



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 13 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Happy Trails

It's December 27, 2016, and aside from visiting family in Santa Ana, California, once again, deserts will be the focus of the trip. The plan is to begin with a slowed-down, two-day drive from Las Vegas to Orange County and then probably re-visit places I've already photographed, like Death Valley. I have a room booked at the Super 8 Las Vegas on Koval Lane, a low-rent motel parallel to the Strip I've stayed in several times. The evening flight is bumpy and once landed I'm met with a fiasco at the car rental desk where, even though I have a reservation, they claim to have no cars and want customers to return in the morning. I refuse to leave and make a pest of myself until they finally give in and offer me an electric blue Mustang!

As usual, Sin City is depressing in the morning of Day 2 and the Super 8 is shabby even by my low standards. But all is well when I get to Red Rock Canyon just outside of town, my third visit to this magnificent park. It's even more beautiful than I remember, maybe because this is the first time I'm seeing it in morning light. In one photo that will eventually end up on my living room wall, I will count rock formations of four different colors.

The car is perfect. I was a little wary at first – I've never driven a flashy car – but I'm starting to really like it. The power, the design, the fat wheels that hold the road tight. Even the little chrome horse on the grill evokes what I feel like I'm doing – riding through the desert, just me and my pony.



Red Rock Canyon, Nevada



Red Rock Canyon, Nevada

Leaving the canyon, I have to drive back through Vegas to reach Highway 15 and begin the westward drive through the Mohave desert. I'm very hungry but there are few options aside from Primm Valley, 30 miles down the road, where I do something I never did before: I walk away from my order while waiting to pay. The service was painfully slow and the food court was noisy, smelly and expensive - just a counter in a crowded and noisy gas station/mini-mart. It takes a while to escape a traffic jam at this last oasis and I'm starving by the time I reach Baker where I have magnificent tacos at Los Dos Toritos next door to the "world famous" but over-crowded Mad Greek Diner which had advertised itself ceaselessly on highway billboards along the way.

I reach my hotel room at the Stardust Inn in Barstow in late afternoon. The town is a bit sad and poor at first glance, with lots of homeless-looking people and a small Main Street (which is actually old Route 66) dominated by thrift shops. The setting is stark but beautiful, though, with desert vistas visible from almost anywhere you stand. It gets dark by five, which is eight back home, so I know I'll be in bed early tonight and up ridiculously early tomorrow. There's a 24-hour MacDonald's down the street, so no worries about breakfast.

The plan on Day 3 is to drive slowly through the High Desert and reach my son's house in late afternoon. It's a long drive through the "High D" (as one top-forty radio station refers to it) without much to see. It's mostly flat brown vistas and worn-down settlements here and there until I reach Elmer's Bottle Tree Ranch, an impressive pile of folk art in the middle of nowhere. Aside from thousands of empty bottles attached to metal posts (trees), there's lots of vintage road signs and equipment scattered about the site. Nostalgia for old things seems to permeate California.

Next stop is the Hi Desert Book Oasis in Apple Valley which is almost impossible to find, with no sign to indicate that it's part of a compound of small cottages that used to be the Apple Valley Inn resort in the forties and fifties, and was later owned by Roy Rogers. I step into the cottage that used to belong to Bob Hope and is now a museum and a friendly, talkative old-timer gives me a tour and tells me all about what a fantastic place this used to be, full of celebrity vacationers (Marilyn Monroe's cottage is next door) and so remote it had its own airport across the street.

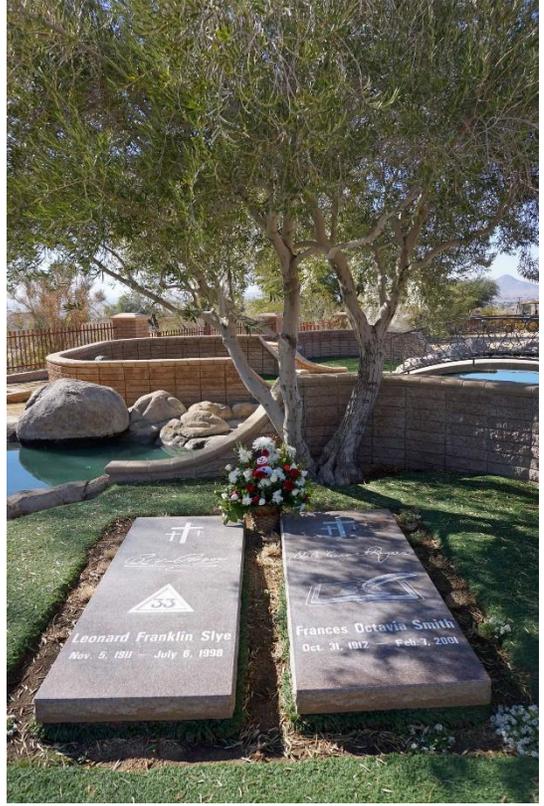


The museum is filled with memorabilia from the Fifties: a *Dick and Jane* reader, a Roy Rogers lunch box just like the one I used to own... bits of my childhood preserved in this tiny cottage with a large *Happy Trails* sign on the front. *Happy Trails* was Roy Rogers' and Dale Evans' theme song that almost sixty years later is still easily accessible in my head, and I wonder if somewhere my own lunchbox still exists.

The old-timer tells me where the bookstore is in the compound and I find two books, one of which is *A Prisoner and Yet...* by Corrie Ten Boom, and a free cup of coffee offered by the friendly owner. I drive about a mile down the road to Sunset Hills Memorial Park cemetery because it looked so nice on the Web, with artificial turf, beautiful vistas and a 24-foot tall replica of Roy Rogers' horse, Trigger, standing straight up on his hind legs with balls the size of pumpkins on display. I pay my respects at the graves of Roy and Dale with *Happy Trails* playing in my head as it will for the rest of the trip.

I reach Orange County in late afternoon and check into my room at the Motel 6 Santa Ana before texting my son to tell him I'm coming. Each time I go to my room, I will walk past a room at the top of the stairs where the door and curtains are almost always open. This first time, a young man sits in a chair close to the door, his hands and head slumped so low in front of him they almost touch the floor. A young woman sits on the bed, her back against the wall. Both appear to be unconscious or lost in a narcotic haze. I wonder why they leave the door and curtains open, like they want to be seen.

I connect with my two-year-old granddaughter immediately, setting a wonderful tone that will endure the whole week and end up being the highlight of the trip. When I get back to the motel, a man is being arrested on the sidewalk and I see another young man hiding behind a truck in the motel parking lot. I briefly consider (and decide against) pointing him out to the cops before going up to my room. None of this seems strange to me anymore. I've been to this part of the world so many times now that, except for being in a motel, it hardly feels like travelling, and I feel like I've slipped out of pilgrim mode.



Day 4 will be all family, including picking up the ex-wife at the airport. As I'm leaving for breakfast, I see an emaciated young woman with several large bags standing on the sidewalk in front of the motel. She paces and talks to herself before a young man shows up and they walk off together. She seems happy to see him. So much drama around here.

I'm reading Corrie Ten Boom's book about her Nazi concentration camp experience and discover from Wikipedia that, oddly enough, she is buried at Fairhaven Memorial Park, only three miles from my motel. It stops raining and I find the grave easily and just as I'm about to take a photo, the sun comes out and the whole cemetery, many graves with Christmas decorations, sparkles magically. My son and I and the baby greet the Ex at John Wayne Airport in Santa Ana and the rest of the day is very nice.

Day 5 is New Year's Eve and I take the morning for myself to visit the beach, even though it's forecast to be grey all day. The beach is cool and colorless but it's always restorative to see and smell the ocean. The long drive there and back is pure southern California boring and I end up (inevitably) at a Starbucks waiting for word from my son. If I were home right now, I'd take a nap, but I'm not, so I need to focus on here and now - this no man's land of freeways and strip malls.

The Ex and I prepare dinner and New Year's Eve is nice, quiet, family time with a Twilight Zone marathon on a big TV no one is watching. The crisp black and white images of these classic programs made in the late fifties and early sixties are comfortably familiar, all of them filmed in this bright (normally), high-contrast part of the world.

Day 6, the first day of 2017, is a Sunday, so there are lots of people - mostly Filipino, Chinese and Latino - attending different services in the smaller surrounding buildings of the Crystal Cathedral complex in Anaheim, a site that used to belong to the televangelist Robert H. Schuller who commissioned world-famous architect Phillip Johnson to design it. The ministry eventually lost its money and sold the site to the Catholic Church which is transforming it into Christ Cathedral. I get a couple of nice shots before heading back to my son's house. It will be another all-family day. Another good day.

Day 7 is going to be a solidly grey, and I hate Los Angeles without the sun, but it's a holiday so the traffic should be lighter. I'm taking a day off from family to visit some places in the city and try for the nth time to find things to like about it.



First stop is the Wayfarer's Chapel, a small Swedenborg structure designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The setting on the coast in Palos Verdes is spectacular but the light is bad and the chapel itself closed for renovations. Next stop is nearby Green Hills Memorial Park to visit the gravesite of Charles Bukowski, but even with the plot number it's impossible to find and the cemetery office is closed. Third stop is Watts Tower in the grimmest, scariest neighborhood I've seen in this city so far. But there's nowhere to park and it's closed anyway. Fourth stop is Hollyweed, a marijuana dispensary where I had hoped to get lucky, but nothing doing for a Canadian tourist.

Hungry and at a loss about what to try next, I find a parking spot near the La Brea Tar Pits and good coffee and a cinnamon bun at Black Cat Coffee where I spend an hour on the internet trying to book a room in the city but eventually settle on one back in Orange County. I'll spend the next two nights at the Quality Inn in Anaheim near Disneyland. I wanted to see a film at a vintage theater on Sunset Boulevard, but parking is nowhere to be found. The day's been a bust but the 24-hour break from family put me a little back in pilgrim mode.

Days 8 and 9 are all family. The Ex and I are doing the grandparents thing, cooking and cleaning and playing with our little wonder and joy. All extremely good and necessary to sustain bonds, but nothing to write about.

On Day 10 the family visit is over and it's back to the desert. The day starts out cool and wet in Anaheim but I should find sun in the desert. After finding a book at Basically Books in Diamond Bar, the rain and fog are so thick approaching Cajon Pass that I almost pull over. But just before I pull into the MacDonald's at the very top of the pass to get my bearings, the rain stops and the sun makes a dramatic appearance over the mountains.

The plan is to spend another night in Barstow where the light is crispy golden when I arrive in late afternoon, and I have fun driving around the small, almost-empty town taking photos up and down Main Street before returning to my room at the California Inn with Chinese take-out I picked up at Barstow Station beside Highway 15 which seems to be the hub of the town.



Wayfarer's Chapel, Palos Verde, Calif.

On Day 11, the forecast is good for Death Valley, but not for tomorrow, so it looks like I'll be spending even more time in Las Vegas before flying home. One day removed from family and I'm starting to appreciate what a blessing last week was. I wanted to cement a bond with the granddaughter and mission accomplished. Memories of the visit will linger for the rest of my days and even if she forgets (she's only two), it's nice to think that some detail about the contact between us might endure for 100 years, and I'm glad I was able to facilitate the same link with her grandmother.

This is my second visit to Death Valley and I love it. Of course, it's January and I probably wouldn't like it very much in July, a month which in 1912 recorded the highest temperature ever on Earth. Beauty is everywhere in this place that feels like another planet. Not far from Badwater Basin (the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere at 282 feet below sea level), I climb a hill to get a shot with a daylight moon hanging over the hills and, with not a soul in sight for miles around, take a pee to mark my visit.

At the Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes, just as I did a few years ago, I set out to walk until I get an unobstructed view of the largest dune. And, just like last time, I exhaust myself slipping and sliding up and down smaller dunes that never stop popping up each time I think I've scaled the last one. I give up after thirty minutes and return to the car with my shoes full of sand so fine and powdery it has penetrated my socks and feels like cool, slippery velvet between my toes. I say goodbye to the park when the sun begins to dip below the hills in the west and head to my hotel just outside the east entrance.

The Longstreet Inn and Casino, in the middle of nowhere, has seen better days. Like other casinos I've stayed in, it feels like purgatory. I struggle to stay awake after a long day of driving and at one point close my eyes and have liminal visions of the joints in my body only loosely connected, if at all. Like they are held together only by faith and a bestowed power of will. Death pops up for contemplation on each trip now. I recently saw an animated video clip of what goes on inside the body – how tightly-packed organs pump and slither away, sometimes with surprising force. The thought that my existence rests on the unceasing, unimaginably complex and interrelated functions of these squishy organs and neural pathways is terrifying if I dwell on it, so I don't.



Zabriskie Point, Death Valley, Calif.



Zabriskie Point, Death Valley, Calif.

On Day 12 I try but can't stay in bed until the restaurant opens at seven, so I get a coffee in the 24-hour shop and check out the empty casino. It's just machines and vintage stuff, with the usual low lighting meant to make the bright lights of the infernal machines more enticing, stale cigarette smoke, and thick red-floral patterned carpet, this one a bit old and stinky.

I set out for Vegas on Highway 95 and it's ten minutes before I see another car. It's quiet, windless and overcast in the empty desert this morning. There's some sun forecast in Vegas but what will I do there for two days? Maybe I'll try some night photography.

First stop in North Las Vegas is the Broadacres Marketplace, a huge outdoor collection of Mexican vendors with a \$1.50 admission price. It feels just like Mexico and absolutely everything is for sale in the tiny stalls, even toiletries. I guess people prefer to shop in a familiar environment. There's live music and rides for the kids and I easily find what I'm looking for: two Luchador masks for the grandsons.

Then, it's a visit to Amber Unicorn Books, another impressive used bookstore in a city full of pawn shops and liquor stores. I check into my room at the Tuscany Suites Casino not far from the Strip and spend three hours walking and riding the Monorail but don't even take out my camera and end up more disillusioned about this place than ever. I don't want to photograph the shallow excesses, I don't even want to be here. The lights, the noise, the cars, people trying too hard to have fun, some desperate, some menacing. I can't find a quiet place to eat so I pick up a sandwich and bag of chips in a 24-hour drugstore to take back to my room and it's not bad at all.

I wake up on Day 13 after having slept eight hours for the first time on the trip. On my way to breakfast in a café in the Casino, I'm curious about who's gambling at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning. There are a few people sitting at a blackjack table and one man asleep at a machine. Not for the first time in this money-mad environment, I'm made to feel low-end almost immediately by the café staff, which I am of course, in this context, but I don't need working class people (my own people) to rub it in.



My trusty steed at the bottom of the world



Then, it's off to mass at the Cathedral of the Guardian Angel which sits in the shadows of towering casinos on the Strip. The church is very attractive and the singer is wonderful, but the heavily accented priest is almost indecipherable and the readings seem without meaning. There is something notable, however, in the church bulletin which the priest reads out to the congregation: "On your way home, remember, life is a journey; *you* decide to be a pilgrim or a tourist. May the blessings of the journey remain with you always. Vaya con Dios!" The pamphlet also says last week's collection was \$23,000, more than ten times the average amount collected at my home church, which is about the same size. After mass, I hear a deacon say that 90% of the congregation is not local, so I guess there are a lot of gamblers hedging their bets.

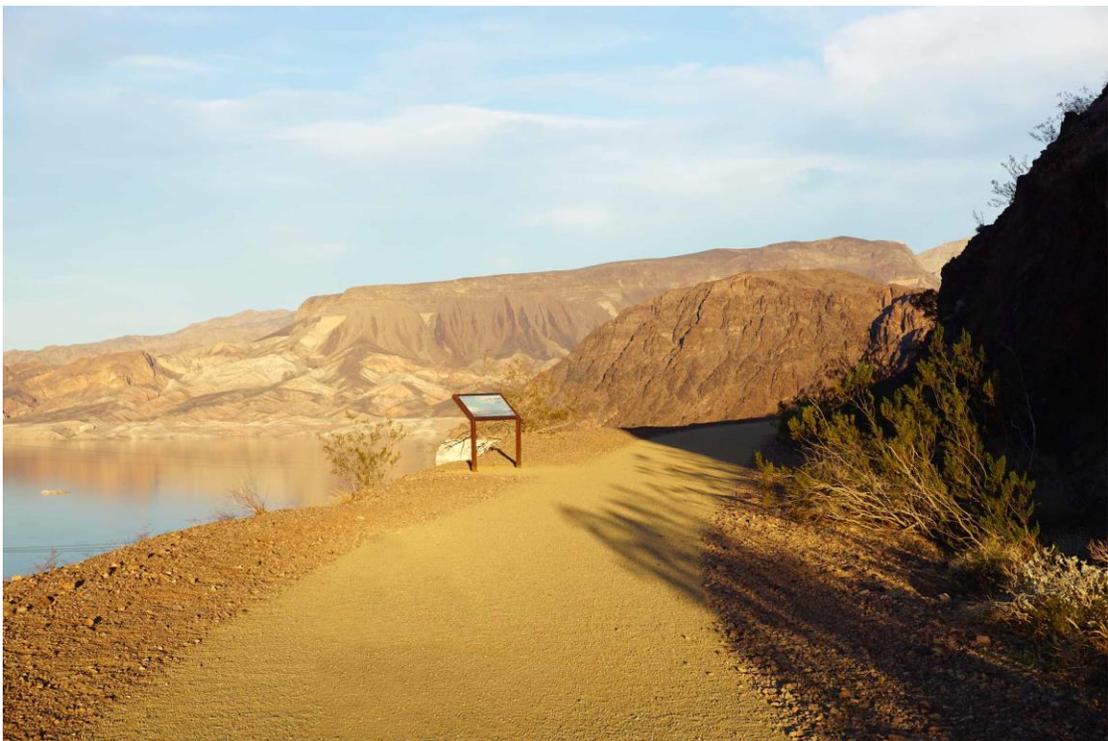
In the afternoon, I spend an hour walking around Sunset Park in South Las Vegas followed by a nice talk with the owner of Books or Books on Sunset Road where I pick up the mandatory Thomas Merton to add to my collection. She tells me that most locals ignore the Strip and suggests I visit Boulder City just down the road.

There's nothing to see in Boulder City when I get there but I take a turn-off to the Lake Mead Recreational Area on the way back and end up wishing I'd done it sooner. The walk along on the former railroad path from the lake to Hoover Dam is wonderful but it starts to get dark after an hour so I return to the car. It takes three hours to walk to the dam and back so maybe I'll return in the morning. There is so much natural beauty within easy driving distance of this weird city where every commandment you live by is suspendable, I actually imagine I could live here, especially in South Las Vegas, only a four-hour drive from my granddaughter.

I'm up at 6:30 on Day 13 with ten hours to kill before I fly home. The weather is bad so Hoover Dam is not an option; I'll see a movie. *La La Land*, a musical about Hollywood and Los Angeles, is playing at 10 o'clock at the Century Orleans, a Cineplex inside the Orleans Casino. I kill some time wandering among the slot machines, observing the gamblers. Most, almost all, are old, many very old. Walkers, canes, breathing aides... working class, some downright poor. None look happy and many are smoking. I see more than one matron smoking and sitting with legs raised and wide open, feet propped up on little ledges at the sides of the huge machine. Weird.



Cathedral of the Guardian Angel, Las Vegas



La La Land is the perfect movie to end the trip with. It touches on everything Los Angeles: sunsets, Griffith Park and the Observatory, fools' dreams of stardom, the Watts Tower... It's a corny film but very entertaining - what a film should be, visual and full of motion, and maybe it will help me appreciate a city I will inevitably return to over and over again as long as I have family there. When I come out of the casino into the parking lot, the sun is shining and the trip feels over.

I wavered about whether to make this a pilgrimage story because so little happened. Half of the trip was devoted to a family visit and bad weather made half of the remaining days problematic for taking photos. The books I found didn't feel significant and would not become part of the story and I found no fridge magnets, despite searching for two days in Vegas where, among hundreds of souvenir magnets shaped like poker chips, tall cocktail glasses and the iconic "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" diamond-shaped sign, I could not find a single Nevada State fridge magnet.

But I dedicated a travel notebook to the trip so I will count it as a pilgrimage, and the church bulletin did say it's entirely up to me to decide what my journey is. And it's not like nothing happened. I was blessed with a *Vaya con Dios* in a cathedral and I rediscovered the lyrics to Dale Evans' *Happy Trails*:

*Some trails are happy ones,
Others are blue.
It's the way you ride the trail that counts,
Here's a happy one for you.
Happy trails to you,
Until we meet again.
Happy trails to you,
Keep smiling until then.
Who cares about the clouds when we're together?
Just sing a song, and bring the sunny weather.
Happy trails to you,
Until we meet again.*

Amen