

TRAVEL TALK – DOGS AND LOST KEYS

By Chase Binder

We've done it again! Bud and I and our two Standard Poodles, Maggie and Millie, have made the 1,500 + mile drive down to Florida. This is the fourth time we've made the after-the-holidays trek, and the third year in a row at our favorite dog-friendly rental in Cape Coral, Florida. We should be old pros by now. In fact, we *do* feel pretty good about all our planning and preparations. But it seems that each year teaches us something new.

This year's notable lessons concerned weather and recovering lost items (yup...me again!). We've been extraordinarily lucky to have had virtually perfect weather on our previous drives south. No rain. No snow. No sleet. Imagine! Our luck was bound to turn, though, and this year was the year it happened. We planned to leave Bow early in the morning on Tuesday, December 29. In the run-up to departure day, we kept thinking of the ridiculously mild winter. No snow at all, shirtsleeves on Christmas day...what could bode better? That all changed, though, as the weathermen honed in on the first big storm of the winter, forecast to arrive on our departure day. As the 29th approached, it became clear that the storm would be nasty—snow, ice, freezing rain—and that it would arrive in Bow mere hours before we had planned to leave.

We had two choices—leave early, or leave late. Our favorite weather forecasting websites, weather.com and wunderground.com, said that the storm would likely arrive in New York and New Jersey just after midnight on Monday—then overtake the New England states and hang around most of Tuesday. Ugh! We decided to try and outrun the storm to New Jersey, leaving Monday evening about supper-time, 10-12 hours ahead of our planned departure.

Smart. Very smart! Just as we were mid-way down New Jersey's Garden State Parkway, the first precipitation hit the windshield. It started as rain, then wavered between sleet and tiny ice pellets. It didn't seem to be sticking to the roads, though, and we powered through.

You might think that we were brave in addition to being smart, but I had an ace up my sleeve. One of my favorite travel websites, Conde Nast Traveler (cntraveler.com) posted an article featuring the best travel apps of 2015, including a weather app called Dark Sky. Conde Nast noted that Dark Sky uses "hyper-local" weather data to give you essentially real-time information on conditions in your area and along your route--useful for winter road trips, but also good for re-routing around summer storm cells.

I loaded the app onto my phone and iPad and all I can say is...wow! The app is intuitive as well as informative and I was able to tell Bud "Don't worry. It's sleeting now, but will stop in 10 minutes for a half-hour before starting again. We'll be long gone. By the time we get to Philly, it will just be overcast. There's rain in Baltimore, but no fear of snow or ice—the temp will be 42." We used Dark Sky the whole way down to Florida. It helped us anticipate rain and gage when to walk the dogs, find an outside eatery and even how handy our umbrellas needed to be.

We got our second lesson in Savannah (lovely, dog-friendly city—packed with history and yummy food!). After checking into our hotel, we took the dogs to Daffin Park, a large dog-friendly park where the girls could run, then went to Huey's on the River (hueysontheriver.net) where outdoor tables welcome dogs. It was a truly exceptional afternoon/evening. But the next morning, I couldn't find my keys. Bud called Huey's and they said—sorry, nobody turned in keys. Bud had a duplicate set of keys, but the expense of replacing my set of our cars' "intelligent" key fobs made us gulp. It would be a \$500 oops!

We went back to the park and did an extensive grid search. No luck. We went back to River Street and retraced our steps from the parking area to the restaurant. Nothing. Finally, I said "Heck, we're back at Huey's, why I don't just run in and double check?" Bingo! The hostess said "Oh sure... they're right behind the bar."

Lesson: physically returning to the place you thought you might have left your item can really pay. But also, some people (OK...me!) might benefit from a lost-item gadget like TrackR (the trackr.com) which uses Bluetooth technology to locate lost items. I'll be doing research on these devices soon. Meantime, my keys now attach to my belt or my pocketbook with a low-tech carabiner.