

SAVVY & SATISFYING SENIOR TRAVEL: Practicing Agile Aging on the Road

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It began as an impromptu road trip. My wife Nancy and I had just completed long months of demanding editing work, combined with intensive community service, when an unexpected death in the family required our presence in Southern California. Once the funeral was over, we needed to recharge our batteries. A relaxed ramble back home to the Central Coast would provide rest and recuperation.

After an extended stay at Riverside's iconic Mission Inn, we wandered up into the San Bernardino Mountains to linger for a week at Lagonita Lodge on Big Bear Lake. Our onward meander on old California Highway 138 led us past Lake Silverwood and along the scenic San Gabriel foothills, emerging at historic Tejon Pass.

This spontaneous itinerary felt serene and deeply satisfying. Making up each day's program as we went along, we paid attention to what we were most enjoying, when, how and why. We soon figured out the key to our contentment was letting our interests and energies as retirees dictate the trip's destinations, activities and pace.

We started giving thought to how this age-appropriate approach to independent travel could be shared with our senior peers. Here are some core concepts and practical tips.

Free At Last. Retirement from professional life can be a liberating transition. In the travel domain, free time relieves us from beelines and deadlines. No more pressure to endure sardine-packed aircraft or gridlocked Interstates. It's senior play-time on the road. Awakenning this awareness invites a conscious, deliberate reorientation.

Gearing Down. Savvy senior travelers are in no rush. Our leisure is a well-earned reward. We can kick back and hang out. A slower pace enables longer sojourns, encouraging immersion in local history, culture, contacts and communities. Evident benefits include layered learning and stimulating social interactions with fellow travelers as well as local residents.

Less Is More. Mature senior travelers have nothing to prove, no one to impress. No more peaks to scale, photos to capture or souvenirs to acquire. Visiting fewer destinations means seeing less but appreciating more. Respectfully. Valuing the quality, not the quantity, of new environments and experiences. As a bonus, merely being away from home can be a respite from dulling routines.

Creaky Knees. Self-aware senior travelers frankly acknowledge and accept our declining flexibility, strength and stamina. This realism has practical implications on the road. It encourages choosing valley trails over hillside hikes, central heating over tent camping, short boat tours over marathon buses. Reading, relaxing and reflecting become legitimate roadside recreations. Nancy and I reaffirmed we could best sustain our endurance by observing a 2/3-1/3 daily rhythm, reserving one third of each day's program for restorative rest, varying that third between mornings, afternoons and evenings. Equally essential was maintaining our daily

exercise: home workout routines had been disrupted, commercial food was less nutritious and unfamiliar beds compromised needed sleep. We helped each other resist lapsing into car potatoes. That said, we agreed there was no shame in accepting available help from parking valets and bellmen, luggage trolleys and elevators.

Savings. A majority of retirees must be budget-conscious on the road. Fortunately, senior-citizen discounts are available for most major travel expenses -- car rentals and lodging, movies, museums and other entertainments. Free time lets us seniors boost these savings by travelling in the off-season and by skirting hotels' huge peak-day price hikes. Booking for a full week can earn generous room-rate reductions. Seeking out resort or condo accommodations can expand our lodging space at below-hotel prices. Those same apartments offer kitchens for "home cooking," relieving dependence on costly restaurants. (Comparable space gains and bargains can be investigated through flourishing services like Airbnb and TrustedHousesitters.com.)

Defensive Driving. Attentive driving is essential for safe and comfortable senior road trips. Nancy and I adopted some simple practices that soon became automatic:

- Minimizing contact with trucks and traffic by maximizing use of secondary roads, in the process enjoying superior air quality and scenery;
- Keeping the gas tank at least half-full to reduce the risk of running dry, especially on exploratory detours;
- Taking turns behind the wheel to stay alert, and budgeting hourly stops for leg stretching and bathroom breaks;
- Utilizing the non-driver as a co-pilot, monitoring the GPS screen (or checking maps) without dangerous driver distraction;
- Carrying and consciously consuming bottled water to keep ourselves hydrated and resist the temptation of roadside sugary beverages;
- Starting each day's driving leg at a relaxed hour to avoid departure competition and commuter congestion;
- Stopping before dusk to reduce the fatigue and shifting light which cause so many senior errors of judgment and accidents.

Bottom Line. If, as the experts tell us, inventive, socially engaged activity is crucial for healthy seniority, then spontaneous, independent travel can be a potent tonic. There's no need to surrender the rich pleasures of that travel as we age, so long as we custom-tailor our journeys.

Russell Sunshine is the author of the travel memoir, FAR & AWAY: True Tales from an International Life, available from Amazon in paperback and e-book editions.