

Riding with Mom in the moment and memory

► **CROSS-COUNTRY**
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Back on Interstate 70, Mom pulls out a book. Last time, we read Harry Potter No. 7. This time we wanted a classic. We try William Faulkner's "A Fable" which, with what Mom calls its "long, long, long" sentences, is not written to be read aloud.

"Are you keeping up with this?" she says, after a few pages. I shrug and she continues for two more pages before saying, "Oh hell!" and flipping the book into the back seat, exchanging it for John Steinbeck's "Cannery Row."

► **TRIP MATES**

Get up and go west along with Joe Ray and his mom at www.boston.com/travel.

It's perfect. There's an immediate sense of place, beautifully drawn characters, and an evident love of things he describes: — marine biology, the Model T, his beloved Monterey, the coast we're heading for, human nature.

In turn, the quality of his observations opens our eyes that much more. Here we are, buzzing around the country, pausing at times to learn, skimming at other times. I get lost pondering how much of the land is managed, how much is wild. I wonder, as we cross Illinois, how much it reminds Mom of growing up in Joliet.

"Town used to be surrounded by fields like this," she says, and the more we drive, the more I learn of her life before she moved east some 40 years ago.

"Truck farm," she says later, pointing out a farm just large enough for its occupants to pack up their produce and sell it locally. Later, hunters' gunshots get her talking about the relationship between crop harvests and bird migration patterns, connections to the land I never realized she had.

She hasn't lived here for decades and these little bits of her past pop up as if from yesterday. Later on, I'll notice her staring out the window, gone who knows where between the corn rows.

"Do you miss it," I ask, wondering about a time in her life where, due to particularities in the parent-child relationship, I'll never get a full answer.

"Yes." In South Dakota, we hop off Interstate 90 and take the Highway 240 Loop Road through the



PHOTOS BY JOE RAY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The author's mom on the boardwalk along Grand Prismatic Spring at Yellowstone National Park. Thousands of miles before that, they sampled wares from Karla Pingitore, left, and Jennifer Aarndt in Stroudsville, Pa., and Mom hammed it up on the road.

Badlands. It's my third trip through the park and the most gratifying. Mostly, I enjoy being with Mom as she sees it for the first time. On this morning, we drive into sunlight after a light rain — the clouds painterly, tall, and close-packed. The hills and their striated colors appear to hinge on the horizon, creating an inverse imprint below, ending only where it rises to meet my feet. It's so complex and full of texture that I can't take it all in, giving me that good feeling of belonging to something bigger than myself.

At this point, I do something peculiar. I interview Mom and one response sticks out.

"Why do you come on these trips?" I say.

"I've driven through familiar situations 99 percent of my life. I spent my first 21 years between Illinois and Wisconsin [where she was born] and never went to Iowa until you and I drove through. Now we live in New England and I still know very little about it," she says without regret. "Besides, how often do we get to spend time like this together?"

Farther on, in Sheridan, Wyo., we sit next to a table of 10 men in cowboy hats. It looks like something between a reunion of old friends and a work meeting.



They turn out to be from all across the country, in town for a video cattle auction at the Holiday Inn, but dinner is all tall stories and catch-up.

We talk with Matt Bode, a buyer for the high-end Creekstone Farms meat processing plant in Arkansas City, Kan., which "finishes" cattle, buying cows and fattening them up.

"Finishing cattle is like a college freshman at a buffet," he jokes. "All they do is sleep and eat."

I ask about buying and selling at a video auction, where buyers see the cows they're purchasing only on a television screen. In



most cases, though, they know whom they're working with.

"It's all in the handshake," Bode says. "Your reputation as a buyer, seller, or cattleman is made or broken right then."

We follow the boys to Sheridan's Mint Bar, an old-school western classic with buck and ram heads dotting the walls, hundreds of rodeo photos, and 100 years' worth of stories most moms will never hear. Mom and I end up talking to different groups. Bode is telling me raunchy tall tales about past visits to the Mint. Mom gets involved in conversations with the boys about heifers, artificial insemina-

tion, and market access. I love looking across the room to see her shooting the breeze with a bunch of cowboys, completely out of her element and also firmly in it — a side I don't usually see.

At the end of the night, I get a point-and-shoot shot of Mom and the guys. Behind the camera, I'm the one smiling the most.

"That," she says, as we walk back to the hotel, "was worth the whole trip."

The next morning, I'm out by the car, staring at the mountains. The Rockies, and later the Cascades, rise like great, distant waves beyond the vast calm seas of the plains and deserts that precede them. Sometimes, I need a moment to remember how impressive they are.

We pass the eastern side of the Tetons, then go up through Yellowstone — parks I've been able to visit on a few occasions and where I have a growing set of memories. I realize the past builds a stronger present. The call of the West has changed over time but still rings clear, and as our trip winds down, there's a peculiar ache, a nostalgia for the present.

Perhaps that feeling takes away from the moment — who knows if and when we'll be able to do this again. Yet that same

If you go . . .

What to do
Gettysburg National Military Park
Gettysburg, Pa.
717-334-1124 ext. 8023
www.nps.gov/gett
"The turning point of the Civil War" where 51,000 soldiers died. Tours given in buses, with guides who accompany you in your car, or with CDs.
Badlands National Park
Southwest corner of South Dakota
605-433-5361
www.nps.gov/badl
While wildlife and grasslands and fossils are abundant, the most striking features are the spires and canyons, with sedimentary stripes and shadows creating first-to-last light effects.

Where to stay
Baladerry Inn B&B
40 Hospital Road
Gettysburg, Pa.
800-220-0025
baladerryinn.com
Several rooms and a suite in an early 1800s home that served as a field hospital during the Battle of Gettysburg. Rooms from \$145.
The Coeur d'Alene Resort
115 South 2d St.
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho
208-765-4000
www.cdaresort.co/
A splurge for the last night of a cross-country trip overlooking Coeur d'Alene lake. Rooms from \$119.
Where to take Mom for a drink
The Mint Bar
151 North Main St.
Sheridan, Wyo.
307-674-9696
Welcoming cowboys and the occasional mother for 100 years and counting.

idea heightens the experience, of how lucky we are to see this and share it, spend this time together, traveling east to west, side by side.

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A religion routine to its practitioners fascinates visitors

► **BENIN**
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gods. He throws it on a table and interprets its form. He gives me general advice on life ("You should be patient, don't lose your temper"), then tells me I'll live long, and should wear white at nighttime to appease the spirits. One thing he mentions, a detail about my past, makes my heart skip a beat. How did he know that, I wonder. Maybe I will sleep in white, just in case.

For a small West African country, Benin offers the rare tourist quite a few treats: lake villages built on stilts, unspoiled beaches, cheap but great safaris. Yet for me voodoo tops the list. After all, Benin is one of the religion's cradles.

Over half of the people in the country identify themselves as practitioners of voodoo. Here, you stumble upon voodoo wherever you go. Sometimes it's a clay statue of a god leaning against a hut's wall, or a distant chant from a sacred forest. If you walk through villages on the shores of Lake Ahémé, you may meet voodoo priestesses, their shoulders and feet customarily bare.

If one place could be called a voodoo capital, it's Ouidah, where every January a voodoo festival attracts thousands of believers from around the world. Ouidah is a bit touristy (as Benin goes), but the temple of pythons swarming with snakes and the peaceful sacred forest are well worth a visit.

Just an hour and a half ride from Ouidah, on a bumpy road that follows the Atlantic coast, is Lomé, the capital of neighboring Togo, which hosts what is probably the biggest fetish market in the world. You can smell the market before you can see it — animal skins being parched by the sun, herbs wilting, feathers rotting. Several look-alike stalls are spread on a dusty, brick-colored



MARTA ZARASKA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Germain is a voodoo priest, here in Lomé, Togo, perhaps the biggest fetish market in the world.

ground. The products on display make me dizzy: rows of desiccated birds, dried up-snakes coiled in piles, heads and skins of almost all local animal species — even endangered ones — from all over West Africa.

It's fascinating and disturbing at the same time, and it's hard for me not to flinch at the sight of a dried dog's head. "How much," I ask the shopkeeper. "Two thousand five hundred francs," he replies, then adds: "Dogs are cheap, lots of dogs everywhere." That's five dollars, probably an elevated tourist price. A hippo's head costs almost a thousand; an elephant even more, one thousand four hundred, the storekeeper tells me.

A few voodoo dolls lie scattered on the ground. I pick one of them: "Is this for black magic," I ask. The man that sells them looks taken aback. "No, it's just a souvenir. We don't sell black magic here." But I press him. "So where can I buy a real voodoo

doll?" He shrugs: "Tourists think voodoo is just about the dolls, but it's a religion, like many others, with good and bad stuff in it."

For residents, the Lomé market is little more than a pharmacy. A porcupine quill? Cures asthma. Mahogany seed? Good for memory and brain stimulation. A Fa priest prescribes a concoction, then ingredients are obtained at the market.

To the disappointment of the sellers I decide against buying any skulls. Instead, I visit an amulet vendor. Germain's shop is hidden at the back of the market. It's a dusty little place, orange-hued, illuminated only by a weak stream of light oozing through a rear window. I'm not sure how to behave; I don't want to offend any spirits (or even worse, any humans). But Germain's smile sets me at ease.

Amulet-buying is a complicated ritual: There is chanting and shaking of rattles, special gestures to follow and magic formula-

las to repeat that will make the charms exclusively mine. I decide on two. The first is a telephone charm, a travel insurance policy of sorts, a tiny piece of pink-stained wood into which you whisper wishes for safe travels.

My second choice is a Legba, a small clay statue of a deity that has a hole for a mouth and two frayed feathers sticking out of its head. The user manual is simple: Let it smoke a cigarette once a year and in return it protects your house. If someone breaks in, Legba will blind the thief and keep him running in circles until the owner returns. Efficient, easy, and cheaper than conventional house alarm systems. How cheap depends on your bargaining skills, and those had better be good, since you are supposed to haggle with gods.

Once I have chosen my charms, Germain grabs four cowrie shells and throws them onto the ground. "The gods want 20,000 francs," he says. It's way

If you go . . .

Where to stay
Hotel Cocobeach
Rue 9 zone portuaire
Lomé, Togo
011-228-271-49-37
www.hotel-togo-cocobeach.com
Nice beach and a good restaurant; can organize a driver-guide to visit Lomé and the voodoo market; doubles \$65-\$83.
Hotel Novotel Cotonou Orisha
Boulevard de la Marina
08 BP 0929, Cotonou, Benin
011-229-213-05662, 04188
www.novotel.com
Recently renovated, good quality restaurant (but pricey), close to the airport. Top-end double \$170.
Ibis Cotonou
Boulevard de la Marina
08 BP 0929, Cotonou

011-229-213-05677
www.ibishotel.com
Modern and clean, \$135 with breakfast.

Where to eat
Chez Clarisse
Quartier Camp Ghézo
Cotonou
011-229-213-06014
Good local restaurant, local dishes, lunch with drinks \$12.
What to do
Benin Ecotourism Concern
www.ecobenin.org
Abomey-Calavi, Rue début Clôture IITA
03 BP 1667 Jéricho
011-229-210-42268
Local travel agency, organizes a day trip "Voodoo traditions and cultures," English-speaking guides; \$40 per person including lunch.

too much. "Two thousand?" I offer. Germain throws the shells once again. "Gods say ten thousand," he says. At the end, the gods and I settle on five thousand francs, which Germain collects on their behalf.

On my last night in West Africa, only five hours before take-off, Paul asks if I want to join a small voodoo ceremony. I cannot refuse. It's pouring, but Paul promises that where we are going, there will be no rain. "They have prayed it away," he says.

And indeed, as I sit on one of the plastic chairs placed in a semicircle on a sidewalk, the weather changes. The ceremony, dedicated to the opening of a new temple, is just starting, but the music is already on. Two drummers play standing barefoot on goat skins, which they are not allowed to step off. Voodoo

priestesses, their heads wrapped in white scarfs, start to sing. Before long a crowd has gathered and the dancing begins.

As the evening progresses, the rhythm of the drums accelerates, singing becomes more vibrant and bewitching. One of the priestesses stands suddenly and goes on to swirl in the middle of the dance floor, her arms in the air. "She is going into a trance," whispers someone behind me. The street fills with aromas of burnt herbs, of grilled food and rain, with clapping and laughter: The early African night has already fallen.

"I have to go," I tell Paul. "Can't you stay a bit longer?" he says. "Next time," I promise him, and myself.

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