



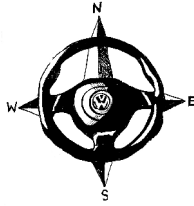
## Author's Note



AS THE AUTHOR, I get the first and last words. Taking advantage of the opportunity, I would like to inform the reader that what you get here is the unvarnished truth. I know that's a bald statement with which to start a travel book, but there it is. Particularly when recalling dialogue, the temptation for storytellers is to embellish a bit, to make ourselves appear more clever by a notch or two. And why not? Rare are the opportunities to improve on the mess we've already made.

You'll also find that I have kept volumes of useful and fascinating information I learned *after* the trip to a minimum here. This is not a research project but rather an unassuming travel book, whose author does not pretend omniscience or the brittle charm of a walking encyclopedia. What follows is not a massively researched tome that enlightens before plowing under, as I prefer traveling lightly whenever possible.

Finally, you may find that I tread a thin line, not always treating important subjects with due reverence, particularly when the nation is at war. What exactly, for instance, am I defending? It is a question I'm still trying to figure out, so bear with me. Some issues, such as traffic or bad weather ahead, are best handled head on, others not. What you see is what you get: the bald facts, enlightened by a few memories, emotions, and other flotsam, as I recorded them and to the best of my recollection. That is my disclaimer.



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IT WAS A CRAZY PLAN and, like the craziest of plans, easy to hatch. The nation was at war and it was my turn to help. Treating the homeland like one large, open pasture, it was time to do the rounds, check the salt licks, inspect the fences, kick the tires, look for strays, and pony up by doing what every red-blooded American considers his patriotic duty: protecting the ranch.

But that was just the beginning of it, a romance on wheels. After so many years abroad, why not start in Manhattan on September 11<sup>th</sup> and, after levering myself over ye olde New England, wheel counterclockwise around this absurdly great and absurdly large country, patrolling the diaphanous Canadian border, descending the precipitous West Coast, running the Rio Grande, and so on? My body's resistance low after so much downtime in the tropics, I could explore the north's flathead ceiling before temperatures turned life-threatening, and then kiss the humid southern climes of Texas and Florida in their sweet autumnal reasonableness.

I had been out of country for five out of seven years – with the interim years in New York hardly counting as in-country – so it was time to get to know home-of-the-brave again. Never having gone coast-to-coast by land, I considered but quickly discarded the direct route in favor of the dry circumnavigation of the lower forty-eight. My wandering hope was that the nation's edge would reveal something about its core, especially the untouristed, unheralded, and unvisited borderlands abutting Canada and Mexico. My mission – if a series of

fuzzy and inchoate impulses can be called that – was to drive as close to the border as possible without getting arrested, while defending the homeland against all aggressors.

At least that was the plan.

As usual, I had little idea what I was getting into. From my large-font road atlas, I discovered that few roads run parallel to frontiers, where there is scant economic justification to do so, and instead strike perpendicularly over them in a quick and dismissive way. Even along the scenic coasts, roadways tend to retreat in-land, due to the difficulty and expense of building over so many swamps, river mouths, inlets, and sea mansions. Despite dozens of foreign crossings to my name, I had only braved American land borders once or twice as a child, on school trips to maul the French language in Quebec, and had little sense of how long, wild, and remote America's boundaries really are. Worse, my childlike concept of the country's borderlines as immutable and fixed for a century or two – that is, eons before my birth – which created a comforting sense of exactitude and stability, was horribly mistaken. In truth, they are not only recently negotiated but physically moveable constructs, more filaments of our collective consciousness than any firm reality on the wind-swept ground.

It's true that America's property lines have been in the news of late, crawling with drug smugglers, illegal immigrants, terrorists, and one-off tourists. Yet, despite all the pressing policy concerns, such notoriety engenders a blinkered view of them, for news trumpets controversy while muting the dusty essence of day-to-day. Reporters go on kamikaze assignments to report blood, gore, and corruption, but does anyone bother with a more relaxed, more comprehensive approach? Perhaps our border regions, and the uncelebrated borderlanders who inhabit them, could teach something fresh and lasting to a returning expat in search of America in the new century.

Besides which, it could be a good ride.