

Before we started off with our journey, we had booked a car, a full size car, where 5 people can sit comfortably and travel. The 5 of us who decided to go out for Spring break: Myself, Mrunal Dhond, Ali Akbar, Vatte Srinivas and Praveen Ramanan. We had estimated individual costs and decided the place to go. The place we all decided to go was Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. Its a national park. It is about 900 miles from Manhattan towards south east. We have to cross Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky to reach Tennessee and Smoky mountains is in east Tennessee. So, after reaching Tennessee, we have to travel across the whole breadth of Tennessee. I hope you get the picture. If you don't, take out an atlas, look out for Map of USA and find out where Tennessee is. Smoky mountains is in Tennessee and North Carolina.

What all preparations we have to do before we started off with the journey. We have to book the car, we have to explore the place and see what all are to be seen in the place, talk to some friends, who could know about the place and tell us about some places that we should not miss. We also saw that we have to do hiking and trailing. So, we took first aid kit and a therma-coal box for keeping ice, so that we can buy water and ice and keep water bottles in ice. Apart from that, we have to take care of weather forecast. We took care of almost everything. We also figured out what all to do every day and the extra expense per day. But, we did not expect a few things, things without which a journey is very boring. So, go on and read whatever interesting things we met every day.

March 15th, 2002, Friday:

I did not go to school today. I was all excited about going out and on top of it, I did not have any important work to do. So, I thought I would make some preparations for going out in the evening. So, first, I made some preparations for that night's food. We have to go to Kansas City (KC) in any of our cars ... all 5 of us and then pick up a car from KC, park our car in the parking area in KC airport and drive for 15 hours almost. We had four drivers (all except Mrunal.. he is not yet confident of driving in highways and does not own a car.. all the rest of us own one and are confident of driving). So, I made lemon rice and curd rice for all 5 of us in two ziplock boxes, boxes that can hold food air tight without getting spoilt. Moreover, it was pretty cold, so there was little chance of food getting spoilt. We all decided to go in my car, because, it was the biggest that could hold all of us and also our luggage. Our luggage had back up plans for two more days (original plan was 4 days of journey) and also hiking and trailing gear...like sports shoes and tracks.

So, all geared up, we started off at around 5 PM. We had arranged to pick up the car at KC at around 7 PM (KC is 2 hours from Manhattan). The car was booked under my name, since I was the one above 25 (apart from Mrunal who was anyway not going to drive). There were 3 additional drivers. If you are above 25, in US, you can rent cars at a far cheaper rate than if you are less than 25 years of age. It is considered generally that a person gets married in USA by the age of 25 and gets matured enough to handle a rented car. Some rental car agencies do not even give you car for rent if you or any of your additional drivers are less than 25. So, we went for a rental car agency which can rent car with additional drivers who age is less than 25. Also, this rental car agency accepted student advantage cards. These cards allow students less than 25 to rent cars at lesser rates apart from some other advantages.

So, we all started off at 5 PM. We went towards KC for 28 miles and suddenly my car stopped. What!!! I am surprised now.. why should my car stop suddenly. It wouldn't start, that's it. So, we had to change plans. First, we had to call up the rental car agency that we could be very late, since we are stuck up. Now,

what to do with my car? We have to get it back to Manhattan and also we have to get to KC to get the car and go on with the trip. At the back of my mind, I am still thinking... what is going to be the cost of my car to repair.. etc etc. Ok, we decided that we will tow my car back to Manhattan. Ali called up an agency where he is a member and arranged for my car to be towed to Manhattan. The towing truck will come from the nearest big town, which was Wamego which was half way from Manhattan to the place where we were stuck up. Luckily, we got stuck up in a town and not in the middle of nowhere. We called up back home at Manhattan and asked Ashish to bring his car and Prasad to get Ali's car. The plan was to shift all luggage from my car to Ali's car and then Prasad can go back to Manhattan in Ashish's car. Since it was beginning of spring break, most people were free without any work and could afford to come to do this favour for us. Ashish had enough knowledge about the car mechanics and guessed that it cannot be repaired by him and it would take a mechanic and guestimated the cost. Now, we all waited for the towing truck to come from Wamego. In the meantime, the temperature was dropping down. It was around 7 PM now. It was 32 'F. That is 0 'C. So, all of us had nature calls. We went to answer all our calls one by one at the back yard of a nearby closed shop. Since we were stopped in a small town, named 'St. Mary's' on a Friday evening, no shop was open and the streets were deserted. So, the towing truck came, it took my car and I asked for the truck driver to drop my car at the workshop. I also requested Prasad and Ashish to call up the workshop manager the next day morning so that he can start repairing my car or atleast tell me what's wrong and how much will it cost. That said, we were all geared up again to start over our journey at 8 30 PM. We could do all this because we had three mobile phones among us. Ali, Vatte and Ramana had mobile phones. We realised the advantage of mobile phone and technology. We were informed later that this town was the base of Klu Klux Klan (a white racist organization of the 70s which used to kill blacks.. how scary!)

We are all now travelling in Ali's car now towards KC. We are talking to each other how the trip has started and are convinced that all bad things that are supposed to happen in a trip has already happened. So, we will surely have a good time now. After discussing such things for another hour, we are nearing KC and reach the rental car agency, Dollar, at around 1015 PM. We go out and talk to this lady at the counter and she says that we will be charged atleast 100\$ more than we were originally told when we booked our car. We fought for some time. But we did not have any strength left to fight. Finally, we decided that this is another of Shani's works and he won't trouble us anymore. So we took a premium-car, a better car than we had originally booked for a fair deal. We said to ourselves that we will fight it out after our trip. We were done with the deal and we were given a car, Chrysler Concorde. This car is a very luxurious car. Five people can sit in this car like they were sitting in a sofa. It has so much of leg space also that you will not feel tired of travelling. It has got probably the best luxuries...like CD player, direction map, temperature measurer and innumerable other comforts, apart from great power. The only problem is it drinks like a petrol-o-holic. We got the car at around 11 PM. We drove Ali's car to the near by car parking lot, which will charge us 4\$ per day for the next 5 days. We will have to drop this rental car back with this rental car agency and then we can pick up Ali's car from the car parking lot.

Mar 16, Saturday:

At around 0030 hours, after 90 minutes of taking our car from the car rental agency, we are on our way towards our first big city on our way to the great smokies. This city is St. Louis. I drove the car first for the first 90 minutes. After 90 minutes, we all stopped because we were all hungry. So, we stopped in a rest area and ate the lemon rice and curd rice that I had made. This saved us a

good 50 \$ expenditure on food. All of us had to contribute to saving such small small amount of money during the whole trip, that made the whole trip affordable. After eating curd rice, I could no more hold the steering. I gave off to vatte to drive the car. Mrunal said he will navigate till st. louis, where, we will reach at about 4 AM. St. louis is in Missouri. So, myself, ali and praveen went off to sleep at the back seat and when we woke up we were in st. louis. I just opened my eyes and the watched the great arch of St. louis under the lights of the night. It was all glory. I had visited this place last year in July... and nothing has changed I thought.

We stopped for a while just after crossing st.louis. Vatte wanted to sleep. It was time, the nocturnal animal, ramana, took charge of the car. I was blissful in my sleep all the time, just waking every now and then to pee in the rest area. So, I wake up in the morning and I see ramana still drving the car at 8 in the morning and rest all sleeping. We had crossed all through Missouri and Illinois. We were in kentucky and we were only half an hour from crossing Kentucky also. It was time for breakfast. Kentucky was looking so stupid that we did not want to eat anywhere in kentucky. We all decided we will reach Tennessee and have breakfast. Ali woke up by now and we all went for breakfast at McDonald's in a small town in Tennessee. We were talking that we had driven already for 8 hours and we had crossed atleast 500 miles. We were averaging at around 70 mph. That was good driving.

We had already booked our reservation at a motel in Gatlinburg, which is located at the base of smoky mountain national park. We had used another card called AAA card for getting discounts in the motel. Remember how I told you abuot our plans of saving small small amount of money so that we save a big amuont. Little drops of water make an ocean. We made a splendid example. When at the end, Mrunal was calculating the expense sheet, we found out that we had saved atleast 50\$ per person.

Ali took the steering after breakfast and all we knew was, we were at Gatlinburg at 2 PM... puncutal on time.. for our check-in. We all just had a shower and decided on the plan. First, we went to the official park office and found out information regardnig the places we can visit that day. We had only hours of the day left with us and so we decided that we will go for the drives and not for the hiking and trailing. We were too tired to go out on a hike. So, we went out for a drive on the Cades Cove. Now, I cant explain in detail about each place we went. It will take another 5 days to do that. But, I will make sure that you are with me. A 'cove' is a flat valley amidst a huge mountain range. The cades cove was a historical and scenic drive. We did some driving in the mountain ranges and it was driving in the mountain after driving for long in the mountains. Yes, we have already driven 900 miles that day. Imagine that you are in a town at the base of a huge mountain range. You leave the town and the first thing you see is a mountain range in front of you on all sides. There are scenic drives everywhere. You just wish you stayed there and admired everything. Especially, after staying in the flat plains of kansas, we were enthralled to go out to the mountains. We curbed all our enthusiasm for the next day. Today was too tired a day. We reached back to Gatlinburg after our scenic drive to Cades cove. This is a small town, three streets, full of shops and lively people. We went to an aquarium and spent our evening watching some nice fish and shark. It was around 930 PM when we were done with the aquarium. We just grabbed some for night and slept. We slept with dreams of hiking the great mountains the next day, and what was waiting for us tomorrow. That was a surprise.

Mar 17, sunday:

I had a hazy thought that ramana was talking on the phone. It was true and I was awake. Ramana had woken up early in the morning. He did not wake us up. I saw the time. It was 10 AM already. I was wondering why did ramana not wake us up. We were supposed to leave the place at 9 AM. Before I could ask him why he gave me a vicious smile and looked outside. It was raining as if Indira was angry with menaka that she did not come with him. I just banged myself back to the bed. The next thing we thought were, oh my god! what do we do now. We can't do trailing and hiking in rain. We watched weather forecast in TV. It said it is going to be thunder storms for the next few days. What?? after my car giving troubles, after the rental car agency giving us troubles at night, after driving for 16 hours, after having dreams of hiking and trailing, not this, for heaven's sake.

We started praying that the rain will stop and we will be able to have some fun in our trip. We hoped. Hope is the last thing to die. We thought that its the end, but again, "if its not good, its not the ending, because the ending is always good".

So, finally menaka did agree to go with Indra. The rain stopped at 1 PM and brought back the cheer and spirit in our faces and minds.

What happened next? Await an interesting trip to the smokies in my next email.