

Road Rules: Prepping For The Family Ride To Florida

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It's Ontarians' ultimate family road trip: a cross-country trek to Florida along infamous U.S. Interstates.

With more than 5,000 kilometres of mom, dad and the kids wedged between sand buckets and surfboards, it could be a recipe for frustration and fatigue.... Or you could do like we did and make the family road trip as much of a vacation as our final destination. Along with the sandbuckets and surfboards, we made sure we packed our good moods, planned a well-thought-out route, took along the willingness to take breaks at kitchy spots, and of course, we travelled in the right car.

There are at least two well-worn paths to the Sunshine State. There's the straight-forward, engage-your-brain-as-little-as-possible Interstate 75 (I-75) that starts at the Canada-US border and ends at the US-Florida border. And there's the dizzying, lesser known Interstate combination of I-90, I-79, I-77 and I-95, which begins near Buffalo and takes you all the way to the Florida coast.

The most popular, the most brainless, and the one we chose was I-75. The topography-fast, flat, and flowing-along this route makes it less weather-dependant. But better yet, I-75 is like a visit to the world's longest shopping mall. Factory outlets, fast food joints, roadside plantations selling pecans and peanuts- they're all only an off-ramp away.

Before every journey reaches the really good stuff, travellers must pass through their rites of passage-think Dante's Inferno, only colder. For border-bound Ontarians, the tough stuff is Highway 401's Carnage Alley, between London and Windsor. On the first day of our last ambitious Florida family trip, we rose before the birds at 5:00 a.m. We were on the road by 6:00 a.m.. And we were stopped dead in the middle of the Alley at 8:00 a.m.-there'd been an accident that closed the highway for hours.

One of the reasons the Alley is so dangerous is that it crosses very flat terrain that offers no shelter from the wind. The storms blow snow across the highway, where the traffic polishes it to a nice sheen... then ice builds up. These crosswinds-along with ice, driver fatigue, gravel shoulders and aggressive driving-combine to create an automotive Bermuda Triangle.

At first we whined, fidgeted and fretted. Then we got out of the car to commiserate with our fellow travellers and realized the ice was slicker than Air Canada Centre's. And finally we slept, only to be rudely awakened once the traffic got moving by the threatening honks of imposing eighteen-wheelers.

Our family finally got moving and crossed the border at Detroit, very aware of the heightened security. Two cars in front of us were the focus of considerable attention and we thought we'd be searched for sure. But by the time our number finally came up we must have looked non-threatening, because we breezed right through. A word of caution: be prepared. There is no substitute for having your documentation.

Once across the Canada-US border we navigated the minefield that surrounds the Detroit's Ambassador Bridge. We marvelled at the lack of signage and instant deterioration of roadways and driver courtesy. Technically this is where the I-75 driving odyssey begins-it's a total immersion into American automotive culture. (Though that might be a contradiction in terms!)

Obvious at once was a preponderance of SUV's, big American trucks and cars, and a distinct lack of the imports we take for granted in Toronto. The roads eerily forshadow what ours will look like in a few years if we suffer more cutbacks. We could have sworn we saw a family of

four living in one I-75 pothole in Michigan! Highway conditions gradually improved as we travelled south, but the aggressiveness of the drivers stayed high. Ever the polite Canadians and unarmed to boot—we just focussed on straightforward driving.

The car we were cruising in broke that good 'ole American mold. A Volvo Cross Country gave us what we needed to make our trip a journey to paradise rather than a voyage of the damned. We had luggage capacity, passenger and driver comfort, stealthiness (to avoid hefty traffic fines), high-speed cruising capacity, a great lighting system, and excellent fuel economy. We also had exclusivity. In the States, we certainly didn't see car repeated on every street corner. As for entertainment, there's so much to choose from along I-75 you can gear your stops to your family's interests.

For the history buffs there are battlegrounds from the War for Independence, the French-Indian War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. For flight and space fanatics there's the Neil Armstrong Museum, dedicated to the first man on the moon. For those facinated with old American architecture, there's plenty to see along I-75, from stately brick mansions of the north to the colossal Kentucky horse farms and sprawling cotton and pecan plantations in the south.

And since the route takes you through several university towns and pro sports cities, you can spot spectacular stadiums: the new football stadium in Cincinnati, Rupp Arena in Lexington, the home of the University of Kentucky Wildcats basketball program, and various sites from the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

But you must give in to the two great I-75 vices: shopping and eating. Both sides of the route are littered with outlet malls. They range from the brand-spanking-new, mass-produced malls featuring Nike and The Gap, to the funky factory outlets no one's ever heard of that are actually right next to the factory.

We hit one right above the Florida-Georgia border that was, quite simply, outlet heaven. We spent far more time than our budgeted 30 minutes, as well as way too much money on deals that had to be had, despite that pesky exchange problem. Some outlets really do deserve their outlet designation.

As for food... how can you turn down the original Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in Corbin, Kentucky? Or the pecan plantations such as the Ellis Brothers (their slogan? "We're Nuts!") that sell you pecans smothered in dozens of coating from spicy cajun to-our hands-down favourite-praline. The Bob Evans family restaurants are big on biscuits, and the Cracker Barrel chain as a source of reliable, albeit pricey, homey highway food. With a little research you can find some local restaurants specializing in such delicacies as Southern barbeque, and oddities such as fried green tomatoes and chicken-fried steaks.

The Volvo provided an ideal driving environment: it fit like a nicely broken-in leather jacket, with excellent ergonomics and highway handling. And it allowed us to focus on the driving ahead.

Even though we're at the opposite ends of the size scale, the Volvo fit us both beautifully. An uncomfortable driver fatigues more quickly, and even a tiny irritation can become a major pain in the...back after hours on the road. Our Cross Country had sumptuous multi-adjustable leather seats that coddled and supported.

Even the steering wheel helped out. It tilted and telescoped, and had cruise control and sound system buttons a thumb's reach away. And you'll need both hands on the wheel to cope with the NASCAR-style drafting techniques of southern drivers.

As for passengers comfort, you better keep 'em happy, or the cries of "Are we there yet?" will haunt you. A rear seat that splits 40-20-40 like the Volvo's is ideal but rare. In our V70 the centre armrest could be swapped for an optional thermal cooler box.

Video units are big hits with the kids, but this seems to defeat one purpose of a road trip- namely, to introduce the kids to the world outside the almighty monitor. But do what you must to survive.

Night flights through the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee can be foggy, so the Volvo's front and rear fog lights were great. A vivid childhood memory is following the rear fog light of a Porsche through the Kentucky mountain fog when nothing else was visible. Thanks, Mom, for getting us there safely!

And if all else fails, hit the brakes. Anti-lock brakes and stability control systems are standard on the Volvo, and are slowly trickling down to a larger spectrum of cars.

Travelling light? Consider taking a vehicle that's sporty, and seek out the mountainous, winding, fun-to-drive alternate routes along I-75. Big, lumbering SUV's and minivans are the automotive equivalent of cold cream and flannel pajamas: a sure way to kill any driving passion!

Just remember: be patient- this trip will take at least 24 hours of full-on driving. On a trip measured in days, seconds really shouldn't matter.

What's the damage?

The cost of the trip will depend on your car's gas mileage. Our Volvo averaged an excellent 9.0 L/ 100 kilometres on the highway at cruising speed. Costing a trip is complex, but the cost of gas there and back should ring in under \$300 CAD. That is less than one ticket to Tampa.

The real issue, though, is one of time-time spent in close proximity with your family. It's true, those 5,000 clicks of mom, dad and the kids wedged between sand buckets and surfboards could be a recipe for frustration and fatigue. But with the right plan, the right attitude and the right car, Ontarians' ultimate family road trip becomes more about quality time, with few distractions and plenty of interaction. Who can put a price on that?

Sidebar 1:

Report Card

VEHICLE NAME: Volvo Cross Country AWD

BASE PRICE: \$48,995.00

AS TESTED: \$51,520.00. Includes Touring Package: in-dash single CD player, Homelink, power passenger seat, autodimming rear view mirror and trip computer. \$1,785.00.

And Versatility Package: grocery bag holder, cargo protection net and cargo security cover. \$740.00

FUEL TEST: 10.2 L/100 kms. Predominantly highway driving.

FUEL TYPE: Premium.

LAYOUT: Front engine all wheel drive

WARRANTY: 4 years/ 80,000 kms comprehensive, including 24 hour roadside assistance for the length of the warranty.

The I-90 combo is more like a nature hike, with hills and dales, wild winter weather, and rolling mountain vistas. However, weather that's but a blip on the radar for I-75 drivers can paralyze I-

90 traffic. The weather consideration was the determining factor for us this year to travel I-75 once again.

But we missed out on the southern portion of the I-90 combo which is more interesting than I-75's. There is North Carolina's Charlotte, the heart of NASCAR country. Farther south is South Carolina's Charleston, a jewel on the Atlantic coast, just off I-95. And while I-75 cruisers are yawning through Georgia's Tifton, the world's turf-grass capital, I-95 is swinging through Savannah, famous for Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, spooky graveyards, voodoo and gracious Southern architecture. Call us chickens, but we chose good ol' I-75, and promised ourselves a trip to Savannah next time.

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