

USA Trip 2018

Notes about a 3-week bus trip across USA with COSMOS. Starting at New York, finishing in Los Angeles. Then three days in Phoenix, Arizona and a three-day stopover in Honolulu.

Immigration

When we first arrived at American immigration control in Los Angeles, the queue was HUGE and snaked around a room bigger than the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). Luckily, it only took about an hour. They took our fingerprints and did an iris scan.

The Participants

For bus trip across USA, Ann & Rick and all the other bus passengers. Alison the guide, Dennis the driver. He sold small bottles of water for \$1, which we bought sometimes because the local water was heavily treated.

About the Bus

There were long periods of driving, so we got lots of commentary from the Tour Director and watched DVD's and documentaries on video screens hanging from the roof. There was a toilet on the bus but only for emergencies. Stopped at least every 2 hours.

Total Distance Travelled

Approximately 7,792 km on bus.

About New York (only Manhattan Island)

Good things: Street numbering system (uniform grid of streets and avenues), traffic signals (no buttons and on fixed cycle), Central Park (excellent), Empire State building, 9/11 memorial (excellent), high line public park (former railway line), art galleries and museums (very good), many ethnicities and yellow taxis.

Bad things: Gridlocked traffic (congestion tax coming in 2021 [first city in USA]), glossiness (Times Square), lack of sunshine in some places (too many tall buildings & narrow streets), few pedestrian malls (vehicles rule the city), apart from Central Square few green areas, no bike lanes (in 2018, city officials are attempting to create some but facing massive opposition), too many police cars and ambulances zooming around with sirens, Hop on Hop off bus (very slow), no close sandy beaches, subway confusing for newcomers, the tipping system, added taxes and too many people.

"New York" things we did: Hot dog in Central Park. Went to top of Empire State building. Toured the Rockefeller centre and top of building. A boat trip along the Hudson River, past the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island and around part of Manhattan Island under the Brooklyn, Manhattan and Williamsburg bridges. Gave a good perspective of the landscape and the many bridges to/from the Island.

Accommodation

Most accommodation was budget but adequate.

Best Scenery

The National Parks we visited were:

- **Yellowstone** (Mammoth Springs, Gibbon Falls, boardwalk over geothermal springs, Old Faithful & other geysers, Yellowstone Lake, Artist Point, Bison, Bears, West Thumb). Yellowstone is pristine. Never been logged, subdivided or mined. Wolves were eradicated from the area with none left by the 1920's but have since been reintroduced with great success. No hunting allowed now. However, fishing is allowed at certain times. Viewed herds of bison in the Lamar and Gibbon valleys with some right beside the road. Had 115 bison walk single file past the bus causing a massive traffic jam. Saw a harem of elk and a Grizzly Bear. No moose. Park rangers always around controlling the idiots who get too close to the animals and they also control traffic.
- **Tetons**. Stopped at Jackson Lake Lodge for lunch with exceptional views of the Teton mountains. Stopped at "Jenny Lake" for closer views of the rugged Teton mountains. Went past little hamlets called Moose and Beaver Creek. Then into the town of "Jackson Hole" where we stayed a night. This is the ultimate Western tourist town. Leather gear, cowboy gear, a bar with saddles as the bar seats, and other Western stuff. The elk migrate from Yellowstone to near Jackson Hole in the winter. There had been problems with lots of elk dying, so a special refuge was created for them with feed provided. The male elk lose their antlers whilst in the refuge and they are collected and sold to pay for the feed. Great idea!
- **Bryce Canyon**. Unusual geological features called Hoodoos. Places we visited included "Inspiration Point", "Bryce Point" and "Natural Bridge".
- **The Grand Canyon**.
- **Zion National Park** was the best. You walk beside the Virgin River via a canyon with near vertical canyon walls. There is a road part way up the Canyon, but you cannot drive your own car on it. They have shuttle buses that transport people up and down and they go every few minutes. A great idea. We took the shuttle to the last stop and walked the river canyon walk, about 4.2km. On the way back, I got off the shuttle and walked to the Weeping Rock where water drips down the canyon and over an overhanging rock. We drove out of Zion canyon, via a series of switchbacks and a nearly 2 km tunnel. Soon as we exited the tunnel the landscape changed dramatically, and rocks looked like sliced pancakes

Best Big Town

Chicago. Wide streets and pavements, lots of green areas, a river runs through the city which is beside the huge Lake Michigan. Beats New York by a mile. Did a boat cruise on the Chicago River and Lake Michigan. Walked about 10km around the city visiting various attractions including the lovely riverside walk, Navy Pier, Macys, the Holy Name Cathedral (magnificent inside) and Cable House. Had some apparently famous "Garret Popcorn". Not much different to the caramel popcorn we have back home.

Visited “The Cloud”, a famous public sculpture in Millennium Park. Also called “The Bean”. It was impressive.

Silly things we did.

- In Chicago, I bumped my head coming off a boat & cracked my head on the top of a door. Lucky, I had a hat on but still caused some damage.
- In Chicago, we had a “legendary” “Chicago-style Deep-dish pizza” for dinner one night from Lou Malnati’s Pizzeria. Had to walk 1km to order it, was a 45 min wait to get it, so walked back to hotel. Then walked back to get it and back to hotel eat it. 4 km walk just for a pizza. The pizza place was packed with dozens of people waiting outside for their orders. Not that good anyway and the Pizzeria was very disorganised.
- Got up one night to go to the toilet. Walked out and into a wardrobe, banging my nose.
- Ann washed some clothes, took them out and put them into another washer and washed them again. She thought it was a dryer.
- First day on bus, our large bags were picked up outside our room very early. Ann left her insulin in her large bag. Had to find bags (they were stacked in a lift with everyone else’s), found hers (on the bottom) and retrieved the insulin.
- Forgot to put my phone on silent one night and left it my pants pocket. Got three calls that night, all from robots wanting my opinion about something (it was election time in Australia). After each call I forget to put it on silent.
- Ann lost her sunglasses and bought a new pair. About 4 days later someone found some sunglasses on the bus. Guess who’s they were?
- Ann and others on the bus collected commemorative quarters (25 cents). There is one for each State and some others. They conducted swap meets on the bus and in secret behind closed doors. We noticed them huddled swapping coins and money in the street.

Worst Town

Las Vegas. The city thrives on all things that I either don’t agree with, dislike or disapprove of. Gambling, smoking, consumption of alcohol in public, loud music, excessive lighting, large cars and virtually no interest in conservation of any type. I had to go there to experience it but have no desire to ever go there again.

We were told that Las Vegas has more hotel rooms than the rest of the USA combined.

Things we did in Vegas were:

- A tour of the “strip”. Glossy and too many people. Vegas is designed to suck as much money out of people as possible. Smoking is allowed in Casinos, and if you have any allergy to smoke don’t go in them. The problem is that in most hotels you are forced to walk through the casino to get anywhere.

- One evening, we took the Vegas monorail and watched the fountain display which occurs every half hour outside the Bellagio hotel. It was impressive. Monorail was great. Driverless, good signage, easy to get tickets and fast.
- Dinner in a Brazilian restaurant. Had special room for us. Excellent dinner and well organised. They had this special \$10 beer and all you can drink. One guy on our trip had 5 beers. They lost money on him.
- Went to “Vegas The Show”. 1.5 hours of mixed entertainment. All types of dancing including Can-Can and showgirls, singing, “Rat Pack” and Elvis impersonators and acrobatics. Very good.
- Late one evening we visited Fremont Street in “Lower Vegas”. For about 3 blocks the street is covered by a high canopy. Inside is a mind-numbing extravaganza of flashing lights and loud music. Street performers, casinos, food and billions of people half of them smoking. A zip line inside the canopy allows people to fly over the top of you. At 10 pm they have a laser light show onto the canopy roof. Not for me.
- Not us, but another couple on the trip renewed their vows in one of the marriage chapels.
- One morning we took a helicopter flight to the Western rim of the Grand Canyon and landed near the bottom of the Canyon. Flew near the Hoover Dam, over Lake Meade and very desolated country. Had champagne and a picnic lunch inside a covered area in the canyon. By far the best way to see the Canyon. Does not seem to be as deep when you are in it. Four more helicopters arrived after us doing the same thing.
- In the afternoon, we did a guided tour of the Hoover Dam. Took an hour to drive there and stopped at a museum dedicated to building the Hoover Dam on the way. The Hoover Dam is downstream on the Colorado River from the Grand Canyon and creates Lake Meade. It was interesting. The driver had heaps of bottled water and insisted we take some back with us. I also walked across the newly built bridge above the dam that connects two states.

Food Issues

- Everything about America is big including the food servings. After realising this, we often got one serving and divided it between us.
- Every drink you get has heaps of ice in it. We learnt to ask for no ice.
- The most expensive bottled water in the universe can be obtained in the Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas. \$21 for a 1 litre bottle.
- This is the first bus trip we have been on where we organised most of our own food. There were a few hotels/motels we stayed in where there was complimentary breakfast (often not enough items) and a few excursions to dinners. For breakfast, if there was a cafe close, we went there and had toast & tea. In some places, there was nothing around, so we got cereal and milk in advance and ate in our room. We purchased lunch from places near wherever we stop. Usually sandwiches. Dinner was in a restaurant or fast food outlet in the town we stopped at for the night.

- Near Niagara Falls (in Canada) we stopped for lunch in a quaint market. Nice sandwiches. There was also a very small church there where they have weddings.
- We went to Sizzlers for dinner one night. Too many questions. “What type of fish?”, “do you want baked potato or fries?”, “what salad dressing?”, “do you want the tip to be included on the CC?” and some others I forgot. The food was not as good quality as Australia.
- Stopped at Jackson Lake Lodge for lunch. Were told that the milkshakes there were great, so we bought a “Huckleberry” flavoured one. It was a thick shake!
- Near the top of the Big Horn Mountains we stopped at a lodge for arvo tea. Had delicious pie and coffee.
- In the “Star Valley” we stopped at a small Mormon town called Aston for a morning break. It was a Sunday (Mormons usually have that day off) and the Tour Director had prearranged for the place to open especially for us. It was good until another bus pulled up. Too many people for a small shop.
- “Tipping” is the way waitresses and waiters make a living in America. They are called “servers” and are not subject to any minimum wage laws. Their base wage is very low and tipping supplements their wage. You are expected to add about 20% to the bill which is then given to the server. But do you give it to them in cash or expect the owner to pass the correct amount to them? I could have got into an argument with the Bus Tour Director about this issue, but it seems it is entrenched in American culture.
- Then there are other taxes added on receipts by some States that are varied and nonsensical.

Overrated:

- Broadway Theatre District in New York was dingy and run down. Some people on the bus just had to go to a show on Broadway, even though you can see the same show back home. I could not see the point except for “bragging rights”.
- The street of stars in Hollywood. A bit run down. Lots of trinket shops. Saw Donald Trump’s star. It had been vandalised.
- The “Mall of America”. A massive shopping complex bigger than Texas (and Chadstone). I will admit that it was well laid out.
- Los Angeles. Cars rule the city. Lots of homeless people. A few run-down areas. Others on the bus took bus or train to some of the famous beaches (Santa Monica and Venice) but I think they were a bit disappointed. You are forbidden to drive on some of streets where famous people live.

Best Food

- In Las Vegas, excellent buffet dinner in the “Papus” Brazilian restaurant. Salad buffet and then meats brought to the tables. We had our own room and it was very well organised.
- In the town of Wall and in a shop called the “Wall Drug Store” we had delicious beef sandwiches with mashed potatoes and gravy for lunch.

- At the Crazy Horse memorial, we had a delicious buffet dinner. The roast beef was the best.
- In the town of “Jackson Hole” we went to the “Chuck Wagon Cookout and Western Show”. Taken to and from the cookout and show in old style wagons pulled by horses. Excellent buffet dinner and entertainment including embarrassing members of the audience.
- In Salt Lake City, we went to the “Steakhouse” and had a three-course dinner. It was excellent.
- In a magnificent old lodge at the North rim of the Grand Canyon we had a lovely dinner in the grand dining room. I had venison meatloaf.
- In Phoenix, Arizona, we had lunch in a restaurant attached to the “Wildlife World Zoo”. The ribs were delicious.

Some Spectacular Things

- The Old Faithful Inn near “Old Faithful” geyser. A spectacular wooden structure, the largest in the world. Built in 1905 with unique woodwork.
- The “Old Faithfull” geyser. It erupts every 75 mins and there is a clock predicting every eruption.
- Mount Rushmore with stone carvings of the Presidents.
- The “Crazy Horse” stone carving.
- The Grand Canyon.
- The Hoover Dam.

Not Right

In Phoenix, Arizona, we visited the “Wildlife World Zoo”. The kangaroos were laying down and did not even bother to get up for us even after we came all the way to America to see them. In an animal show, they had a trained Kookaburra and even made it laugh (but not as loud as we hear them) much to amusement of the audience.

Highest Elevation

3010m

Disappointed

We stayed in a magnificent very old lodge at the North rim of the Grand Canyon. Unfortunately, it rained on the way there and overnight. Fog obscured any view of the Canyon and it was the same in the morning. After breakfast, we did a lovely walk overlooking the Canyon. About 30 mins before we left the fog lifted enough to view some of the canyon.

Some Nice and Interesting Places and Things

- The “Corn Palace” in Mitchell, South Dakota. The building is covered in coloured corn cobs (they come in 14 colours) and other grains, with new materials selected and used every year. Were given a talk about the place in the theatre inside
- The town of Madison. Quaint. Visited the Capital building and walked around the farmers market.

- The so called “Badlands”. A few interesting photo stops and stories.
- At a rest stop, an Amish (a strict religious order) lady was selling food and clothes. People on the bus bought most of her food. She had her horse and buggy nearby.
- Salt Lake City. Very clean and well organised.
- The town of Jackson Hole. Modelled on the Wild West. An interesting bar called the Cowboy bar. Town square has 4 arches made from Elk antlers.

Health Issues

- The day before we were due to leave New York (NY), a lady was diagnosed with conjunctivitis. She went to hospital and got some drops which all cost \$1200. Because it is highly contagious, the Tour Director wanted the lady and her partner to stay in NY and fly to the next stop. They did not want to do this and stayed on the bus. Consequently, for a few days she wore dark glasses and disposable gloves and we all had to use sanitiser and avoid touching anything near her. Luckily, nobody else got it.
- Someone started the bus trip with cough and spread it through the bus. At least 5 people had severe symptoms including Ann. One couple who intended doing further touring considered going home early.
- Others had mild coughs and/or congestion including me.
- Someone fell over and damaged their knees.
- Probably other things I did not hear about.
- We both suffered from occasional mild nosebleeds whilst passing through certain areas. Apparently, it is because the air is so dry it dries out the blood vessels in your nose. Very common. Some people get severe bleeds.

They Say, We Say

- We say Toilets, they say Restrooms.
- We say Beanie, they say Toboggans Hat.
- We say Milkshake, they say Thickshake.

Interesting Rides, Museums and Tours

- Did a tour of the historic district of Philadelphia. This is the oldest town in the USA and is where the Declaration of Independence was drafted and signed. Very interesting.
- In Washington DC, we did an evening tour of the JFK performing art centre (very lavish and has the largest room in the world), the Martin Luther memorial (a large stone bust of him with some quotes embedded in stone), toured the memorial parks for WWI & WWII veterans (lots of water fountains), the Lincoln memorial, the Vietnam veteran’s memorial, the Korean veteran’s memorial and finally viewed the White House.
- In Washington DC, we were left near the Smithsonian museums to visit whatever one we desired (there are few of them and all free). We

decided to go through the Arts first and then the Natural History one. Spent 1.5hrs. They were all excellent.

- Near Minneapolis, inside the “Mall of America”, we did the “Fly over America” experience. Strapped into seats that move and whilst watching a massive screen, you appear to fly over interesting places in America. Complete with water (through clouds) and smoke (following an old plane) effects. It was excellent.
- In Cody (named after William Cody alias Buffalo Bill), we visited the Buffalo Bill Museum. It was excellent, especially the section on Native Americans, although a bit depressing. Had 2 hours, but that would not have been enough time, so we quickly walked the exhibits and even that took 1.5 hours.
- In Detroit, we visited the Henry Ford museum which was excellent. Not only cars, but heaps of other stuff. Had the car that President Kennedy was assassinated in and the bus where in the 1950’s a coloured lady called Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person, causing a national outrage and what became the start of the civil rights movement. Had coffee in an old-style diner.
- Salt Lake City is the home of the Mormon religion. About 80% of the population is Mormon. We went to the visitors centre and 2 sisters took us on guided tour of the Temple centre. It was interesting. Learnt a lot about the Mormon religion. Lots of homeless people here because the Mormons are very family oriented and generous. They are not that keen on alcohol and caffeine, so there is limited availability for these items.
- In Los Angeles, we did the Warner Brothers Studio tour. Looked through buildings containing archived costumes, building items and miscellaneous items. Toured a few sets and sat in the “Friends” café. Excellent.
- Pearl Harbour in Honolulu. Had guided tour through museums using audio guide. Watched 30min film. Took boat to near the Arizona memorial. Unable to go onto memorial due to maintenance works. It was extremely interesting, depressing and emotional.
- In Honolulu, we did a bus tour around the island. Left at 9.00. The North shore has some of the best surfing beaches in the world and we were shown many of the best spots. Stopped at the Polynesian Cultural Centre where we had a big lunch and listened to a spiel by one of people there. Attempted to teach us hula dancing. Did a canoe trip around the centre. Had an ice cream with pineapple in it. Not bad. Stopped at a macadamia nut centre and tasted macadamia flavoured coffee. The rest of the afternoon we took a coast road back to Waikiki stopping numerous times to enjoy the views and history issues. Got back 6.00. 13 hours of sightseeing. An interesting day.

Unexpected

Despite America being the “gun country” we did not see one gun. Even in Phoenix Arizona, where it is legal to openly carry a gun in full view, we did not see anyone doing this.

Tacky

- The gift shop near Niagara Falls.
- Passed by the “Big Rock Candy Mountain”. It’s a colourful mountain in a pass through the Sevier mountains and there is a song about it. People have seized on the name and there is resort there but it’s not that big and a bit tacky.
- Passed through the town of Circleville. Named because it is surrounded by high mountains. It was the birthplace of “Butch Cassidy”. They even have the “original” house he lived in.

Just OK

- In Honolulu, we went to the “Chiefs Luau”. Took 2.5 hours to get there because of traffic. Usually takes 45 mins in peak period and only 30 to get back. Consequently, we missed out on some activities that were offered before the main event. Had a buffet dinner, then dancing, singing and a fire show islander style. Was OK but done similar stuff before.
- On the way to Las Angeles, we stopped at the Calico Ghost Village for about an hour.

Dodgy Town

Stayed 2 nights in Minneapolis, the home of Target stores, birthplace of Prince and Bob Dylan. Had to go into the Target store in the town. Bit weird, because there was a large supermarket inside. Bit dodgy around the Target store at night. We did visit an interesting sculpture park and walked a bridge across the Mississippi River.

Not Impressed

- Niagara Falls. Compared to Iguassu and Victoria falls it is crap. Virtually no infrastructure and rather small. We did a boat cruise around the base of the falls wearing pink ponchos and, in the evening, viewed Niagara Falls with coloured lights. Bit crappy. Nearby the falls are heaps of places offering glossy entertainment with flashing lights and loud music. As we drove into Niagara Falls, we watched a film called “Niagara”, starring Marilyn Monroe.
- The Waikiki area in Honolulu. High-rise hotels line the shore in Waikiki, an area known for its popular surf beach. Designer fashion stores line Kalakaua Avenue and nearby streets, and the area buzzes after dark with waterside cocktail bars and eateries. The streets were very crowded, and you could not hear yourself think in some of the eateries. Not much different to Surfers Paradise in Queensland. So why fly all the way Honolulu?
- Disappointed with our greeting in Honolulu. We were supposed to be meet at the airport, but this did not happen. I had to chase someone, and we were eventually directed to a shuttle bus. Whilst waiting for the shuttle, a lady supplied us with leis. I expected flowers but they were made of beads.

- Every major road near a town is clogged with cars, cars, more cars, trucks, trucks and more trucks and it does not matter how many lanes they are all clogged.

Lost

- Laptop (cannot remember who lost it).
- Camera (cannot remember who lost it).
- In Honolulu we visited “Duke Pineapples” and did a train ride around the plantation. Lost one of our drink bottles when it slid off the train and into the bush.

States, Territories and Provinces in America and Canada we travelled through

New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Washington D. C., Niagara Falls, Ontario, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, California.

Trip Rating

8 out of 10.