

When the Drive Matters More Than the Destination



Emil and Liliana Schmid celebrating Christmas in 2012 in the desert near Dubai. It was just one stop on their road trip of nearly half a million miles. Emil and Liliana Schmid

By Paul Stenquist

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It's a simpler equation than the classic chicken-or-egg question: The automobile came first, of course, but a road trip wasn't far behind.

The open road, heavy with symbolism and full of promise, has long coursed through popular culture, with the journey at least as rewarding as the destination. In addition to the romance of the road, one goal might be distance, like the classic New York-to-Los Angeles jaunt that will add 2,782 miles to your odometer and cross a big item off your bucket list.

Way back in 1905, a merry Oldsmobile was celebrated in song. Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" wildly wandered postwar America. Slightly more recently, Willie Nelson put us "On the Road Again," Bruce Springsteen told us we were "Born to Run" and Rihanna exhorted us to "Shut Up and Drive."

And while Americans have popularized and maybe even perfected the road trip (picture Chicago-to-Hollywood on what's left of Route 66; now picture it in a '57 Corvette), its roots are global. The first automotive road trip of considerable length is said to have been, like the automobile itself, a product of Germany.

Baron Theodor von Liebieg took to the road in his Benz Victoria in 1894. Getting underway in Reichenberg, Bohemia (now Liberec in the Czech Republic), von Liebieg drove to Gondorf on the Moselle River, with a stopover in Mannheim, where he visited Carl Benz, creator of the automobile.

Forget McDonald's — there weren't even fueling stations along his route. But there were chemist shops, where von Liebieg bought ligroin, a laboratory solvent, to power his machine's single-cylinder three-horsepower engine. In all, the baron and his Benz traveled over 1,500 miles that summer.



F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald road-tripping in their used Marmon during the summer of 1920.

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Going the distance

Von Liebieg surely didn't realize he was helping define the art of the road trip — a long journey inspired by wanderlust. And while the length of his drive was amazing given the condition of the roads and the primitive machine he drove, his mileage is a mere drop in the bucket compared with that of [Emil and Liliana Schmid](#), who hold the Guinness World Record for the longest driven journey.

The Swiss couple have traveled almost half a million miles in their Toyota Land Cruiser, interrupting their drive only to ship the S.U.V. from one continent to the next. Having first taken to the road in 1984, they've driven in almost every country on the globe. This month, they were in Iran and on the move.

The Schmid's tough-as-nails Land Cruiser is an excellent road trip vehicle in most regards. Fitted with a giant roof rack and offering plenty of interior space, the vehicle lets the couple take their life with them.

Couple's trip

Not long after von Liebieg completed his journey, and before Kerouac was crisscrossing the country, things got rolling in America.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of a road-tripping adventure in the 1920s for Motor magazine, a Hearst publication that had in its early days targeted an emerging class of Jazz Age Americans with wheels.

In three 1924 issues of the magazine, Fitzgerald recounted a 1920 trip from Connecticut to the Alabama home of his wife, Zelda.

Describing how he and his wife had anticipated the journey, Fitzgerald touched on the emotions that have long driven folks to drive. “To be young, to be bound for the far hills, to be going where happiness hung from a tree, a ring to be tilted for, a bright garland to be won — It was still a realizable thing, we thought, still a harbor from the dullness and the tears and disillusion of all the stationary world,” he wrote, in a quote [singled out](#) by Malcolm Forbes in a review of “The Cruise of the Rolling Junk,” a compilation of those magazine articles.

The journey is emotional yet lighthearted, with their used Marmon as much a character as the reckless Fitzgeralds. A marriage of automobile and occupants. In brief, a road trip.



The Schmids on the Avenue of the Baobabs in Madagascar in 2011. They have spent 35 years traveling the world in their Toyota Land Cruiser. Emil and Liliana Schmid

After the presidency

Today, retired presidents earn millions writing books and giving speeches. In the early 1950s, they went on road trips. Well, at least one did.

In 1953, shortly after leaving office, Harry Truman and his wife, Bess, left Independence, Mo., in their black 1953 Chrysler with New York City as their goal. It's all documented in a book by Matthew Algeo, "Harry Truman's Excellent Adventure."

The Trumans undertook the journey much as we would today, without Secret Service protection and shunning publicity. Along the way, they explored Main Street America, eating in diners and staying in motels. According to a [2009 essay](#) by Mr. Algeo in The New York Times, they spent a night at the Parkview motel in Decatur, Ill. The tab? Five bucks (not quite \$50 today), which just fit the Trumans' budget, supported by his \$111.96 monthly Army pension income (a bit above \$1,000 today).

Crisscrossing America

Kerouac's "On the Road" is the quintessential work of American road trips. Based on the travels of the Beat generation author, the novel defined the road trip as an escape. Among the memorable road trips Kerouac describes are a sprint from Denver to Chicago in a Cadillac, a foray into Mexico in a distressed '37 Ford and a winter trip from New York to New Orleans in a Hudson.

Narrated by Kerouac's character Sal Paradise, the work itself is a road trip, originally written on a single scroll with no paragraph breaks, much like a highway stretching out before a driver aching to get on the road again.

While America wasn't home to either the first or the longest road trip, we have arguably perfected the genre. We've driven the 1,650 miles of the Pacific Coast Highway from Olympic National Park in Washington to San Diego many times. Countless travelers have enjoyed the roadside Americana that colors the nearly 2,500 miles of historic Route 66 as it winds its way from Chicago to Santa Monica. An even longer journey can be had by following U.S. 50 from San Francisco to Maryland's Eastern Shore.

But U.S. Highway 2 takes the prize as the longest cross-country route, tracing the northern boundary of the United States from Seattle to Acadia National Park in Maine. Along the way are Glacier National Park and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, after which the road takes a detour into Canada before descending into upstate New York.

Although the 2,192-mile Appalachian Trail, which stretches from Georgia to Maine, is famous as a hiking route, there's a driving route as well for those of us who prefer to take our exercise while behind the wheel. A road trip may not do much for one's physical health, but it can be a rejuvenating mental elixir.

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