

# Traveling With Braunsen

When my nephew Braunsen was eleven I asked him if he would be interested in going on a trip with me instead of just staying at my house for a week as he had done since he was three years old. He loved the idea. When I asked where he would like to go he answered “Maine”. Of course I wanted to know why. His response, “because it’s as far north as you can go in the contiguous United States.” That seemed like a good reason to me.

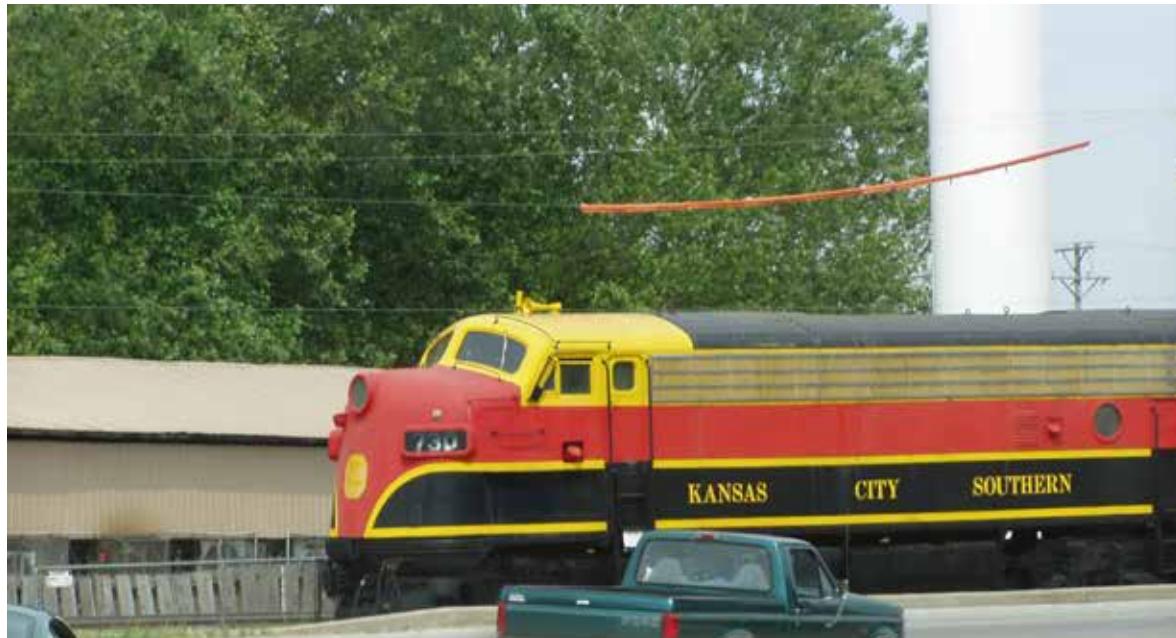
As might be expected of most eleven year old boys, the next week he had changed his mind, this time he wanted to see “Indian stuff.” I told him if that’s what he wanted I would take him to Oklahoma and introduce him to his Indian relatives.

This was the first of seven, week-long trips we took together. Oklahoma and Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, New York, South Carolina, New Mexico and a cruise to Mexico. Hopefully there will be many more. He was, and is still, my favorite travel bud dy.

Sheri Tiner  
aka Tanta



# Oklahoma and Arkansas, 2004



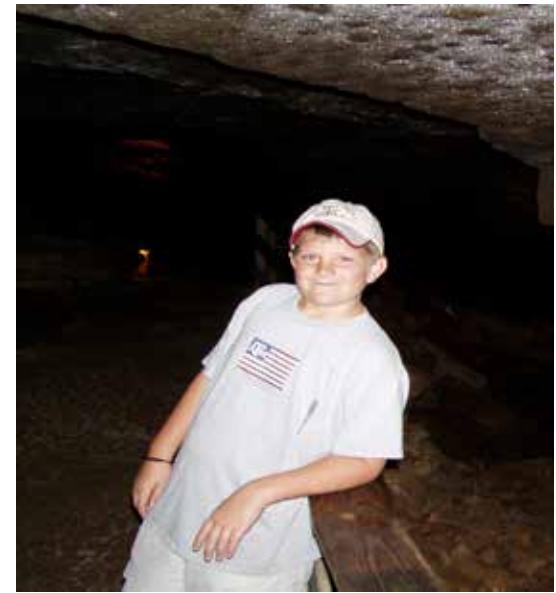
The trip started with Braunsen's first solo flight into Dallas. I picked him up at Love Field and we started north. A couple of hours into the trip he was still playing with a hand-held game which just wouldn't do. I handed him my camera and asked him to take photos. This got his head up and he was instantly engaged in the trip. He took some great pictures too.

About mid way on to our first stop we started hearing weather reports of tornadoes and we were



hit by high winds. We spent an hour parked behind a convenience store between two big trucks hoping the storm would go the other direction.

Eventually we got to the hotel in Siloam Springs, Arkansas for the night. Our first destination the next day was the War Eagle Mill, which was a great lunch spot and an interesting working water-driven grist mill. From there we went to the War Eagle cave. I've always loved caves and Braunsen discovered he did too. It took a couple of hours to do the tour and I have to ad-



mit some parts got a bit cramped for my taste but Braunsen crawled around like a pro spelunker.

We headed back to Siloam Springs for dinner and bed time. The next day would be the Pea Ridge Civil War battle field.





Siloam Springs, Arkansas is a lovely little town where my grandmother lived as a child. When I was Braunsen's age, we were still able to drink from the springs coming out of the hill-side. Now the springs have been spoiled by a chemical spill but the town is still very nice.

When we were making plans for the trip, Braunsen asked if I was taking my laptop. Thinking he was wanting to play games on it, I told him I was bringing it along. I still don't know if I was being played by an eleven year old, or if he's just that much like me but he said he was glad because we could do stuff during the day and at night in the hotel we could look up genealogy. Gosh I love that kid!

What he didn't know was this is the kind of statement that gets him stuck visiting cemeteries. He was pretty agreeable about it though.



The day spent at Pea Ridge was even better than I hoped. You drive around the edges of the field and stop at markers that describe the events near that site. Ordinarily a battlefield is a big open space, which this was, but the descriptions at each stop really brought life to the place. It made such an impression on Braunsen that he actually wanted, and played with, a set of Civil War army men.





We went on to Tahlequah, Oklahoma to visit the Cherokee Heritage Center. It was constructed on the site of the Cherokee National Female Seminary that was built in 1850. It was the first school of higher education for women west of the Mississippi. The school burned in 1887 and was re-opened on another site near Tahlequah. The three columns are all that remains of the original building.

The first Saturday of each month they had events for children to take part in such as using the traditional blowguns, stickball and story telling in the 1890's style village of Adam's Corner.

The main building has an ongoing Cherokee art exhibit and Braunsen's favorite, a gift store. There is also a replica of a traditional Cherokee village from the early 1700's where we toured and learned about things like Cherokee stickball which uses sticks similar to those used in lacrosse



except each player has two sticks. The game was sometimes used to settle disputes without having to go to war. There were few rules and games could be brutal, sometimes lasting for days.

The story telling was awesome, as you can see Braunsen was fully engaged. The tellers act the parts of the characters in the stories, normally animals. The stories told to children are typically the ones telling about why animals look or act a certain way and are usually quite funny.

Our next adventure was cut a little short due to the storms in the area so we headed to Tulsa for the night and went to see the latest Harry Potter movie. One of the reasons Braunsen is my favorite travel buddy is that he's so flexible and interested in everything.



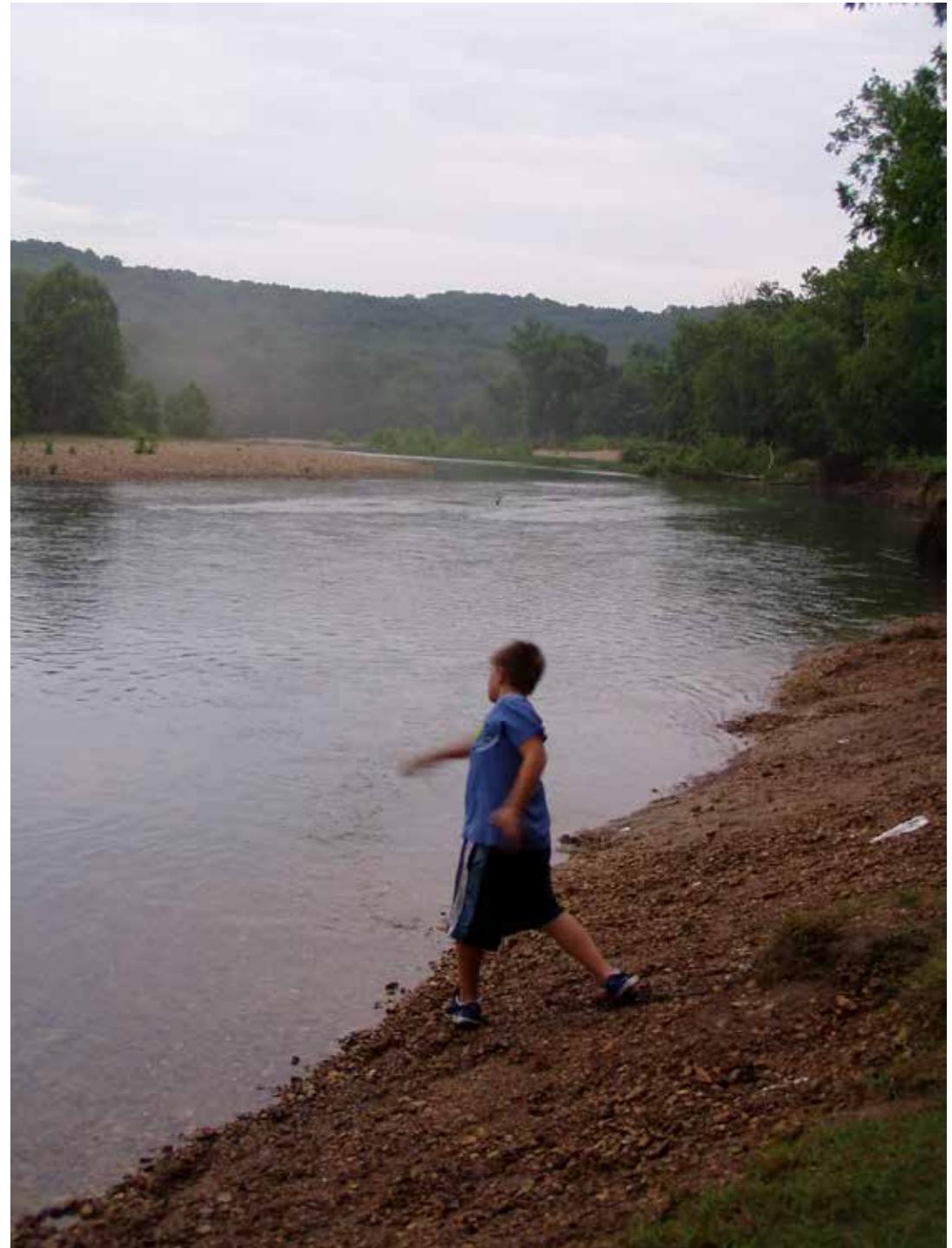


We spent our last two nights in Oklahoma at the Thunderbird Resort on the Illinois River near Tahlequah. This is the river our ancestors lived near when they came from the east to settle in Indian Territory in the late 1800's. My cousin Clemie told stories of taking quilts and a frying pan to camp at the river. I guess that's about all that's necessary for camping to someone who doesn't have indoor plumbing at home.

Braunsen and I were much more fortunate. We had a very nice cabin to stay in. That was kind of a lucky break, I had booked a less expensive cabin, not really great but okay. When the rain started we discovered the window leaked around the AC unit and the owners hooked us up in a cabin that would have been twice the cost. Braunsen loved it, I took his picture in every room.

We spent the morning floating down the river in a raft and made it back just before the rain started. We sat on the deck and watched until it finally stopped then headed to play in the river. Braunsen displayed some excellent rock skipping skills, making a few throws more than three-quarters across the river.

We enjoyed this trip so much we started talking possibilities for a trip the next year on our way back to Texas.



# New Orleans, Louisiana, 2005





For our second trip, Braunsen decided he liked the idea of New Orleans when I explained beignets from Cafe du Monde and that they served spicy seafood everywhere. The boy does like his food! Actually, I think this is what got Lindsay to go with along, he even volunteered to drive.

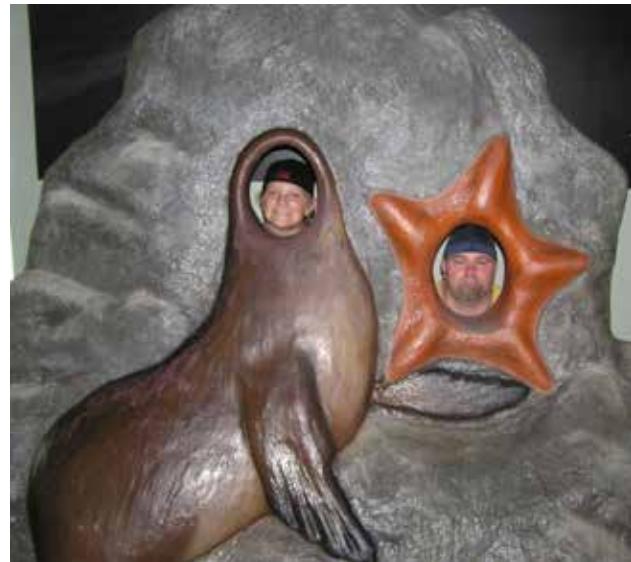
If we hadn't done this trip at this time we would have had to wait several years. We were there the week of July 17, less than two months before hurricane Katrina devastated the city.

Our hotel was awesome, tucked away from the Bourbon Street noise, but still in the French Quarter. The guys loved the room because the air conditioner turned the place into a freezer. I had to wait for my camera lens to de-fog every time I went outside.

Buildings in the French Quarter are built right up to the street but they all have lovely courtyards behind the house in the French and Spanish style.

Our first adventure was the Aquarium of the Americas. The aquarium is





run by the Audubon Institute and is considered one of the foremost aquariums in the world. The main focus is the aquatic life in the southern Louisiana region and the Gulf of Mexico.

The favorite exhibit for all of us was the large tank simulating life around a gulf oil rig. It's designed so that you walk through a tunnel with large fish swimming all around you. Truly amazing.



Everyone should visit the craziness that is Bourbon St. when in New Orleans so I took Braunsen for a walk just at dark. We checked out the flaming fountain at Pat O'Brian's and heard the music pouring out of the bars. I didn't want to linger with an eleven year old, but just those few blocks were quite the learning experience for him.





Braunsen and I took off for Jackson Square which was built in the 1700's. On the north side of the square are the Cabildo, the old city hall, the St Louis Cathedral and the Presbytère, formerly the home of Catholic priests which now houses the Mardi Gras Museum.

On the east and west sides of the square are the red brick Pontalba buildings built in the 1840's. The ground floors house shops and the upper floors are apartments. They're the oldest continuously rented apartments in North America. The south side of the square is open to the Mississippi River and of course the Cafe du Monde.



Braunsen fell in love with beignets (French doughnuts). I had to warn him not to breathe when taking a bite, if you do, you either inhale powered sugar or you wear it.





Braunsen and I enjoyed the Mardi Gras Museum quite a lot. They have wonderful exhibits of past costumes and plenty of stuff to do for kids. Even at the advanced age of twelve, Braunsen enjoyed dressing up in the costumes or pretending to be at a street parade begging for beads.





When I asked Braunsen what his favorite part of the week in New Orleans was, I fully expected him to say the food or the swamp tour. I never thought he would say it was the World War II Museum. I must admit it was impressive.

The visit starts with a video of the activities surrounding D-Day and then you enter one of the best museums I've ever seen. The way they illustrated the challenges and tragedies of World War II and the D-Day operation was beautiful. All three of us stayed engaged and didn't want to miss a thing.

We also visited the Confederate Museum across the street but, it wasn't anywhere near as impressive.





We headed out of New Orleans for a day in the swamp and had a blast. It was a two hour tour out of the Barataria Bayou. To me the swamp is a very relaxing place. The water moves slowly, there are plenty of trees with lovely Spanish moss and if you're in a large enough boat, the wild life is at a safe and interesting distance... normally.

On this trip we were led by a crazy Cajun who tempted fate by hand feeding the alligators and keeping one as a pet. Of course Brausen thought that was just too cool for words.

Did you know that an alligator can leap nearly two-thirds of its length out of the water?



South Texas, 2006



In Texas, it's usually seventh grade that we're taught Texas history. This involves the bringing of colonists to then Mexico by Stephen F. Austin, the Texas Revolution including the overwhelming loss at the Alamo, the massacre at Goliad and the victorious battle at San Jacinto.

My third trip with Braunsen just happened to be South Texas and a good many of the historic locations. Perfect timing. Braunsen gave me a refresher course in seventh grade Texas history. I showed him the sites.

Our day started off in Houston trying to out run a huge thunder-storm. We made it to San Felipe, the site of Austin's first settlement and made a brief photo stop. We visited the Old San Felipe town hall, in use from 1842 - 1975.

By this time he was well aware that if there could be genealogy involved, there would be genealogy. I explained to Braunsen about our Allen ancestors who came to Texas and settled near San Felipe with Stephen F. Austin's first three hundred colonists.

From there we went on to Schulenburg to visit the painted churches and of course so I could show Braunsen where our ancestors settled when they



came to Texas from Germany, Switzerland and the Czech Republic.

We started at the grandest of the painted churches, St. Mary's at High Hill. When the large populations of German and Czech immigrants arrived they built small simple churches that look like any ordinary small town church. What they did inside was paint the wooden structures to resemble the grand churches and cathedrals of their homeland.





Yes, we visited the cemetery at St. Mary's. Our Czech ancestors, the Blumerich's are buried there. Braunsen was impressed with the fact that nearly all the stones in this cemetery are inscribed in German.





The storm that had chased us out of Houston that morning made a U-turn and came after us. Normally storms go from west to east, this one decided to follow Braunsen and I all day. When we headed to the second painted church, we drove through blinding rain and had to sit in the truck for 20 minutes to avoid getting completely soaked.

The next church was St. John the Baptist Catholic Church at Ammansville. It's also known as the "Pink Church", it's pretty obvious why. With the lights off and the overcast day, the interior looked absolutely Pепто pink. It is quite lovely though. We sat out more rain inside taking photos then headed on down the road. We decided to head further south to try to avoid the rain, so off we went to Goliad.





The story of the 1836 battle and aftermath at Goliad is truly the worst event in Texas history. While Braunsen and I really enjoyed the battlefield at Pea Ridge, this one was terribly depressing. There is a lot of information around the site and it's very well done and nicely preserved, but it just makes you want to cry.

The next stop was the much more pleasant Mission Nuestra Senora del Espiritu Santo de Zuniga at Goliad State Park. What is there now is actually a 1930's reconstruction. The mission was originally established in 1722 near Matagorda and moved to the present site on the San Antonio River in 1749. It was the first large cattle ranch in Texas supplying local settlements and some as far away as New Orleans.

Mission Espritu Santo is also the birthplace of General Zaragoza who helped defeat Santa Anna. He is also the general who led the Mexican army to victory over the French on May 5, 1862 in the Battle of Puebla. This is what the celebration of Cinco de Mayo is all about. Fun to know that he was a Texan.

FANNIN BATTLEGROUND  
Remember Goliad!

The battle fought near Coleto Creek in Goliad County on March 19 and 20, 1836, was one of the most significant engagements of the Texas Revolution. This strategic victory proved the skills of the Mexican army, but the infamous aftermath inspired a Texan battle cry in their decisive victory at San Jacinto.

Colonel James W. Fannin led his army of 400 men eastward out of the protective walls of Presidio La Bahía on the morning of March 19, 1836. Caught on the open prairie by General José Urrea's Mexican troops, the Texans were forced to surrender. On Palm Sunday, March 27, the prisoners were marched out of the Presidio and shot. Their remains were buried with military honors three months later.

In 1914, the State of Texas built a gray-granite monument on thirteen acres donated to mark the battlefield site. The land became Fannin Battleground State Historical Park in 1965.

Visit these Related Sites:

- Presidio La Bahía
- Goliad Massacre

Battlefield Site:  
A cotton gin once marked the battlefield site in 1836.

Goliad  
Birthplace of Texas Ranching

Timeline of Events:

- 1722: Mission Nuestra Senora del Espiritu Santo de Zuniga established near Matagorda.
- 1749: Mission moved to San Antonio River.
- 1754: Presidio La Bahía established.
- 1835: Texan forces capture Presidio La Bahía.
- 1836: Battle of Coleto Creek (March 19-20).
- 1836: Goliad Massacre (March 27).
- 1914: State of Texas builds monument on 13 acres.
- 1965: Site becomes Fannin Battleground State Historical Park.



Mission Espiritu Santo is beautiful in its simplicity. Braunsen had fun playing with the echo in the stone building.





Presidio la Bahia, located here in 1749, is where Fannin and his troops were taken after their surrender. I prefer to think of it as the place in 1835 the Texans wrote and signed Texas declaration of independence.

Unfortunately we arrived too late to go inside so we walked over to the memorial site where by order of Mexican General Santa Anna, Col. Fannin and his soldiers were marched to from La Bahia and massacred. The memorial stands at the grave site of Fannin and his soldiers.





The storm that had been chasing us all day caught up again at Goliad so we hit the road to Corpus Christi. We found a hotel on the seawall and walked down to the largest Whataburger we had ever seen. Of course Corpus is the home of Whataburger so it stands to reason they would have the largest. Braunsen was thrilled that it was two stories tall and we could eat out on the deck.

We watched the storm approach yet again and hurried back to our hotel just in time for the down pour. Fortunately we were done for the day!

With a clear sky the next day we toured Corpus Christi starting with their history museum, then the Texas State Aquarium and on to the USS Lexington, an Essex Class aircraft carrier built in 1943.





The Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History was a great place for Braunsen, plenty of hands (and feet) on activities. They also had replicas of the Columbus ships the Pinta and the Santa Maria. Unfortunately both ships have been scrapped since our visit. We were lucky to be able to see them when we did.



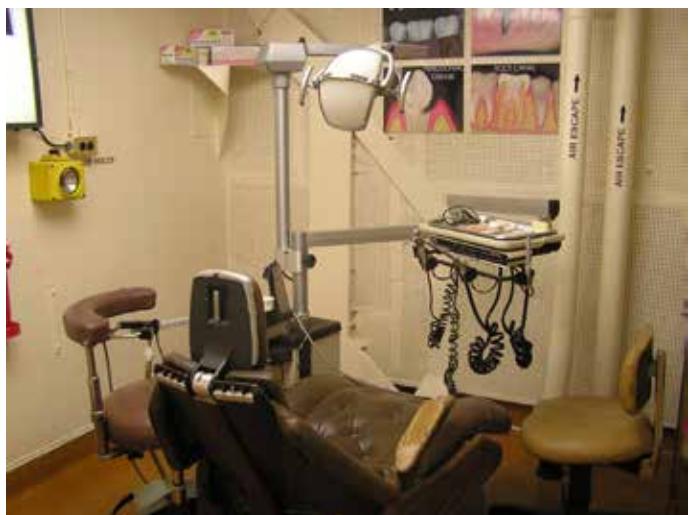


We didn't spend a great deal of time at the Texas State Aquarium. I had been there before and I think Braunsen was anxious to get to the big aircraft carrier. It's a very nice aquarium, it just pales in comparison to jets and big guns.

The USS Lexington is huge! It carried a crew of 1,550, is the flight deck is 910 feet long. It is truly a floating city with a hospital, barber shop, dentist office, a library and of course a huge kitchen and mess hall. One day's food service included 660 pounds of meat, 164 gallons of milk and 97 dozen eggs.

My mother told me my dad chose the navy because the food was better, I'm not sure how good it was, but there sure was a lot of it.





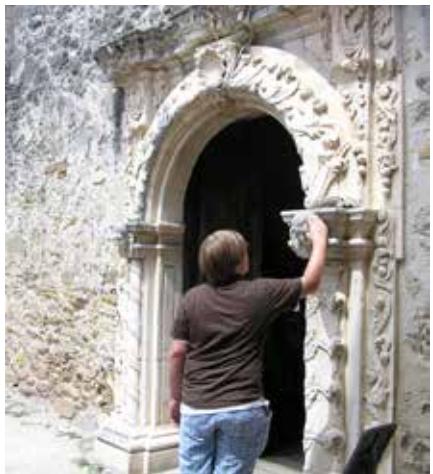


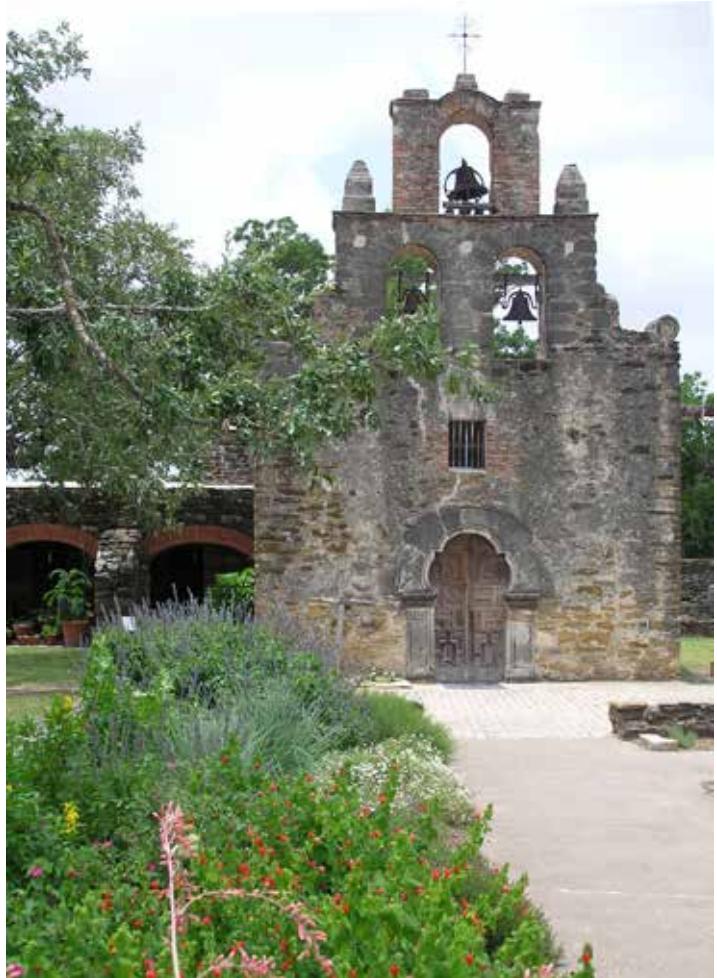
Our next destination was San Antonio where we met with an old friend, Joel, to show us around the five historic missions in the area. All but the Alamo are still functioning Catholic churches.

Our first stop was Mission Concepción (left), a Franciscan mission moved to San Antonio in 1731. It's the closest to downtown and the main church is well preserved but all that remains of the original compound.

The second, and most complete mission, is San Jose, (below and right) established in 1720. It is unique because it still has the compound walls and you can go inside the living quarters. Joel is quite knowlegable about the history of San Antonio and the missions in particular. Braunsen hung on his every word asking question after question. We both learned a lot that day.







Mission San Francisco de la Espada is the furthest mission from town but also the most peaceful. It also is a functioning Catholic church. I actually have a friend who is a descendant of some of the earliest parishioners. The gardens at this mission are beautifully maintained.

Mission San Juan Capistrano (right page) is on the opposite side of the San Antonio River from the other missions. It is quite small but sits on a large protected site and has trails to the river that are great when it's





not a typical Texas hot summer.

The Espada dam, completed in 1745, is the oldest existing dam in the United States. It is quite unique in that it was built with the curve with the flow of the water rather than against it. It's one of the few surviving parts of the old acequia system built to move water out of the river for irrigation at the missions.

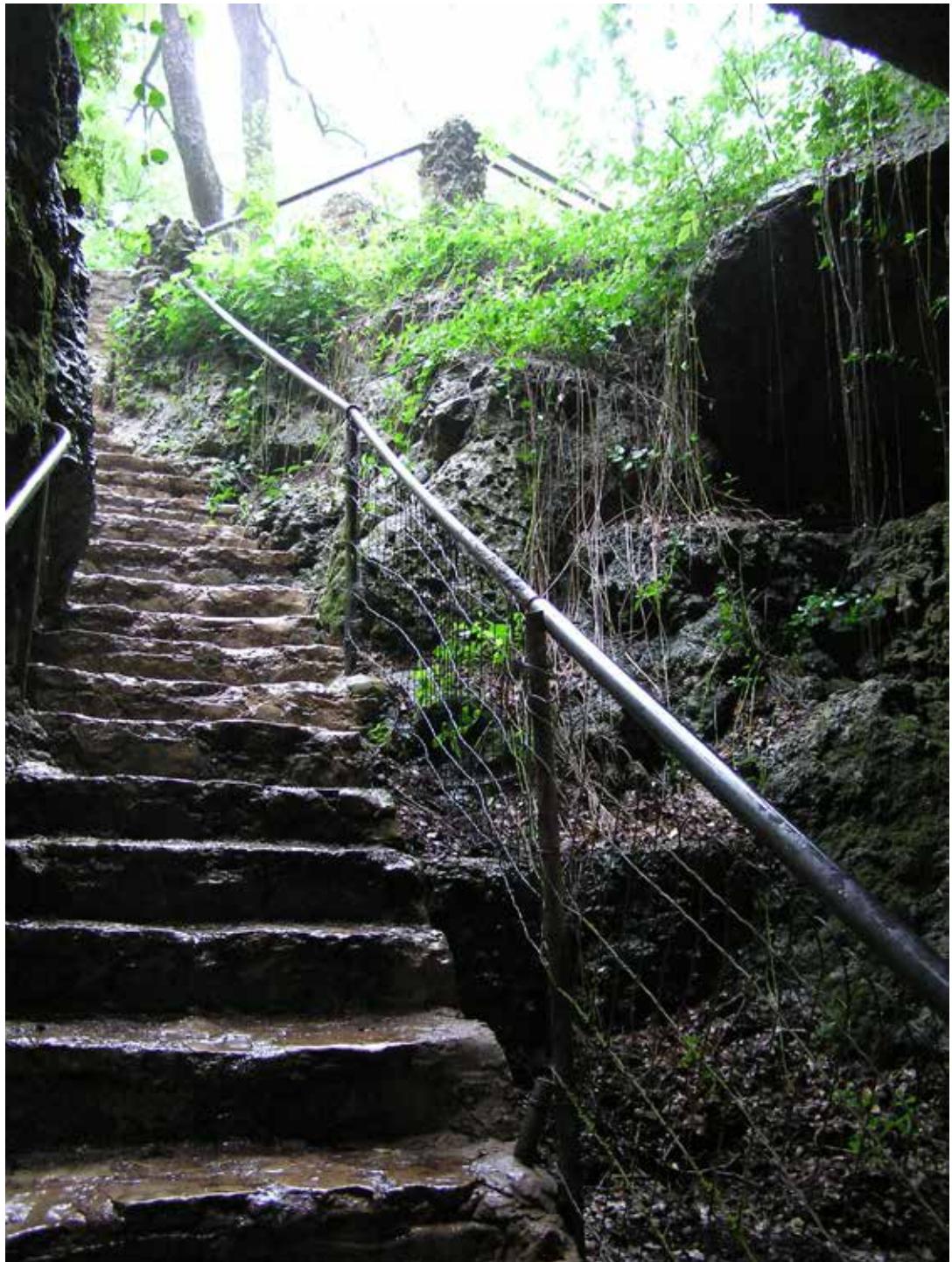




Last but certainly not least on our mission tour was the Mission San Antonio de Valero, better known as The Alamo, was begun at its present site in about 1724. Not much of the original mission remains but anyone in the United States and many from other countries recognize the façade. Fortunately before the last buildings could be destroyed, the Daughters of the Revolution of Texas raised the funds to preserve the site. Today it is owned by the State of Texas.

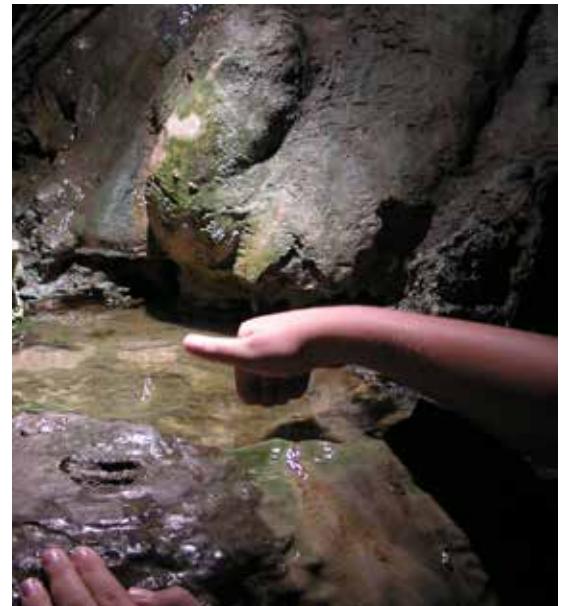
After all the touring we treated Joel to lunch at a great restaurant near downtown San Antonio. Pico de Gallo is now my favorite restaurant in the area. I just love the tacky lights and streamers on the ceiling and the food is excellent!

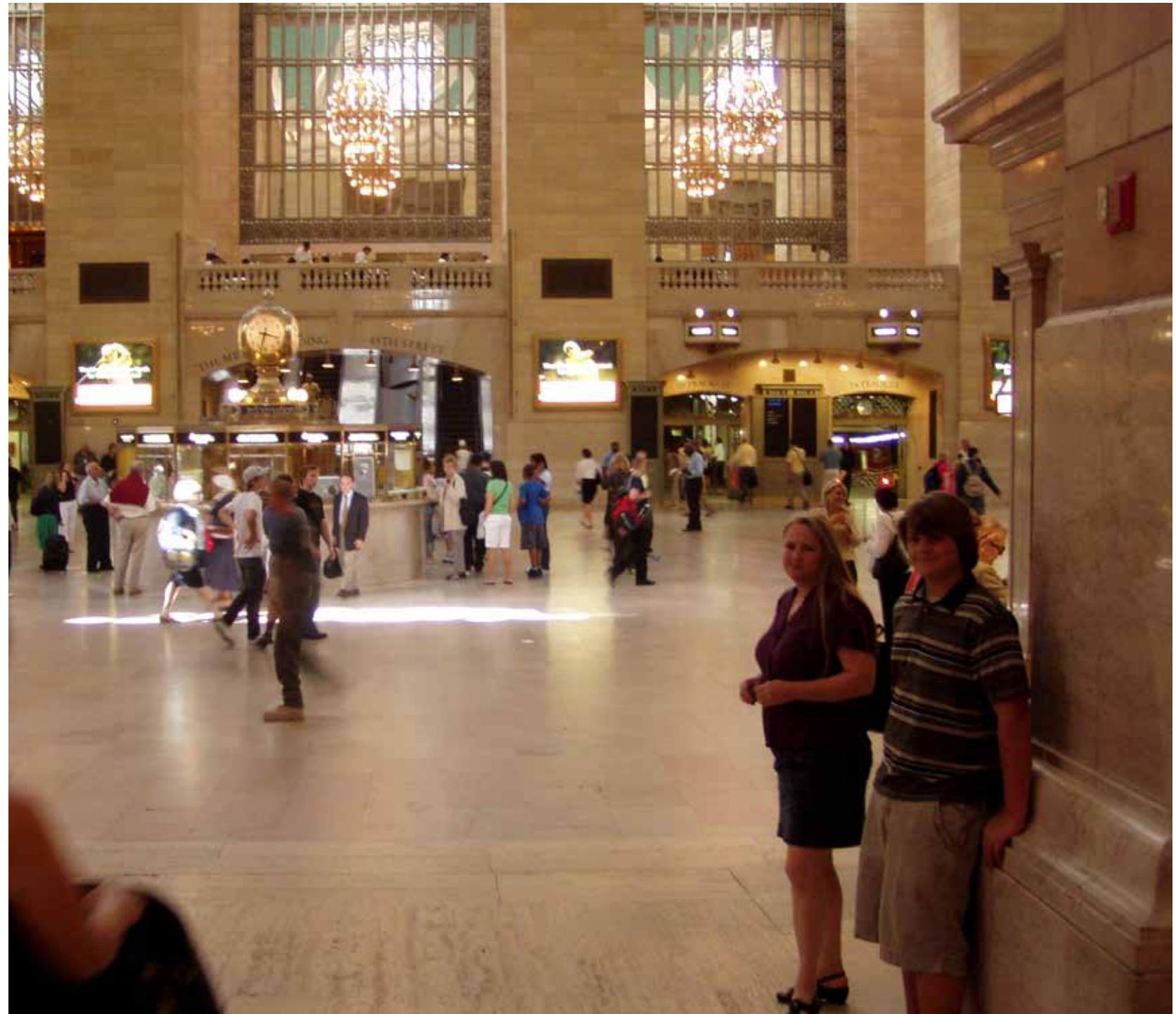




On the last day of our Texas History Tour the rain caught up with us again. This time we went underground to avoid it, to the wettest cave in Texas, Cascade Cavern. It's a small cave compared to others in the area but beautiful. There are pools of the clearest water everywhere. I still don't understand why, but we found that if you dip your fingers in the pool, they disappear. Of course Braunsen had to try this and as you can see in the photo below, it works.

Once again on the trip home we made grand plans for next year. How about New York?





# New York, NY, 2007

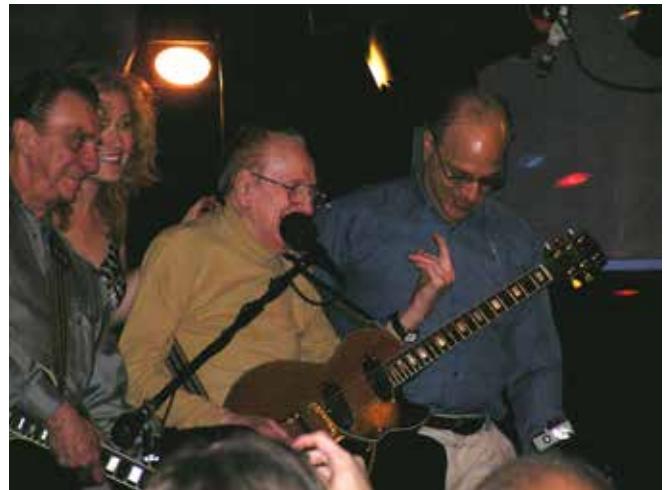
Braunsen and I had talked about possibly going to New York but it became a reality because a friend of mine wanted to go for the July 4th fireworks and to see the Museum of Natural History after the movie "A Night at the Museum" came out. Kirk decided he would tag along.

Of course, traveling with Braunsen means having food readily available in mass quantities. We took a cab from the airport, dropped our bags at the hotel and walked a few blocks to Grand Central Station and their food court. There is such a wide variety of ethnic foods we could all be happy. We finally decided that we would separate and meet back up with our selection and share. I chose Greek, Kirk chose Asian BBQ and Braunsen chose Chinese. It was all good!

The first night plan was to go see Les Paul, the inventor of the solid body guitar (today's typical electric guitar) and a fabulous jazz guitarist. At that time he was 92 years old and played every Monday at the Iridium.

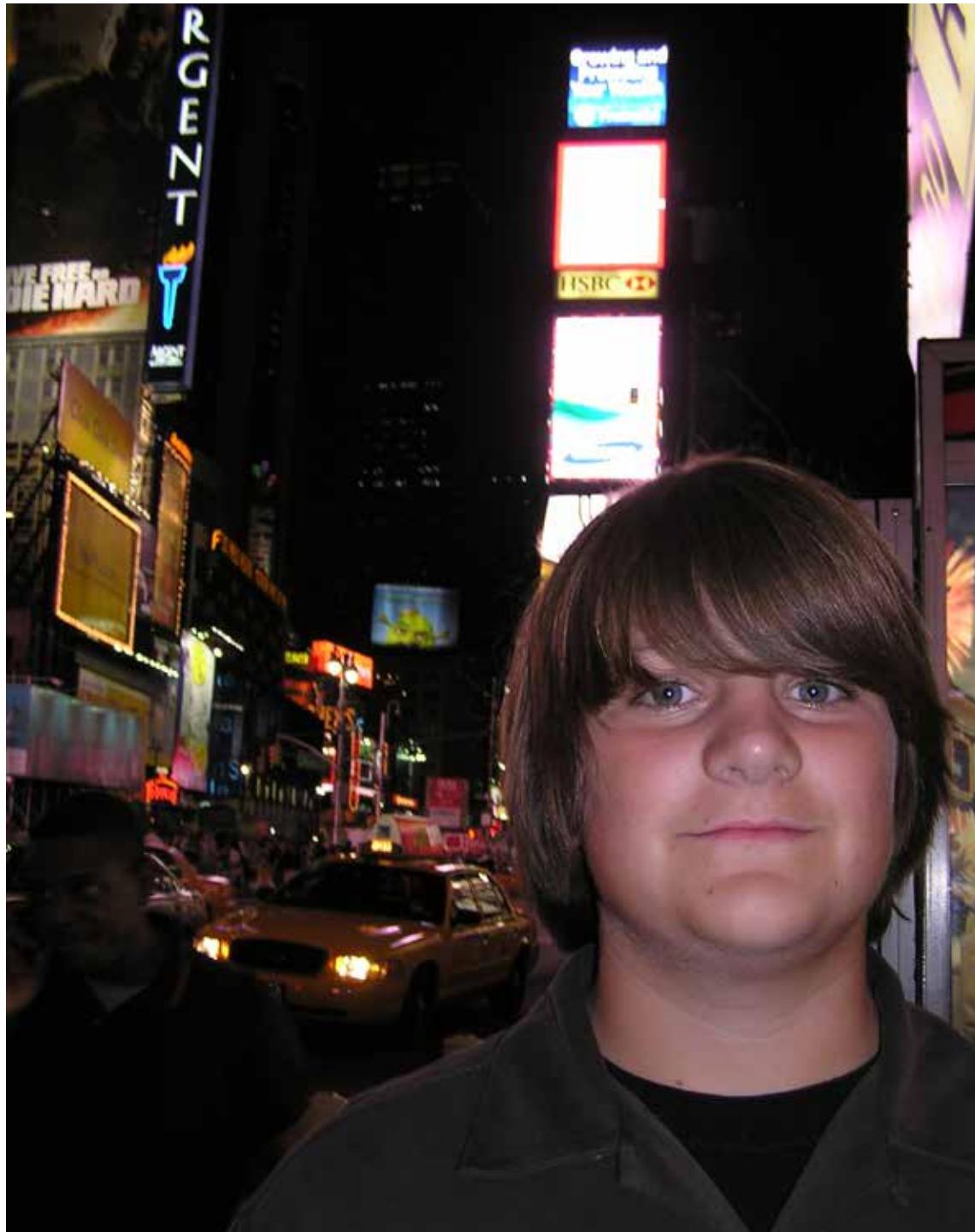
I had been afraid I would never get a chance to see him play. About this time Braunsen was learning guitar and I thought he'd get a kick out of going to a New York jazz bar and seeing one of the greats. Not many fourteen year olds get to hang out in jazz bars in Times Square. He loved it!





I have a couple of friends who sat in with Les Paul at the Iridium and they warned me his second show gets a little 'adult' with his jokes. I made sure we got there in time for the first show! It's really a good thing we got to see Les Paul play on that trip. He only lived another two years.

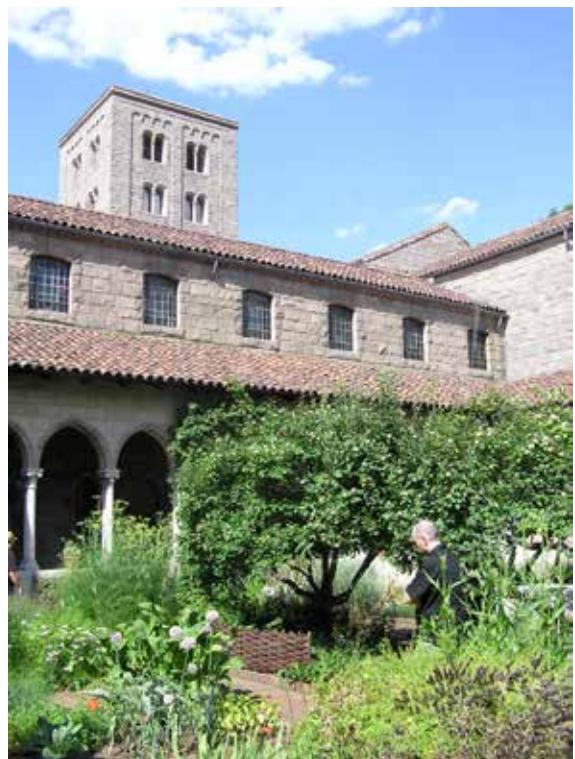
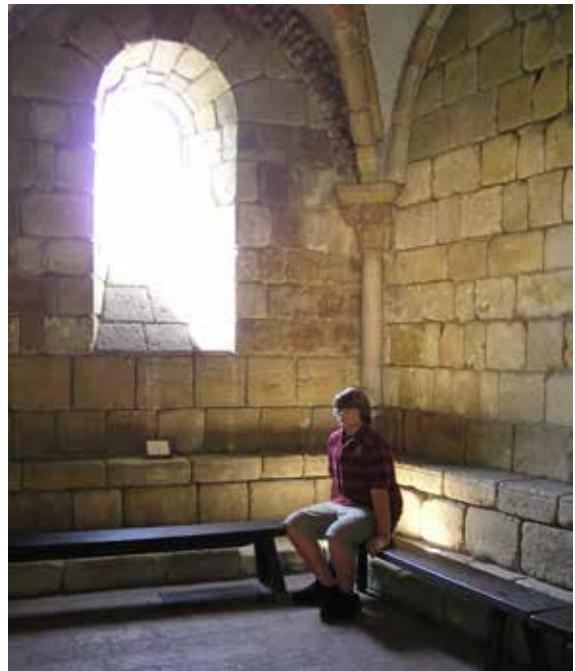
After this trip I think Braunsen's favorite place in the whole world was Times Square. We went back every night, he loved the lights, the crowds and the noise. He would have spent a lot more time there if I could have stood it!





Before our friends Martin and Anita got to town we did a few things they weren't interested in such as the Guggenheim Museum, lunch at Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill and the Cloisters Museum. The picture to the right is Braunsen's soft shell crab sandwich at the Mesa Grill. He kept having to tuck the legs back in so he could eat the darn thing. I couldn't watch, I think he enjoyed that part.





The Cloisters is a great museum that is built like a renaissance Italian villa and is at the far north end of Manhattan. My particular favorite.



Recognize this restaurant? You may have seen it on many episodes of Seinfeld. They didn't film inside, just used the shots of the outside. There were quite a few Seinfeld items inside and it was a good place for a burger at a reasonable price.



For dessert, absolutely De Robertis on the lower east side. They had amazing Italian pastries cheap. We picked up a dozen to snack on. They didn't last long. Unfortunately De Robertis closed in 2014.





We discovered the National Museum of the American Indian, a part of the Smithsonian, in the old US Custom House. The building alone is worth the visit.

The exhibit by James Lavadoir (color panels below) kept all three of us staring for quite a while. His work was amazing, I just wish I could afford it.

The museum also had artifacts from various Native American tribes that show the wonderful craftsmanship. All this and the museum was free!



We had time left before we had to be back at the hotel to meet our friends, so we roamed around the southern tip of Manhattan taking in the sights. NYC is a great place to just wander and see what's around the next corner.





Back at the hotel we met up with Martin and Anita and decided to watch the July 4th fireworks from the roof. It was a bit disappointing because it was raining but we had a good view of the light show.

We spent a few hours at the American Museum of Natural History and it looked just like it did in the movie except that the great hall was jam-packed with people. Once we were further inside there weren't really crowds. It was a huge place.

I'm pretty sure we saw everything, including the show at the planetarium. This was Kirk's favorite museum of the trip. We're all pretty diverse in our tastes and New York has something for everyone.

Once we wore ourselves out, we went and rested in Central Park watching the other tourists go by. It really was a little bit of heaven in the middle of a concrete jungle.







Our next New York adventure, and Braunsen's second favorite, was shopping in China Town and Little Italy. Anita wanted to buy knock-off purses. Braunsen just loves to shop. As we were walking up from the subway and our heads just cleared the street level little Asian ladies started in on Anita saying "Gucci, Prada, this way!" I have no idea how they picked her out of the crowd but away we went.

The first time Braunsen saw the ladies open the wall in the back of a shop to take us to the purses he was hooked. Kirk was kind of into it too. For the most part Martin and I waited on the street for them to come back... or not. Behind walls, into basements, through tunnels to other buildings, the things people will do for cheap purses, wallets and watches. Yes, Braunsen got a wallet, I got a purse and we paid less than one-fourth the asking price. I gave Braunsen a hard lesson in bargaining when I started walking out without buying anything because they would not meet my price. Boy was he surprised when the little lady chased me out the door saying I had a deal!



Wonderful New York pizza for dinner then up the next day for a Circle Line boat tour around Manhattan and our visit was done. Yes, we started planning for next year on the flight home.



# Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, 2008



Braunsen and I had talked about Myrtle Beach for a while. We have cousin Margaret there and our cousin Betty lived near Charlotte in north-central South Carolina and I really wanted him to meet them. Also, our cousin Margaret's family owned a great resort, amusement park and water park that I wanted him to still be young enough to enjoy.

I talked to Margaret and Betty and made plans to invade Myrtle Beach. Braunsen's mother liked the idea so well she decided to drive the whole family there and I would pick Braunsen up after a week. Margaret got to meet everyone and treated us to an amazing meal at her favorite steakhouse. It was quite a party, chocolate cake included!





I'm not sure how Lesli made the drive from Houston to Myrtle Beach with three kids in the car and pregnant with Lexi but she seemed to be in pretty good spirits. I was tired that evening just flying to Charlotte and driving three hours with Betty.



We stayed at the Ammons Sea Mist Resort with its on-site water park, game room and amazing restaurant. The breakfast was so good and plentiful you didn't need to eat for the rest of the day.

Well, there was one little glitch with breakfast. I haven't yet mentioned the only disagreement Braunsen and I ever have. He *hates* to get up in the morning. There is nothing to tempt him, no torture to move him. He will sleep through anything. On this trip I actually dove across the bed and landed on him. He only grunted.

Eventually he did roll out of bed but I think it's only because he got hungry. Food does usually win him over in the end.





Our first morning we spent at the Family Kingdom Water Park riding the big slides and the lazy river. When we got tired of fun in the water, we threw on swimsuit cover-ups and crossed the street to the Family Kingdom Amusement Park.

Braunsen rode the roller coaster so many times he lost count. Betty and I mostly took pictures as he flew by. After a lunch of park food like hot dogs and funnel cakes we were done for the day and headed back to be lazy at the hotel.





Margaret's friend Bob offered to drive us up to North Carolina for a day of visiting the old Confederate Fort Fisher and into Wilmington to see the Battleship North Carolina.

On the way we had to wait for the ferry across the Cape Fear River so we amused ourselves feeding bread to the seagulls.

Poor Braunsen got stuck in the very back of the van with Bob's grandkids who were a bit challenging to say the least. I overheard a conversation that made me smile. Bob's grandson asked Braunsen why his phone was pink. Braunsen replied quite simply, "dude, it was free." If he could do that at fifteen, I knew a lack of confidence would never be a problem.







There isn't a great deal left of the structures from Fort Fisher but you can walk the earthen mounds and see the outlines of the old walls. It's at the south end of what is now called Pleasure Island, just south of Wilmington. There are beautiful beaches on the Atlantic side and wild marshland on the Cape Fear River side. If it hadn't been so hot it would have been a great walk.

After an excellent seafood lunch we drove on up to Wilmington to see the Battleship USS North Carolina which served in the Pacific during World War II. The ship was completed in 1942 and carried a crew of 2,300. The Battleship USS North Carolina opened as a World War II memorial in 1961.





On our last night in Myrtle Beach Margaret invited us over for dinner. She made a double batch of a traditional South Carolina Chicken Bog. Something named “Bog” doesn’t sound that great but it’s an amazing chicken and rice dish. A double batch means there are two chickens in the pot.

After dinner, Margaret, Betty and I taught Braunsen how to play Scrabble. He did quite well against champions Betty and Margaret. In return, Braunsen taught Margaret that a double batch of Chicken Bog doesn’t stand much of a chance against a fifteen year old future football player from Texas.

Another thing Braunsen learned on that trip was how to navigate the DFW Airport. I showed him the gate information on his ticket to Houston and let him lead the way. He did great!

New Mexico, 2009



Braunsen is sixteen and he's driving! Finally I don't have to do all the driving on our trips. Once we got out of Fort Worth heading west I told him it was his turn to drive and I sat back and relaxed. It was going to be a long time until we reached Roswell, New Mexico.

West Texas is the perfect place to practice highway driving, long straight roads and little traffic. Unfortunately the most interesting scenery is windmills and oil rigs. Maybe the occasional tree.

Our plan was to see alien things in Roswell, spend a few days in Albuquerque and then drive up to Santa Fe and stay with Ann's parents, Joe and Barbara Eason, in their three hundred year old house. Our friend Ann would be meeting us in a few days.





The coolest thing about Roswell was the street lamps. They had cute little alien eyes. We weren't sure how seriously anyone took the UFO Museum, we thought it was funny as hell, little shiny men and sparkly spaceships were worth the \$5 admission.

Roswell is where Braunsen got his first taste of New Mexico style Mexican food with green chilies. He loved it but, I don't think he's ever met a food he didn't like.



We arrived in Albuquerque and Braunsen settled in with his usual style and started sifting through online restaurant reviews. He was ready for more good New Mexican food. He found a great local joint called Padilla's Mexican Kitchen in a neighborhood close to us. The reviews certainly were accurate, small place, great food and good prices.

We made plans to head to the zoo the next day. Albuquerque has an excellent zoo, really lovely grounds and animal enclosures. I was glad he was still young enough at sixteen to want to go to places like zoos. I was afraid he might feel too old for that stuff now that he was in high school.

After dinner we cruised the area and took some pictures of the mountains from our hotel. We were loving the city already.







Old Town Albuquerque is fun to wander around, especially for Brausen who loves to shop. I don't care much for shopping and fortunately he also loves to eat so we stopped for a bowl of green chili stew at Little Anita's restaurant.





We visited several of Albuquerque's excellent museums, both for art and history. Braunsen's favorite was the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. The building was designed in a traditional style and had a central courtyard with some wonderful paintings.





The Albuquerque Museum of Art and History was my favorite. It had a great mixture of historical exhibits from the area and some wonderful art, from ancient to modern. The sculpture in front of the museum is pretty representative of the diversity of the collection inside.







The next day we headed north to Santa Fe stopping at the Sandia Peak Tramway to take a 2.7 mile ride up a cable to the peak at over 10,000 feet. This is not for anyone afraid of heights. You dangle from the cable and sway in the wind, it could be a little nerve wracking. The scenery across the valley is amazing though.

Once we got out at the top there were trails along the ridge and we could check out the ski slopes on the other side of the mountain. Beautiful!

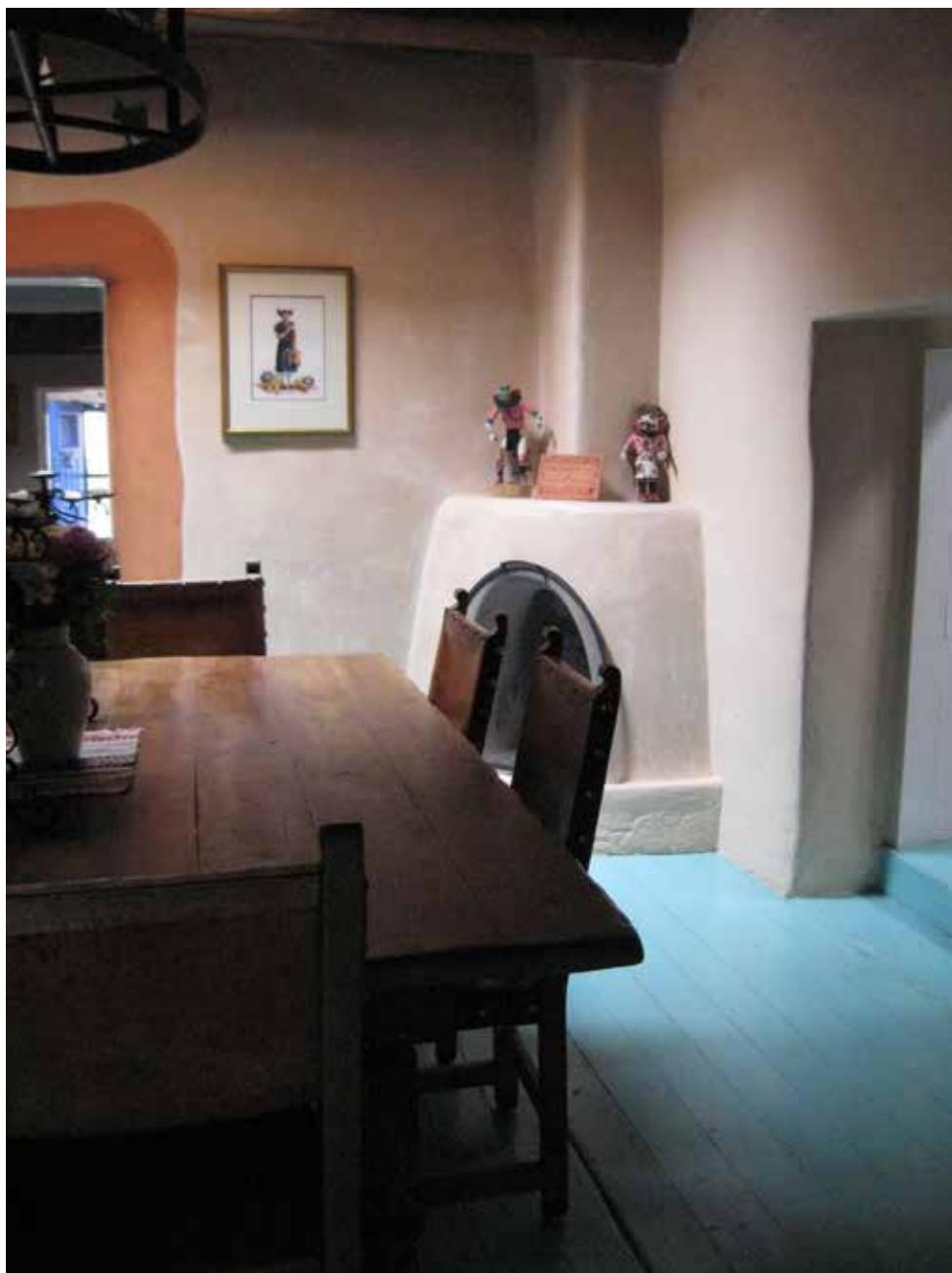




Joe and Barbara were such fun to stay with. Braunsen and Joe really bonded over football. At one point Braunsen wanted to go to a flea market and Ann and I were not convinced. Joe said to Braunsen, "come on, we'll go have fun." Ann and I decided we'd rather not get left behind and they let us go with them.

Their house in Santa Fe is beautiful inside and out. It was part of a much larger property when the house was built about 300 years ago that is now the surrounding neighborhood. Many changes have been made to the house but the age is obvious in the foot thick adobe walls and old wooden beams.







Joe and Barbara's house was just blocks from the center of town so Braunsen and I took a long walk to see the sights. Santa Fe is the oldest capital city in North America and the oldest European community west of the Mississippi.

The Palace of the Governors on the square was built by the Spanish in 1610 and is the country's oldest continuously occupied building. Most days the front gallery is full of American Indian artists selling jewelery, pottery and other handmade items. Once again Braunsen was in shopping heaven.



Joe told us about the Bradbury Science Museum in Los Alamos. The museum features the functions of the Los Alamos National Laboratory which includes the Manhattan Project (the secret atomic bomb program), developments in defense technology and the history of the laboratory and its creation.

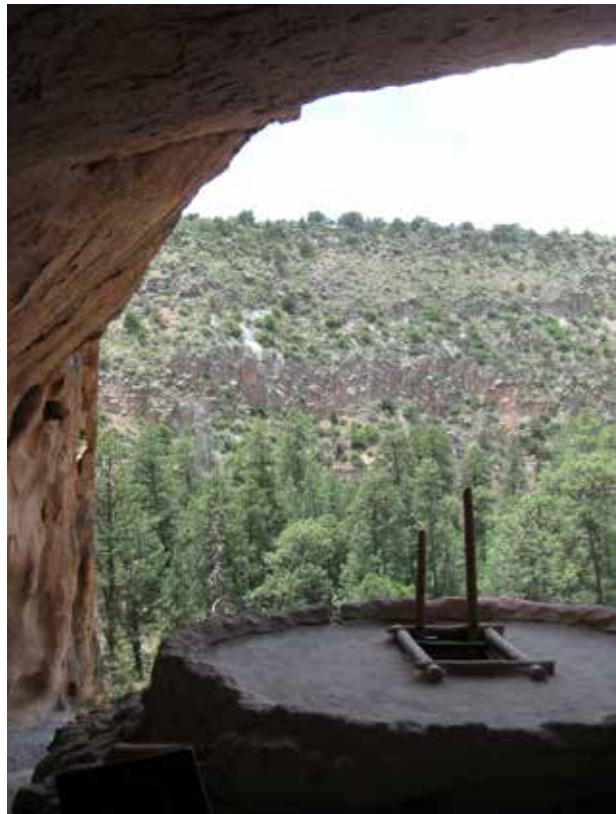
I just love the way Braunsen is interested in everything. I've taken him to quilt exhibits, art shows, history museums and wandering around in the woods. He's into it all.



Bandelier National Monument is full of primitive cave dwellings and petroglyphs dating back over 11,000 years. Braunsen and I walked the main trails up and down the Frijoles Canyon. We climbed up into the caves and tried to imagine what it would have been like to live there.

The caves aren't natural, they're carved out of the soft rock cliffs and some have multiple rooms. You can still see the areas where soot from fires blackened the ceilings. There was one cave more than one hundred feet up. I let Braunsen climb up and take pictures so I didn't have to make the climb myself. The view was spectacular, I should have gone up.

In some places there are remnants of adobe walls. Having been built from dirt, over time rain and wind slowly wear them away to nothing.





Braunsen had been looking for a gift for his mother with no luck so I suggested he ask Joe for ideas. Joe insisted he would make something for her, his hobby is jewelery making. Braunsen took photos throughout the process of making a pendant from an ancient Anasazi pottery shard. He even helped by sanding the shard smooth. It turned out to be beautiful.



We left Santa Fe in the late afternoon for the drive back to Texas. We stopped in Amarillo to spend the night and the next morning I suggested visiting the Cadillac Ranch. Braunsen was not impressed by the idea of going to see half buried cars. When I went anyway he totally got into the spirit.

What the Cadillac Ranch is, is ten Cadillacs made between 1949 and 1963 with their noses buried in the ground in a cow pasture outside Amarillo. Their awesome signature tail fins are standing proudly in the air. This is the only art installation I know of in the world where spray painted graffiti is actually encouraged.

After an hour or so of spray paint fun, we got back in the truck and headed home. This was to be the last trip we took for the next six years.





# Cruise to Mexico, 2015



It had been so long since our last trip, I was anxious to go somewhere with my favorite nephew Braunsen and his lovely girlfriend Lauren. The cheapest, easiest fun I could think of was a cruise. It's also a great way to get away from the North Texas winter. Our timing was perfect, the entire week we were gone the DFW area suffered an ice storm.

Braunsen, Lauren, Kirk and I packed up and drove to Galveston the day before the cruise and met Braunsen's family for a great dinner at Shrimp & Stuff then walked it off along the seawall before bedtime.

The morning of the cruise was all about hurry up and wait. Get in line and wait, go through security and wait. The photo on the left is a perfect example of 21st century waiting. Nobody seems to mind anymore.

Bye-bye Galveston. Hello vacation!

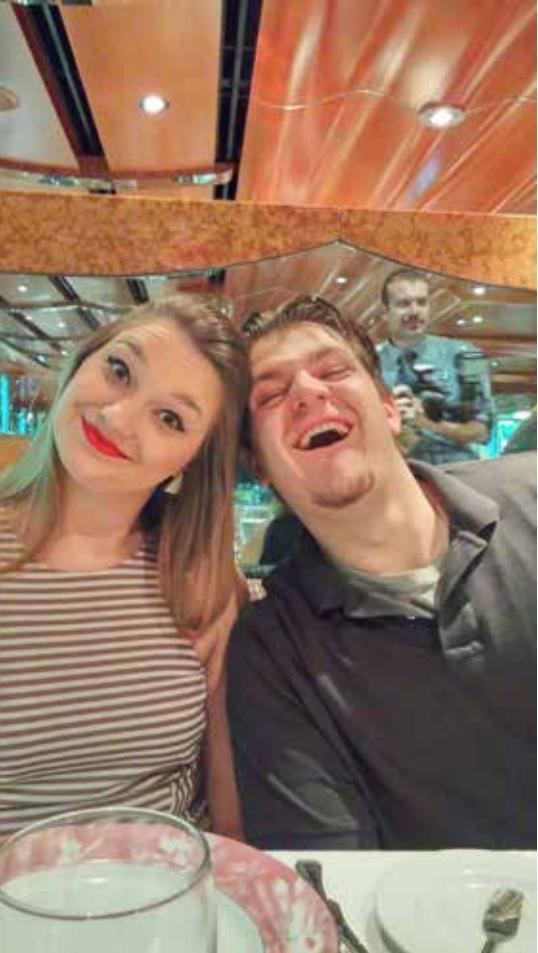
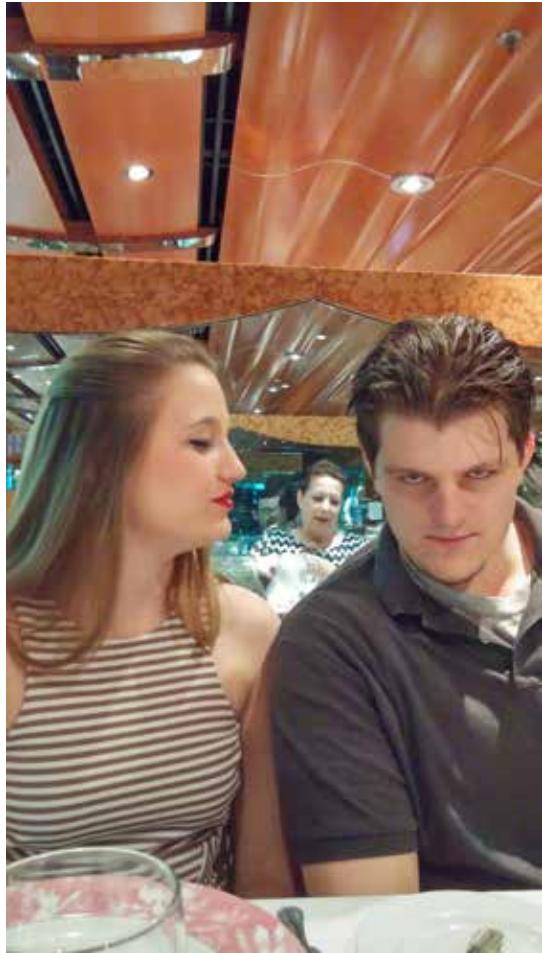


The idea for this trip as opposed to all the others with Braunsen was to relax. We made no plans for excursions or activities. I just told Braunsen and Lauren I expected to see them at dinner each night and we went our own way, sometimes meeting and hanging out for a couple of hours. No agenda is a wonderful thing!

Kirk and I went to a cooking demonstration that was the funniest thing. The chef could barely speak English so he had an assistant talking for him. The poor assistant didn't know anything about cooking. The audience ended up translating for her.

While we were in there we saw Braunsen and Lauren walk by the window. Braunsen had been on one cruise but this was a first for Lauren. They explored the whole ship. Whether it was because they got lost or were curious they wouldn't say.





Formal night dinner was lobster. If you felt like it, you could order two. And of course we can't forget the melting chocolate cake for dessert. Everyone dressed nicely and was on their best behavior with perfect table manners and sweet smiles. Uh yeah, if you believe that you don't know Braunsen! Maybe someday he'll actually pose nicely for a picture? Anyway, dinner was fun and delicious and that's what vacation is all about.

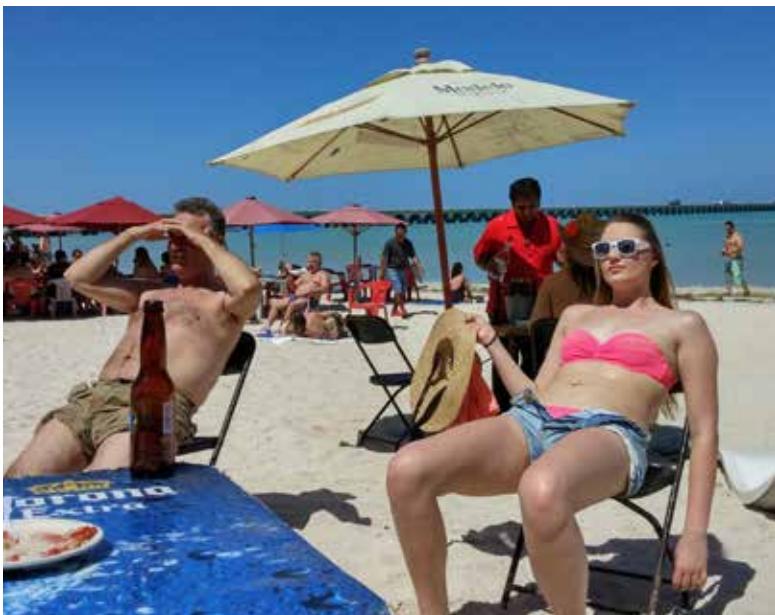




First stop, Progreso. It's a very small and poor town on the northern coast of the Yucatán peninsula. There's not much there but beach and a few shops. The pier where the cruise ships dock is loaded with tourist shops. You must pass through the main shop to get off the pier. We headed straight for the shuttle bus and the 10 minute ride into town.

Once we got there, we walked toward the beach and kept dodging guys trying to sell us an all inclusive beach day for only \$30 per person. Instead we walked along the beach until we found a place with tables on the sand and \$2 Corona and margaritas. Over all we probably spent less than \$30 for all four of us to laze on the beach.

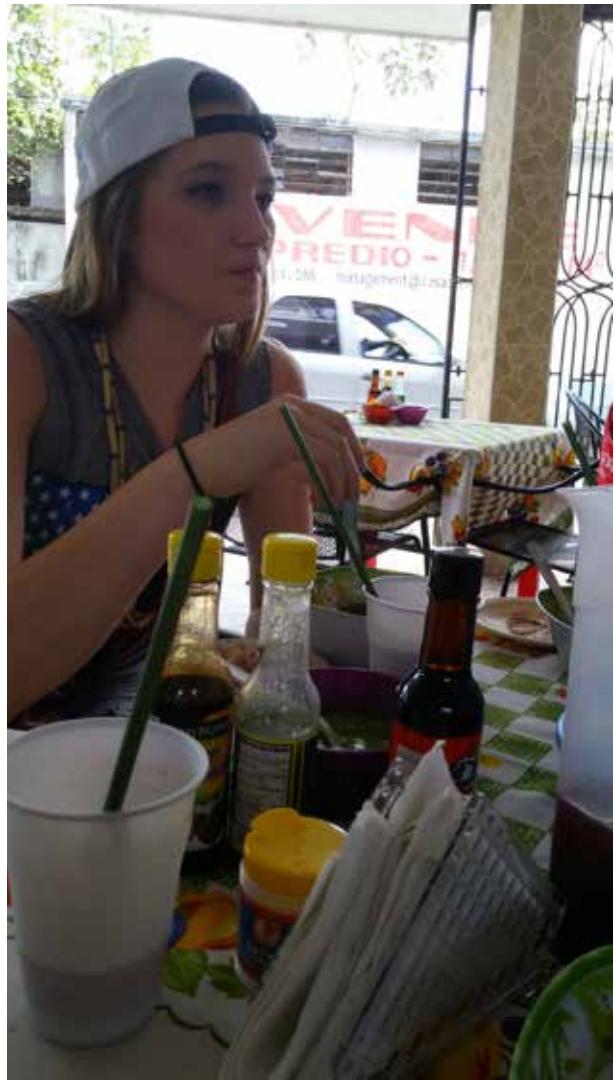
When we had enough of the sun and started to get hungry we headed back to the town market and the taco stalls there.





At the market we did fairly well ordering in Spanish. We got what we were expecting. In Lauren's case that was a torta mar y tierra which translates to a surf & turf sandwich, the contents of which are pictured at right. Braunsen got tacos and some boiled crabs for fifty cents each, Kirk and I played it safe with pork tacos. A great lunch for four, \$20.





Cozumel is a much larger port than Progreso but you still have to pass through shopping hell to get to a taxi. We took off for our favorite restaurant on the island, Las Palmas. It's a little open air place where it's a definite advantage if you can order in Spanish.

They serve a two course meal with your choice of aguas frescas (cool waters) for about \$7 per person. We ordered Jamaica water, made from hibiscus flowers. It's red and kind of sweet but not quite like Kool-Aid.



Everyone but me had pescado diablo (spicy grilled fish) and I had milanesa de puerco (fried pork cutlet). The meal comes with soup, salad, beans and rice. We were totally stuffed so we took a nice long walk down to the main street on the water front. We sat for a bit with a drink and watched the tourists go by.



After paying way too much for a couple of drinks in a tourist bar we headed on down the street to find a liquor store. We discovered that mixing tequila with mango nectar was actually quite good. Of course chasing a shot with beer worked well too.

When everyone had ingested enough happiness we caught a cab back to the cruise port, aka shopping hell and snapped a few pictures before heading back to the ship.

Poor Kirk and Lauren didn't make it to dinner that night but I'm proud to say Braunsen made it, even if he was just a bit green around the edges.





Adiós Mexico!

I certainly hope it's not another six years before I get to travel with Braunsen again. From the age of eleven to twenty-two, he's still my favorite travel buddy. Love you Braunsen!

