

Try a Southern road trip for quirky Americana

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My sister, best friend and I travel together every year, usually out of the country. We've been to the Dominican Republic, St. Lucia and Mexico - inexpensive with blue waters. A tricky economy and airline jitters impacted my travel buddies on this trip. They wanted to stay in the states so we decided to drive as far south as the road would take us.

It was our 10-day road trip in a *Thelma & Louise*... and *Louise*, minus fleeing from the law, a suicidal path and Brad Pitt in our backseat. You know, the journey rather than the destination.

This trip wasn't about art museums or theater. We were seeking Quirky America as we headed south. This was our path:

Day One: Drive through the boring flat lands of Ohio and stop overnight in Warren County, Kentucky. We decide to eat or drink the specialty from every city we sleep in, provided it's vegetarian. Bourbon is vegetarian.

By 10 p.m., most of the restaurants in Warren County are closed. A waiter locking the doors of his diner told us we were in dry county, but we could buy booze illegally in the parking lot of a nearby drugstore after 11 p.m.

No thanks. No bourbon. No good food, but a short drive to the Days Inn cost less than \$25 each.

Day two: A dry night means an early rise. We depart to Gatlinburg, Tenn. Quirky America at its finest: Hollywood and pancake houses. At the Log Cabin Pancake House, 4235 Airport Road, we enjoy pean, blueberry and banana pancakes with four different kinds of syrup.

Driving into downtown Gatlinburg we pass, and quickly reverse the car at the sight of - The General Lee - the Dukes of



The beach choices seemed endless along our route to the southern-most tip of the U.S., which included Fort Lauderdale, Islamorada in the Keys and Georgia. Some were remote, others were not.

Hazzard car! You can stand next to it for \$10, pose like Daisy Duke and get photographed. Next it's the *Ripley's Believe or Not Museum* and a brief glimpse of the *Elvis Museum*. Then a fast drive in the Smoky Mountains.

Days three and four: Swing through charming Savannah. The residents are so wonderfully friendly that we're uncomfortable.

That night we linger at the hip, dimly lit Velvet Elvis nightclub, 127 W. Congress, downtown. We dine the next morning at the Cobblestone Cafe, 130 W. Lower Factors Walk, a quaint waterfront restaurant that serves nice big bowls of oatmeal. The quirkiest thing that happened to us in Savannah occurred there. It's a

long story that involves doors slamming shut by themselves in the women's bathroom and other creepy things. Locals aren't surprised to hear our ghost stories and they tell us the place is haunted. Ghost stories are part of Savannah's mystique. We loved it.

From there we walk to the Mercer House, 429 Bull St. The book and movie *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* is centered around this house because of the notorious killing that occurred there. (Read the book.) Tourism has increased in Savannah since the book was published.

We forget to eat Georgia peach pie.

Days five and six: By noon, we're on a warm Fort Lauderdale beach. No spring-breakers, thankfully.

Highlight: Mai Kai Polynesian Restaurant and Dinner Show. A restaurant with a Polynesian village atmosphere including thick tropical green-

ery and waterfalls plus an authentic Polynesian show. It's known for its seafood, but we had the spicy Tiki Coconut Primavera and Hawaiian taboaleh with pineapple. Located at 3559 N. Federal Highway. Web site: www.mai kai.com.

Drank Florida orange juice once.

Days seven and eight: Traffic is brutal on the road to the Florida Keys, but who cares when you're with friends, wearing swim trunks and listening to soca music? We discover a pristine deserted turquoise beach right off the highway on Islamorada. Two hours later we realize we're attacked by no-seen bugs on the sand. Our skins are covered in tiny bites and we itch for the trip's remainder.

By mid-afternoon we're in the southern end of Key West, which means it's the southern-most point of the U.S.

We know this because there's a big cement marker that reads

"Southern Most Tip of the U.S."

On Key West, we stay at the El Patio motel that costs less than \$100. Don't expect luxury for the cheap rate, but it's clean, cute, has a nice pool and is centrally located; 800 Washington St.

Later, we partake in the Key West ritual to applaud the sunset and listen to street musicians perform Otis Redding's "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay" too many times.

Before heading home on day nine we tell the El Patio desk clerk of our quirky journey to the most southern point of the U.S.

"Actually the southern most tip of the U.S. is down the street on military property, you can't go there. The landmark that you found is just for the tourists."

Quirky. Perfect.

We forget to eat key lime pie. Even better.

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