

EAST COAST TRAVEL AND COVID-19

by Chase Binder

We're back! Bud and I and our Standard Poodles, Maggie and Millie, have just completed our eighth 3000-mile NH-FL/FL-NH road trip since 2014.

After some experimentation with routes, we decided that the straight-arrow approach down I95 along the eastern seaboard works best for us. Each way is exactly 1500 miles, so we break the trip up into three 500-mile days. The first night we stop in Virginia, the second in Savannah and on the third day we roll into Cape Coral mid-afternoon. We have our favorite hotels and restaurants in each area. We share the driving (easier now that we no longer tow our 22' boat back and forth). We even know where the best gas prices are. We had it all down!

Then along came COVID-19. We normally start planning our northbound trip in late April, working around family events and any special trips on the schedule. But in late April this year, the coronavirus was in full swing. Our trip to Italy was cancelled. The economy and virtually all travel came to a screeching halt. Suddenly our calendar was completely and totally open. We didn't have to be back in NH for anything—except seeing family and friends, of course. But it became more and more clear that with self-isolation, quarantine, and social-distancing policies, we might not be able to see family and friends much at all.

What to do? Stay put in Florida where we could use our boat, play golf, walk Maggie and Millie, and use our pool—all while adhering to the CDC's coronavirus protocols? Or should we scramble back to NH and hope that we could limit our exposure and eventually resume our normal "NH summer" life?

We dithered and dithered—one day feeling we'd just stick it out in Florida, the next yearning to come home. Ultimately and (I confess) at the last minute, we decided on NH. Several friends had already made the trip north, so we gathered as much info as we could. We heard stories of horrific bathrooms in gas stations, empty hotels, vast swaths



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of "heck I won't wear a mask" areas and roads with very few cars but lots of trucks. Some friends drove to Wisconsin straight through—26 hours, stopping only for gas and brief 2-hour nap in a rest area. Others made the trip to NH staying well off the I95 corridor, picking a route through Pennsylvania, and doing two overnights. Another couple made it to Maine in one overnight, packing all their food and never stopping at a restaurant.

Hmmm. We decided that the more restaurants and hotels we stayed at, the greater our risk of coronavirus exposure. We'd been under stay-at home orders for almost three months and so were not at all road weary—in fact, we were anxious to get on with life and travel. So, we designed a "one overnight with two 750-mile days" to manage hotel exposure. We used our trusty soft-side cooler to pack fruit, water, yogurt, cheese sticks, soda, dog food and a number of our favorite subs from our favorite Florida supermarket, Publix. We had the subs cut in quarters instead of halves for flexibility. That was it for food—we would not stop at a restaurant at all.

Bud planned the itinerary. On the first day we stopped in Wilson, NC at the pet-friendly Country Inn and Suites. Their pictures showed bedding with white sheeting duvet covers instead of bedspreads. Those are changed daily. The room had a fridge and microwave and an updated bathroom. That worked fine for our food plan as well as my sanitation plan—I carried alcohol wipes for liberal extra cleaning on arrival. Check-in was "touchless" and though the lobby (and the hotel) were full, staff and most people were wearing masks and social distancing.

We used the I95 rest areas liberally...the girls needed potty breaks right along with us. From Florida through Georgia, South and North Carolina, Virginia and Delaware rest areas were clean and about 60-70% of the people had masks and were clearly being cautious. The rest, not so much. It was a little nerve-wracking. But New Jersey was using its digital signage to encourage masks and each service center and rest area had additional signage saying masks were required. Service area restaurants had limited menus and floors marked to emphasize social distancing. Everyone had masks on.

As usual, we traveled on the weekends and adjusted our sleep schedules to get on the road around 3 AM both mornings. This put us through the DC/NYC corridor Sunday morning. Normally the traffic is extremely sparse...however, on May 31st this year the coronavirus restrictions were just beginning to ease. Traffic was crazy busy!

All things considered, our plan worked well. We traveled with wipes, masks, and hand sanitizer right in the console and used them frequently. We stayed very situationally aware and never felt that we were at risk or that we couldn't control our interaction with our surroundings.

Yes, it was a long haul—1500 miles in two days. But we felt it reduced our exposure and got us where we wanted to be. Home!

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