

Creating Precious, Enduring Memories

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Nothing gets friends – or even strangers – more animated than talking about memorable moments long past that survive and even flourish with passing time.

I seldom tell of an upcoming trip that others aren't soon sharing their own recollections of a journey to that same destination. And, so it was recently, when I mentioned Kim and I would be spending a day on Fontana Dam Lake during our anniversary trip to the Great Smokey Mountains.

One friend told of driving with her husband on the "Tail of the Dragon" along US-129 at the southwestern border of the national park. With 318 curves in 11 miles, that roadway is a motorcycle Mecca. But, our friends slayed the dragon in an oversized pickup truck.

A cousin fondly recalled a childhood camping trip to the lake in 1959, as his dad drove the family to a convention in Denver. It was still a special memory 53 years later, as he remembered spending time with a father now long gone.

Kim and I made memories in that area of western North Carolina this week. Though, not in the way we planned. The Dragon wasn't much easier to travel in a Honda Pilot than a pickup. But, we enjoyed the scenery and laughed as we shared the road with Harleys and crotch rockets heading from Maryville, TN to Fontana Dam. It was a two-hour, white-knuckled, roller-coaster drive up and over Deal's Gap.

The dam was a welcome sight, and we couldn't wait to take a pontoon boat out on the beautiful green water glistening like glass in the morning sun. We felt like the Griswolds at the shuttered gates of Wally World in National Lampoon's *Vacation* movie when the marina attendant told us all boats were taken for the day. We never considered a reservation. We were devastated. "You can try coming back tomorrow," he said, not realizing we'd driven two hours to get there. Kim tried not to show her disappointment, but I knew she was excited about being on the water. So was I. This was NOT how we planned to spend this day.

For consolation, we toured the highest dam in the eastern US. It's an impressive engineering feat, but we were always looking wistfully back down on that lake.

After lunch, we stopped at the general store for a road map. Perhaps we could find a trail or waterfall worthy of a stop on the road back to Maryville. A friendly woman listened to our sad story, gave us a map, and suggested a longer, but more scenic way home via the Cherokee Skyway. Our day already dashed, we were disinterested. The drive over was hard enough when we were excited; the trip home in defeat was not something to prolong.

But, she persisted, so we took the map and agreed to try her suggestion. Some miles south, near Robbinsville, the drive up to Santeetlah Lake was pretty, but it only reminded us of our missed adventure. Approaching the Skyway, we easily could have missed the small, hand-painted sign amid tall grass beside a narrow gravel driveway announcing “Boats for Rent.”

I commented, but Kim kept driving. We were silent for another mile, before I asked again about turning around. Reluctant and not particularly hopeful, we doubled back. I was even more doubtful upon seeing the tiny marina with maybe a half dozen boats. Thunder was booming in the distance, but we decided to inquire inside.

A pontoon boat was available, so we said we’d give it a try. I was feeling OK about the weather, until the marina owner asked as we boarded the boat: “You sure you want to do this?” Thunder still rumbled, but we said yes.

After a few sprinkles, it never rained. The sun came out. Santeetlah was a gorgeous body of water – surrounded by a pristine national forest and filled with water so clear I could see my feet dangling below while floating in the water. We had the lake to ourselves, seeing only four other boats during over two hours on the water. It was heaven.

But for a woman who convinced us to turn left instead of right, a chance glimpse of a tiny sign, and a decision we almost didn’t make to turn around, a memorable moment never would have been. Memories are the most precious and enduring things we create in life, and yet their making remains an uncertain craft. I can tell you, though, such moments aren’t always found hurrying ever forward on roads we already know.