Route 50 Ways to See the Country

idway through our weeklong cross-country drive last September from Ocean City, Md., to San Francisco, we were feeling saddle sore. Lenore, oscillatory of the same start of Route 50 in downtown O.C. A creeping street cleaner slowed our access, which we chose to read as a positive omen. Bill and I veered our bug-caked rental car off U.S. Route 50 and eased onto Main Street, Hutchinson, Kan. At a junk shop, from a shelf of assorted

animals, we found a road-trip mascot, a plastic donkey straining against a harness a hauling ass. How fitting. We were shoehorning our

coast-to-coast trip into seven 500-mile days, while snatching scraps of spare time to eyeball a few local wonders. Our mission was to drive the entire 3,200mile length of Route 50, a rough-spun asphalt thread stretching across the nation's midriff.

After a Saturday night of carnival delights in Ocean City, we rose early, kicked the engine and drove to the cleaner slowed our access, which we chose to read as a

But the first day was disconcerting, full of jerking stops at almost everything that caught our interest: fruit stands, antiques stores. mirrored balls, farm scenes, tourist info centers, unusual bridge abutments. A paltry 350 miles at day's end in Bridgeport, W.Va.. forced us to adopt a discipline for the rest

of the trip: We'd allow ourselves two or three

major diversions per day, plus a few curiosity stops, which should enable us to realize our goal of spanning the continent in a week.

We had to drop some ballast. The first thing to go: three squares a day. We'd save time, we decided, by eating only two big meals a day. So, after a light predawn

breakfast from the cooler, we buckled up and drove for a few hours, finding brunch at a small-town diner. A larger meal in the early evening allowed us time for a walk and an hour of night driving before bed.

Our initial plan was to sleep in what we had imagined would be charming old motor courts, but after a few glimpses of mildewed rooms, exhausted mattresses, shag carpeting and greasy wood paneling, we opted for the stainless chain motels found near 50's intersections with any interstate highway. We tried a few bed-and-breakfasts. too, but generally had poor luck with our last-minute

We never regretted our choice of highway. Unlike a monotonous freeway, Route 50 shifts its character with every click of the odometer. It can be a slim, lonely filament, beaded with small towns untainted with franchises, or it can swell into a corpulent, tricked-out

thoroughfare, pandering to our least wholesome desires for fast food, cheap trinkets and high speeds.

The highway dragged us away from the sandy shores of Maryland and shot us across the loamy Atlantic Coastal Plain through the heart of D.C., sliding between the White House and the Washington Monument as Constitution Avenue. It carried us over the Potomac. crept across the Piedmont in Virginia, twisted through the Alleghenies, rolled through southern Ohio and stretched out through the rich, flat farmlands of southern Indiana and Illinois.

After crossing the Mississippi River at St. Louis, we swooped through the limey hills of Missouri and into the tree-sparse farmlands of eastern Kansas, where we thought A rental car, three pals and seven days of blacktop

we'd make up some time—a miscalculation. The Kansas State Fair proved a rich distraction, with its ultra-patriotic rodeo and the proud, shrieking champions in the poultry barn. After several hours, we wrenched ourselves back to the road and settled into the flat, agricultural

groove of the Arkansas River Valley, following 50 into the higher plains and dry rangelands of western Kansas and eastern Colorado.

Hugging the Arkansas River deep into the Rockies, we abandoned the river's headwaters to cross 11,312-foot Monarch Pass, the route's highest point, at the Continental Divide. Streaking down out of the mountains, we followed the old "Rainbow Route" into the widening Gunnison River Valley until it hit the Colorado River at Grand

Junction, a town full of art galleries and downtown public sculpture. Here, 50 teams up with Interstate 70 for a bolt through the deserts, swells and ranges of eastern Utah. This stretch was a window-full of eye candy, with its rainbow-colored mesas and canyons.

After crossing the mountains of central Utah, we split from the freeways and crossed the dessicated Sevier Desert, haunted by gaunt cattle lingering by the roadside. We traversed the Confusion Range, paid a visit to rugged Great Basin National Park, and began a 400-mile roller-coaster ride through the ranges and basins of Nevada. which officially named its stretch of Route 50 "The Loneliest Road in America."

From the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, 50 climbs up to and skirts the forested, granite edges of Lake Tahoe, tunnels through a sacred Washoe Indian site (Cave Rock) and then slides down the wetter side of the Sierra into

California's flat, hot Sacramento Valley. Route 50 officially ends in Sacramento as it's absorbed by Interstate 80. But the old highway once continued westward to the coast. so we pressed on, over dry oak-savannah hills into cool, damp San Francisco.

Crossing the Bay Bridge, we picked up Geary Street west through the city, finally hitting the Pacific Ocean at Point Lobos. A vivid sunset smeared the waves blue and

A week on the road suddenly seemed too fleeting. The ever-changing swath through America had streaked past as a rocking blur, hypnotizing us with the drone and hiss of engine and pavement. The three of us agreed—we still felt like driving on.

Text and graphic by Patterson Clark — The Washington Post Watch the coast-to-coast video of the trip at www.washingtonpost.com/travel. Getting There

Slow down. Take two or three weeks to cross the country, and really savor the drive. Wander off track, chat with the locals, smell the vegetation.

If you're hesitant to trot your own car back and forth across the country, or simply don't have a lot of time, consider renting a car. We rented a Buick LeSabre (smooth ride, but lots of dive and squat) for \$460 a week from National Car Rental. A few miles down the road, we discovered that the oil was very low. The wheels were out of alignment, too, but we got used to it. When we dropped off the car, National gave us a credit for the oil we bought.

For a return flight back, look for one-way ticket deals. JetBlue flew us from Oakland to Dulles for \$100 each.

