

# The Red Road Diaries: More Tales of Traveling the Backroads of America in an RV Volume Two

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The Red Road Diaries

Volume Two

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## Introduction

During our many years traveling in our RV on the back roads of the United States, Canada and Mexico, we have crisscrossed the country several times. Spending as much time as we have on the road, besides all the sights we have seen, we have also gained a good deal of insight into the ins and outs of road travel. The Red Road Diaries is a two-part compilation of those wanderings, what we have seen and the lessons learned. Replete with photographs and stories of our travels it will also give you insight into what life on the road entails.

The Red Road Diaries - Volume Two continues where Volume One left off. This time we are travelling west, instead of east. Volume Two takes you across Texas and through the whole Southwest, from Santa Fe to Zion, then north from the Tetons to Yellowstone. Come along as we caravan down the Mexican Baja to Cabo San Lucas. Enjoy the beauty of Montana and Glacier National Park and cross the Canadian border with us to revel in the majestic Canadian Rockies. Join us as we canoe and fish the lakes of British Columbia, and then sail the Inner Passage south to Vancouver Island. Explore the Pacific Northwest and the craggy shores of the Pacific Coast from Oregon to Southern California. Whether you are just an armchair traveler or planning an adventure of your own, The Red Road Diaries will spark your imagination, and, hopefully, give you enough tips and suggestions to motivate you to try the RV lifestyle yourself.

## Chapter 1: Driving West: I Can't Believe How Big Texas Is

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### A Rainy Day Mission in San Antonio, Texas

We don't usually drive the RV on long trips in the winter. In the past we have stuck close to Florida, where warm, sunny days are the norm in January and February, and we have no shortage of outdoor things to do. There is nothing worse than trying to steer a 33-foot motorhome through snow or ice storms. But a trip down the Baja in Mexico beckoned and it meant we had to be in San Diego in early February, so we headed west right after the New Year. We allowed plenty of time for

seeing what we could see as we crossed the southern states. New Orleans proved to be cold and rainy, but, on the bright side, we had the place to ourselves. (See The Red Road Diaries - Volume One) We left early, promising to return, and hoped for better weather in San Antonio, our next big stop, where had planned a tour of the Mission Trail.

By the time we were just east of Houston it was cold, with a lot of rain and sleet. We decided to stop for the night rather than push on and the weather was the talk of the campground. Ice and snow had closed the roads heading west, and a number of our neighbors had been there for a day or two, waiting the storm out. By morning we had continuing rain, but no ice. I-10 had reopened and we made it past Houston to San Antonio without a problem. Our first order of business was to find a local Mexican restaurant and have a great Mexican meal. One of the treats of traveling the southwest is Mexican food that is much better than the pseudo chains we are used to in Florida. I don't understand why anyone in the Southwest (or anywhere else for that matter) eats at Taco Bell.

The morning dawned cold and drizzly but we were on a mission to see the Mission Trail so weather was not going to get in the way. In the early 18th century the Spanish empire had set up five missions along the San Antonio River, primarily to expand their influence north of Mexico but also to convert the native population. Run by the Franciscans, they converted the Indians, taught them to farm and fought off the Indians that resisted. We toured two missions, drove by the third because it was raining so hard and found the fourth locked up, but guarded by a sweet looking steer. The fifth mission, the Alamo, would get a separate visit. We enjoyed these missions, their architecture and their history. It was an ironic reminder that the border between the United States and Mexico has been a moving target over the centuries. We stood in what was once New Spain, then Mexico, and before all that, Indian Territory.

### Walking the San Antonio River Walk

We had hoped waiting a day might mean clearer weather for seeing the Alamo and The River Walk, but it was not to be. The wet, cold front that had been following us since New Orleans, and had put a damper on our tour of the Mission Trail, was still hanging around. We couldn't hole up in the RV forever. We donned our foul weather gear, determined to see the sights before we continued on our journey toward Chula Vista, California and then the Baja.

The first stop was the Alamo. Too much Disney and watching Davy Crockett in my wasted youth laid the foundation of my knowledge of this place. It loomed large in my mind, so I was surprised at how small it was. It was also smack in the middle of downtown San Antonio. What was an isolated mission in the 1700's has had a whole city grow up around it. I won't dwell on its history, you can go to their website for that if you are interested. Briefly, the Alamo was originally (1724) a Spanish mission, subsequently it has been a Mexican barrack, a hospital, a fortress, a general store and since 1905 a shrine and museum. Today it honors the Texas Revolution, lovingly cared for by the Daughters of the Texas Revolution. Having found my family name listed on a display of men who died in a subsequent battle, it started me on an ongoing journey into my family history, my Texas roots and a more personal understanding of the settling of this great country. It is a special place and worth a visit.

San Antonio was built on the San Antonio River. The city has grown a lot bigger, but the river still flows through it. They built a multi-tiered complex of shops and restaurants called River Walk along the river's banks, starting from the Alamo. It's actually very attractive and I'm sure its outdoor cafes are usually packed with tourists. There's not much call for sitting outside enjoying a drink and watching the passersby's when it's cold and drizzly. We pretty much had the place to ourselves and enjoyed strolling the walkways, exploring near empty shops and taking

photographs. Cocktails or dinner would have to wait until we returned in better weather.

## Deep in the Heart of Texas, Remember the Alamo

I love irony. I bring this up because I was clearing out a file (An aside: traveling in a motorhome demands at least a nod towards neatness and organization. You can't accumulate a lot of "stuff." Usually we operate under the rule "a place for everything and everything -- mostly -- in its place." I needed a file folder and that required clearing out an old one...life in 300 square feet of space) Anyway, in this old folder I found a copy of a bit of American/Mexican border history from our visit to the museum at the Alamo.

My 5th great-grandmother was an early settler of Texas (she arrived after the battle) so I tend to accumulate these bits from our family's past. This one is particularly ironic given all the talk today about protecting our borders and keeping out the "illegals."

Directly from the of the Museum at the Alamo:

A New Population: Spanish officials, concerned about Texas' sparse population had decided to invite colonists from the United States to settle in Texas before Mexico declared her independence. The new Mexican government adopted the colonization plan as its own, hoping the colonists would contribute to the region's economic prosperity. The first colonists, led by Stephen F. Austin, arrived in 1821. By 1828 there were so many immigrants from the United States in Texas that in some areas they outnumbered the Mexican population by 10 to 1. Manuel de Mier y Terán, a Mexican official sent to Texas that year, reported in alarm that Texas was becoming more American than Mexican and would be lost if the flow of settlers from the United States was not stopped. In 1830 the Mexican government, in response to Mier y Terán's warning, closed Texas to further immigration from the United States. It also established several new forts in Texas to strengthen its presence, prohibited the importation of slaves and opened customhouses to collect taxes and stop illegal trade with the United States.

There was an additional quote at the bottom of the display from Mier y Terán in 1828 that said, "They (the American Colonists) all go about with their Constitution in their pocket demanding their rights." Does any one else see the irony in this bit of history?

## Following the Straight and Narrow (roads) of West Texas

I do not usually drive the RV. I would in a pinch, but I prefer navigating, or enjoying the scenery, to wrestling against the buffeting forces of semi's passing you at top speed, or the stress of anticipating who is going to try and squeeze past you on the right as the passing lanes merge into one. The one place I don't mind getting behind the wheel is West Texas, where you find long, straight highways, little traffic, and no crossing lanes with people pulling out and cutting you off. These are my kind of roads.

After several days of enjoying the sights of San Antonio we were facing a few days of travel. When you live and tour in an RV you have these kinds of days, getting from point A to point B, no sightseeing, just driving. The scenery is always different depending on where you are. Sometimes it is miles of farmland, fields, barns and silos, other times the undulating grasses of the prairie, or majestic mountain passes. It is a big, beautiful country. West Texas is no different.

Leaving San Antonio it was is still cold, but the rain had finally stopped and the sun was out. Texas is huge. Three-plus days of driving no matter how you cut it. It is 600 miles to Las Cruces, New

Mexico, our next major stop. That is two days driving for us and the choices for stopping are few and far between: Ft. Stockton or Van Horn. Van Horn is 311 miles, which is longer than we like so we call the Ft. Stockton KOA and make sure they are not full (highly unlikely, but we like to check) and settle in for the drive.

Heading west the rolling, populated hills of the San Antonio suburbs turn into flat desert, high mesas, cactus and scrub brush. Although the scenery is pretty, there's not much to actually see. We are running parallel to the rail tracks, so occasionally we overtake a long freight train and try and guess how many cars there are. Just before Fort Stockton we see hundreds of windmills spinning atop a mesa, which made for an impressive sight.

We pulled into the Ft. Stockton campground around two thirty and got settled because Hubby wanted to watch the football playoffs. I thought about driving into town just to take a look at their statue of the world's largest roadrunner. That meant unhitching the car, which I decided not to do, and instead wandered around the campground taking some photos of the very western scenery. Even the dog walk screamed Texas. The fellow in the camper next to us noticed we had satellite TV and offered to supply the beer if he could join us in watching the football game. So the travel day ended with football, Coronas, and a new friend. Life can be good on the red roads, even on a travel day.

#### An Aside: Spelunking in Carlsbad Cavern, New Mexico

I tend to be slightly claustrophobic. I need to have a few feet of open space in front of my face; so small, tight spaces will usually produce minor panic attacks in me. I had no idea I was like this until I went spelunking. I was young and adventurous, on my back, inching my way into a cave in upstate New York, the cold granite roof of the cave entrance inches from my face. It's not like I freaked out: just heart palpitations, a cold sweat and a mad desire to get out of there, immediately. My companions had to back out so I could escape and I spent a pleasant few hours sitting in the sun while they went exploring without me. That was the last time I went anywhere near a cave, until Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico.

We were camped at the Van Horn, Texas KOA Campground. This was actually on our way back from the Baja trip. Van Horn sits between El Paso and Ft. Stockton and we had not stopped here on our way west, so we decided to stop as we headed home. We were at a crossroads. We could go south to Big Bend National Park, east to San Antonio or north to see the Guadalupe Mountains and Carlsbad Cavern National Park. We opted for the caves; a short side trip, while we were in the area. Carlsbad is one of the world's largest caves; actually it is comprised of hundreds of limestone caves. The largest, The Big Room, is 4000 feet (1220m) long and 255 feet (78M) high. I didn't think claustrophobia would be an issue. The drive itself was spectacular. West Texas is a vast tract of wide-open ranch land split in half by long straight roads, one lane in each direction. The gently rolling landscape of scrub brush turned into larger buttes and high plateaus as we neared Guadalupe Mountains National Park. El Capitan and Guadalupe Peak loomed in the distance.

You can take an elevator down into the caves of Carlsbad or you can take the natural entrance, a large hole in the rock cliff used by the original explorers. Of course, now it has a paved, well lit, switchback trail. No ropes, ladders or lanterns required. The limestone cave was formed 500,000 years ago when the area was the edge of an inland sea. The rest of it, the glimmering rock formations, the stalactites and stalagmites, the columns where they merge, the undulating waves of rocks and mineral all happened much more slowly, drop by drop. Take some water, dripping, seeping and evaporating and billions of drops later you get the magical, mysterious beauty of Carlsbad. It's dark, damp, cold and subtly lit. The photos can't begin to do it justice. There are also about one million bats residing at Carlsbad. During the day they crowd together in, appropriately

enough, the Bat Cave. At dusk you can sit in the amphitheater as the sun goes down and watch them swarm skyward for their nightly hunt.

We spent several hours wandering the depths of the Carlsbad, drifting from cave to cave. Totem Pole, Witches Finger, Bottomless Pit, Temple of the Sun, the names were as numerous as the types of rock formations. We left tired, chilled, eyes readjusting to the bright sunlight. It had been decades since my last venture into a cave, this one was much more enjoyable.

### The Ice Storm Cometh, Las Cruces, New Mexico

Leaving Ft. Stockton, Texas the weather deteriorated. We were beginning to second-guess making a late January RV trip west. As we neared El Paso and the New Mexico border it became dark and overcast, the mountains shrouded in clouds and covered in snow. Road signs warned that I-10 was closed from Las Cruces to the Arizona border due to weather conditions and road icing. We were glad we hadn't planned on going further than Las Cruces, and hoped the icing was past where we would be getting off.

We were staying in Hacienda RV resort. Large, friendly, a welcoming fire in the clubhouse, this resort was a great place to be stranded for a few days, as was Las Cruces. It is the second largest city in New Mexico. It is a farming community, sprawling across the Mesilla Valley, a flood plain of the Rio Grande, and the Organ Mountains, 10 miles to the east, dominated the landscape. The weather was the talk of the town since the temperature is usually in the low 60's all winter, and the recent ice and cold was unusual for this warm, dry area. \*

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During our many years traveling in our RV on the back roads of the United States, Canada and Mexico, we have crisscrossed the country several times. Spending as much time as we have on the road, besides all the sights we have seen, we have also gained a good deal of insight into the ins and outs of road travel.

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Once you have seen the possibilities, you might be motivated to try the RV lifestyle yourself. As in Volume One, you'll pick up innumerable tips and suggestions regarding RV travel, as well as a wealth of resources to help you on your way. So come along as we explore life on the road, from the beauty of our National Parks to the oddities only found off the beaten path. The Red Roads await.

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