

General Blog Sample – Shira Stepansky

Published online at elephant.org.il

Traveling there & here:

I know from my Jewish history courses in college that the stereotype of the wandering Jew is not really based on the Jews' desire to travel as much as our forced travels and relocations, often at the whim of local governments. I, however, love to travel, whether by plane, train or automobile. I really thrive on the excitement of exploring new places and meeting new people. Give me my map & I am on the way!

This article is part of a series of articles in which I will compare the differences and similarities between traveling in the US and Israel.

I love to drive. I enjoy driving long distances. I grew up in a town that was an hour drive from Denver, Colorado, so for all entertainment (movies, etc.) & even religious connections, we traveled an hour each way. As kids, that hour gave us an hour to read, sleep or eat and or mentally prepare for the coming activity. As we grew older, we learned to use that time to decompress and debrief from the day, giving us special quality time with our parents to discuss with them the day's activities.

After relocating several times I and ending up married in New York. The summer after we got married, I took my husband (a non-driver, except for emergencies) on a pan-USA driving trip. He had friends working in places like Cleveland and Indianapolis and I had family in various locations including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Kansas & Colorado. Gas was relatively cheap then & car rentals even cheaper. We rented a comfortable car for 3 weeks &

after including gas, our travel expenses were less than if had we flown to only one of the places we visited.

Of course, staying with friends and family along the way made the trip a lot more enjoyable as well as affordable. We also made use of my “space available” privileges at various military bases along the way, sometimes getting a two-room suite for \$15 a night. Those were the days!

The plan was to spend a week of actual driving time westward, more or less along Interstate 70, a week in Colorado, where my family was based, and a week coming back via Interstate 80, so we could see Mount Rushmore, which neither of us had ever seen. Leaving Colorado later in the day than planned, we drove straight north through Wyoming. As dusk approached, our gas tank was around half, so we figured we would fill up about half way between where we were & where we hoped to spend the night, combining the gas stop with a stretch stop.

We pulled out the AAA (American Automobile Association) guide book & picked a motel close to our desired stop & called ahead to make a reservation. The person on the other end asked if we’d be “in by 10”? We guessed not as it was only 9pm at the time and we were at least 2 hours driving time from there. He replied, “Well then, we’ll just leave the key taped to the door. See you in the morning.”

As we progressed into Wyoming, towns and gas stations suddenly became few and far between. As our gas gauge continued to drop rapidly, we realized that our original plan to go farther before stopping for gas was unwise. There was no guarantee that there would even be a gas station in that area, and even if there was, it would probably be closed by then.

We took the next exit & pulled up to the pump, happy to see there was still someone about. It turned out he was in the process of locking the pumps for the night! I guess the concept of automatic, credit card gas pumps had not yet made it up to Wyoming. He was nice enough to unlock the pumps and sell us a tank of gas & we were gratefully on our way.

We arrived at the motel to find a very pleasant room. It was well appointed, considering it was out in the middle of literally nowhere. In the morning, when I went to check out, he explained that they generally don't lock their hotel rooms at night, but that lately, they had been having trouble with local raccoons who would open the doors & then leave them open after finding no food & leaving. Then, later on during the night, moose would come into the rooms & chew up all the linens & curtains.

After living in New York for a number of years where the closest thing to a moose is some animal that escaped from the Central Park Zoo, worrying about moose vandalizing our motel room seemed rather cute to us, but it was no joke to the motel owners.

Since learning about the Wyoming raccoon-moose caper, we visited any number of cities in the US, each having their own local issues. If you do not mow your lawn in Canton, Ohio, you will go to jail, according to a new law there. In Manhattan, NY, the big things are recycling and cleaning up after your dog.

Here in Israel, my wildlife issues consist of mosquitoes and spiders, but traveling around Israel is a relative breeze, due to a very good nationwide bus system. Finding a place to stay has also been relatively easy, since nearly everyone's living room couch is really a day bed: remove backrest, add sheets (or not) & viola: instant guest room!.

On our annual visits to Israel for the past number of years, we seldom managed to get out of the Jerusalem area, but when I moved here, I intentionally took my language training in a non-Anglo area. If I wanted to shop or eat, I had to practice my new language skills on the locals after school. I also traveled several times a week, rotating between Netanya, Tsfat, and Ra'anana, regretting that I had not bought stock in Egged.

Israeli's put their American counterparts to shame when it comes to home hospitality. I went to a class in Ra'anana and the instructor offered to let me spend the night at her house, since the class ended after 10pm. I went to a business meeting in Yokneam, and a fellow attendee offered to let me stay with her that night as well, rather than travel back late at night.

I learned to keep my toothbrush and any necessities in my backpack, since I never knew if I was going to be back at "home" that night. My first 2 months in the country, I never slept more than 2 consecutive nights in any one location, mostly because everyone was trying to help me, and usually, that meant insisting that I sleep over rather than wait out in the dark late at night for a bus. Early morning busses usually allowed me to get back to ulpan on time from just about anywhere in the area.

I am not sure how the Israeli hotel economy survives, but I can understand now why they charge so much. In all of the time I have spent in Israel over the years, I have only spent one or two nights in a hotel as a paying customer. Right now, I don't even know what the going rate for a hotel room is, and thanks to many new friends from Haifa to Ashkelon, it looks like I won't need one anytime soon.

I am very happy to report that my rookie year in the national sport of home hospitality also went well. We did not have to put anyone on the floor yet, but Hotel Stepansky has had 20 "pop in" for a Shabbat meal. To be fair, the

group's advisor was the son of one of our closest friends, and he did call on Thursday night, just to make sure we would be home.

Next month, friends from Ashkelon will be in Karmiel for a son's graduation ceremony and plan to make a long weekend out of it. Hotel Stepansky is officially relocated & operational.

Gotta run. Friends who are staying at the local Rimon Inn just invited us out to eat. The only question is where? Tsfat is known for many wonderful things, but fine dining is not one of them.