but find the iconic avenue tacky and depressing this time, crawling with hippies young and old and legions of homeless and hipsters. I have a Mexican dinner kitty-corner to the bike shop and I think I see Rob, the owner, step out and back in, but for some reason I'm not tempted to cross the street. I'm a bit pissed off that he didn't make an effort to meet me and the whole affair feels like it's over and done with now. In the evening I drive over the Bay Bridge into Oakland to see a baseball game but leave in the fourth inning because it's just too windy and cold in the bleachers.

The next morning is nice and relaxing. I'm done with San Francisco and decide to forgo the GPS and take the slow road, Pacific Coast Highway 1, to Monterey. I've got plenty of time to get to where I'm going, so I'll aim for my first freeway-free day and hug the coast as much as possible.

First stop is for coffee and a croissant on Main Street in Half-Moon Bay, which looks like a really nice town. I count five women around my age sitting at tables in the café-bakery, all of them with undyed grey or white hair. Not much pretense here, something about California I like very much. I find myself not disappointed by the aborted Bridge mission. Maybe the message here is not to try to connect one trek to another – let each one be unique (and don't poke sleeping slope-dragons).

In Monterey, I spend some time in Cannery Row, a waterfront neighborhood, now a well-scrubbed John Steinbeck tourist attraction. In the morning I decide to continue driving south on PCH 1 with no destination in mind. I eventually find myself back in Big Sur at the Henry Miller Memorial Library where I break my rule and buy a new book, *Emil White of Big Sur*, only to spill coffee all over the back cover less than five minutes later when I sit down in a lawn chair outside the library.



California, Pacific Coast Highway 1



Pacific Coast Highway 1, California



Pacific Coast Highway 1, California

A few minutes later I pull into one of the many lookouts along the highway and meet some birdwatchers: two couples, one seniors from Denmark, the other young Californians. The Danes have powerful telescopes and a camera with a huge lens to watch dolphins romping a mile out at sea and capture images of eagles and falcons. Two people creatively enjoying their retirement together. The Californians are bright, chipper and attractive naturalists, looking to spot American Eagles. This part of the coast is as good as the natural world gets.

After a nice evening in Grover Beach and a fantastic dinner in a small, unassuming Chinese restaurant, I drive to the beach for some photos. I finish the Hoffer book sitting in the car as the sun disappears into the Pacific in front of me. Hoffer, a working class, self-taught philosopher, writes mainly in aphorisms, using highly condensed paragraphs. He worked on the docks as long as he could, until he was 65, then gave away all the money he made from his four books and lived on his pension. He didn't like to travel: he left the U.S. only once, entering Mexico for five minutes before turning back. He witnessed the sixties from ground zero in San Francisco and denounced the "revolutionaries" as children rebelling against their own protectors and fundamentally out for themselves.

I get to Orange County late Friday afternoon and spend a few hours with my son. After dinner we go for a walk in downtown Fullerton and notice lots of big bugs on the sidewalk in several places along the way. I'm reminded of the "night of the worms", a spring evening in another life when I was walking home one evening with my three young boys. The rain had just stopped after pouring heavily all day and everything was drenched. We noticed what looked like a multitude of shiny strings on the sidewalk, except they were moving. Worms were emerging from the lawns in front of the houses – hundreds of them oozing out of the soft wet ground and onto the sidewalk, almost impossible to avoid stepping on, but we tried our best. I remember the smell of wet earth, the clean, post-deluge air and the kids' fascination with this alien life form on the sidewalk. A perfect moment almost a quarter of a century ago.



Grover Beach

In the morning I find an impressive used bookstore, Bookman, in Orange City, where I buy four books, one of which is Huston Smith's autobiography, *Tales of Wonder: Adventures Chasing the Divine*. I arrange to meet my son and a friend who's visiting Los Angeles for dinner at Canters famous deli in Hollywood, followed by a show at the Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard. As always, Hollywood is slightly depressing and the famous boulevard is garish and noisy on a Saturday night.

On Sunday, my son is unavailable and I spend six hours in the car with my friend: three going to Venice Beach, three coming back, with thoroughfares blocked by a marathon bicycle event. Not for the first time, I decide I don't like it here. I could never live like this: endless hours sitting in traffic-limbo on ugly freeways or clogged streets, trapped in a metal box watching cyclists and the rare pedestrian breeze by.

The next morning it's into the desert with nine days of travel remaining before I return to Las Vegas for my flight home. This second half of the trip will be an exercise in solitude after three days of constant company.

It's 95 degrees in Phoenix after a six-hour drive. It feels so foreign here, so American. I go to Camelback Mountain in search of a scenic hike I read about but only make it halfway up; it's too hot and I'm out of shape. No interesting photos here anyway. The little bits of color I see are dried up and washed out except for an unnaturally vibrant-green golf course that looks completely out of place. I give up and head back to the hotel, stopping at a Walmart to use the bathroom and get a glimpse of local regular people. First impression is that people don't look very happy here. I get caught in Phoenix rush hour traffic returning to the hotel and spend yet another hour sitting in a car.

Halfway to Tucson the next morning, I'm craving a decent coffee and something sweet but I can't find a donut shop. I pull over and drive around a commercial area and end up in a Burger King with yet another practically inedible fast-food breakfast. A minute after I leave the Burger King I see a Starbucks just around the first bend followed shortly by a donut shop. My instincts seem off-kilter today, as they have for a couple of days.



Venice Beach, L.A.



Arizona rest stop



Arizona

Sabino Canyon in Tucson is wonderful. I take the tram to the top, slather myself with sunscreen and begin the long walk down. After an hour or two of absolute beauty, I notice the battery running low in the camera and curse myself for deciding not to charge it last night. Another bad decision.

And then another misstep: I slip on a loose rock walking down a slope to take a photo and scrape the inside of my right wrist and jam the same pinky finger I dislocated last year. I can feel and see the finger swelling up and soak it several times in pools and streams of cool canyon water, washing away the blood on my wrist at the same time and hoping for the best. I wonder if I'm getting too old and/or stupid to travel alone.

The sun disappears behind some random clouds and I take the opportunity to sit and contemplate my next move. I'm feeling a bit of dread, like maybe I'm not supposed to be here. Shut up, I tell myself, the finger doesn't look so bad and there's the sun again – move on. When I get to my hotel, I discover yet another misstep: yesterday apparently I booked a room on the Web for last night instead of this night. The friendly motel guy gives me a room at half price and advice about a scenic sunset drive not too far away. The sunset is a bit of a disappointment but the drive and the site are very nice.

The Emil White book is refreshing, simply written with lots of pictures. White's story begins in Central Europe in the twenties before he emigrates to New York. People used to survive not so long ago on very little money, even living extended periods of time hungry, with little or no food. My life is easy in comparison and I'm not even slightly rich. I appreciate what I have, but I heard a woman on the radio yesterday say that it's not enough to express gratitude, we need to *practice* gratitude. Too much sun today, I'm feeling a bit raw. I'll be more careful tomorrow. I have an excellent dinner in a nice Vietnamese restaurant where the cook says: *Work on ideas that are creative and can bring fine results.* I'm liking Tucson.



Sabino Canyon, Tucson, Arizona

Just an hour on the road the next morning and I have to get off the highway, feeling like I'm about to pass out, overcome by drowsiness. I park the car in the shade of a tree in the lot of a run-down general store in a dusty little hamlet, roll down the window, and sleep for ten or fifteen minutes. I wake up with dream-thoughts about how the story of my life is mostly a history of daydreams, an odd thing to be considering in this hyper-active, hyper-real state of travel. Sometimes on these treks I feel like I'm collecting material for *future* daydreams.

First impression of New Mexico is dust, which the wind seems to pick up to cast a depressing light brown hue over everything, making barely visible silhouettes of distant hills and mountains on the other side of the desert. I've booked a room in a town whose name I like. Truth or Consequences is an interesting little place: very western and not at all strip-malled. Even the motel is a throwback. I walk around the old town and take some photos before I return to my room. I will do the same the next morning, hoping that some of the shops will be open, but nothing seems to get going before eleven in this sleepy town.

Santa Fe at first glance is charming. The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum is great. I know what she means when she says in a short film that she felt immediately at home in New Mexico. Everything's different, she says, even the wind. She says she was influenced by a teacher to take pieces of the world and make them beautiful.

The trip is becoming a sort of tour of Western American artists of the 20th century: Georgia, Henry Miller, Emil White, Ansel Adams. I can't seem to shake Ansel Adams. Just down the street from the O'Keeffe Museum I find the Andrew Smith Gallery of masterpieces of photography. It's inspiring to see original full-blown prints of masters like Adams. Especially Adams' trees, one of my own favorite subjects.

The next morning, I take the slow "high road" to Taos. I'm starting to like some of the more traditional country music I hear on the car radio but the Jesus stations are ridiculous, with arrogant preachers pretending to speak on behalf of God in between shameless and crass appeals for cash. Merton says of the Desert Fathers: "If these men say little about God, it is because they know that when one has been somewhere close to His dwelling, silence makes more sense than a lot of words." Never trust anyone who claims to speak for God or live in a world without mystery.



In Taos I have a nice quiet moment alone in one of the most photographed churches in the world, the San Francisco de Asis Mission, made famous by Ansel Adams' iconic 1929 photograph. I buy a book, *Living Solo*, by Adrienne Salinger, and have a long conversation with the owner of the Brodsky Bookshop who suggests I leave the car parked in front of his store and walk into town a few short blocks away.

But I don't get very far - the town looks too perfect and smug, like a haven for retired well-to-do hippies and New-Agers. I follow the other tip offered in the bookshop and drive over the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge and then on to Abiquiu where Ghost Ranch, the Mecca for O'Keeffe pilgrims like myself, is guarded and cared for by women of all ages. I hike one of the trails halfway to Chimney Rock with parts of the sky threateningly black, but it never rains. I end up playing tag with the sun for much of the day but get some good shots, which is not hard in what could be the most beautiful place on Earth.

Great day. I finish reading *Emil White of Big Sur* in the evening. I like the book even though it isn't actually written by him and is a bit naïve, like his paintings. It's good to have his perspective on Big Sur, a place I've visited four times now. It's not just a spectacularly beautiful place suspended between sea and mountains, but also a state of mind, a place where creativity rises naturally to the surface. Like New Mexico: The *Land of Enchantment*, according to its license plates.

It's Saturday morning, it's going to be a perfect weather day, and I have no plan. I decide to go back to Abiquiu via Los Alamos, home of the Manhattan Project. I end up in the Jemez Mountains driving through the Serengeti-like Valles Caldera, which is fantastic. It takes a long time to get to Abiquiu this way but the scenery is beautiful and I get some really nice shots driving through the Jemez Reservation. I visit Ghost Ranch again and soak up even more beauty.

As hard as I try, I can't sleep in. The next morning I'm up at 5:30 again with breakfast provided by the hotel at six. The Sunday morning Santa Fe sunlight is sparkling in my room this morning and I decide to linger and bring the photos and writing completely up-to-date, organize the last three days of the trip, then go to mass at St. John the Baptist at 11 before beginning the three-hour drive to the Petrified Forest.



San Francisco de Asis Mission, Taos



Rio Grande Bridge, N.M.



Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, N.M.



New Mexico



New Mexico

I begin Thomas Merton's *The Wisdom of the Desert*, alternating between my own writing and the wonderful introduction to the book where he says the ultimate end of the desert monk's striving was purity of heart and rest, which "was a kind of simple no-where-ness and no-mindedness that had lost all preoccupation with a false or limited 'self.' At peace in the possession of a sublime 'Nothing' the spirit laid hold, in secret, upon the 'All' – without trying to know what it possessed."

Mass is a bit cheesy with lots of hymn singing and expressions of adoration, and for some reason I raise my hand when the priest asks if anyone is attending the church for the first time. Someone comes to me and puts a wooden cross on a string around my neck and there is applause. A young Latino man dressed like a gangbanger who could be a deacon gives me a suspicious look.

Love is the theme of the day. The day began with Merton saying, "Love in fact *is* the spiritual life, and without it all the other exercises of the spirit, however lofty, are emptied of content and become mere illusions." Love is not just a sentiment, but actual identification with one's brother. The sermon repeats the same message, with the priest actually suggesting that we should love the Boston Bombers, the two boys who have dominated the news since I began this trip, the two most hated people in the country at the moment. In his books, Merton the monk says the same thing: living a solitary life is meaningless if there is no manifestation of love for others.

A few hours later I'm back in Arizona where the Petrified Forest and Painted Desert are amazing – so otherworldly I feel like I'm in an episode of Star Trek. And I'm virtually alone in the 28-mile-long park, with not even a breath of wind to break the silence. The desert air is sweet and once again I find myself stimulated by the scents of the wasteland. It's early spring of course – probably not so pleasant in the summer.

The next morning, the second to last day of this trek, begins quietly. I seem to be one of just two or three guests in this motel in Holbrook. I move slowly but efficiently and I'm out the door on the way back to the Petrified Forest by 8 a.m. No rush today. Plenty of time to make the short drive to Flagstaff later where I'll spend my last night in a strange bed before beginning the long journey home.



Painted Desert, Petrified Forest, Arizona



Painted Desert, Petrified Forest, Arizona



Painted Desert, Petrified Forest, Arizona

Once again, I'm practically alone in the park and once again there's no wind to add sound to these extra-terrestrial landscapes. I look more closely at the two-hundred-million-year-old trees which have transformed into glass-like stone. How long can something exist? If I turn to stone, could I live 200 million years? Deserts and trees - my kind of trip.

In the evening I find another amazing bookstore/café: Bookmans Entertainment Exchange in Flagstaff. I fall asleep for the last time in a strange bed and on my last morning I'm feeling like I'm done with being a tourist. I was going to go to Walnut Canyon here in Flagstaff, but no more vistas for me - my eyes are feeling over-fed.

I haven't booked a room for tonight because my flight is at seven in the morning, so I'll just take it easy on this double-day which won't end until I'm back home tomorrow evening. I'll finish the two short books I'm reading, begin another one for the journey back and tie up all sorts of other loose ends. Maybe I'll see a movie in Vegas tonight.

Living Solo, the book I picked up in Taos where the owner engaged me in the longest conversation I've had with a stranger on this trip, is a book of full-page photos of people who live alone with full-page self-descriptions on the facing page. I like the format very much, and of course I see myself as one of these solitaires who have to guard against becoming too eccentric. Maybe I'll take a photo of myself and write a one-page blurb when I get home.

Merton's *Wisdom of the Desert* was disappointing, except for the amazing introduction, which will prove to be the most interesting thing I read on a trip where I didn't actually read very much. I get the feeling that Merton tries too hard to present Catholic bigwigs as people of relevance and interest when in fact he stands head and shoulders above most of them. This is not the first time Thomas has been my best travel companion.

At a Dunkin Donuts at a sand-blown rest-stop somewhere between Flagstaff and my destination, I'm puzzled as to why getting to Vegas is taking almost two hours longer than the Web suggested, but who cares? I still get there far too early with twelve hours to kill, the first two of which I kill in the Mob Museum where the highlights are a multi-media presentation in a genuine courtroom and a short film about Hollywood's fascination with gangsters.



Painted Desert, Petrified Forest, Arizona

The museum is located in the old Las Vegas Courthouse and in the former courtroom there is a multi-media presentation about the Kefauver Hearings on organized crime in the fifties, one of which actually took place in this room. A short film on Hollywood's depiction of gangsters says that moviegoers are fascinated by people who are able to make shitloads of money without actually working. Organized crime became a force to be reckoned with because of prohibition. When gambling and booze were illegal, the mob thrived. Las Vegas represents the profits of sin and freedom to break all the rules. Such a contradiction in this Bible-obsessed part of the world.

Outside in the heat again the museum's parking lot attendant suggests I hang out at the Mob Bar around the corner but my squeamishness for anything fancy and pretentious prevails and I return to my old haunt: the slightly shabby Ellis Island Casino next to the Super 8 Motel on Koval Lane, low-end and working class, just like me. I eat in the casino restaurant where, as always, they seat me at the same single-guy table at the very front of the restaurant.

A couple of hours later I'm sitting in the Town Square Mall drinking a \$6 frappuccino, killing time before my movie begins at 10:30. It's a huge mall, literally the size of a small town, and there actually is a town square in the center with what looks like a grass lawn but when I walk over to touch it is actually artificial. Like Vegas itself: all lit up and dazzling but tacky and fake if you look too closely. If it weren't for the cheap air fares to this part of the world, I would probably never come back.

The movie, *Into the Pines*, is good but ends too early. It's only 12:30 and my plane leaves at 7:00 with the airport only a few minutes away. I return the car as slowly as I can to the huge, almost deserted rental complex and empty out what has been my home for the last twenty days, careful to make sure I don't leave anything behind. I will get some sleep in the airport and on the flight home.

20 days, 4400 miles of driving, 400 photographs and 11 books. When I get home my senses seem more alive than they have in years. I can actually smell the neighborhood, a good smell, on a perfect spring night. From my balcony I can see all sorts of life on the streets and sidewalks and it's wonderful. I pay more attention to the process of coming home this time, because this really is the purpose of my treks: to bring back travel-eyes and travel-energy, the trekker's sense of purpose

and direction, taking in the world with eyes wide open and unfiltered by expectation and familiarity.

The most interesting thing I discover once home is a passage in Huston Smith's autobiography that explains the desert and the fascination of empty space. It's something Aldous Huxley said to Smith while they were walking, coincidentally in reference to the Desert Fathers: "The Nothingness of which the Desert Fathers spoke is not nothingness. The desert is in order that we may discover that God *is* by direct experience, for ourselves." It's simple. God is visible and accessible in the desert. Mystery solved.

It feels good to be home, reconnected with the comforts of my chair, my bed, my computer, my kitchen and my bathroom. But I know that after a few days of contentedness I will start to feel the need to leave again and struggle to stay alert and productive at home. I understand that what ultimately matters is how I live when I'm home: how I relate to family, friends and the responsibilities that are mine, without the adrenaline and spectacle of constant travel.

Says Merton: "What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery..."