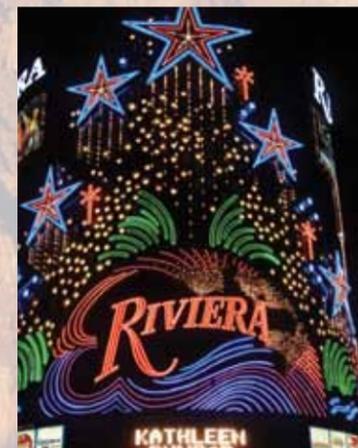
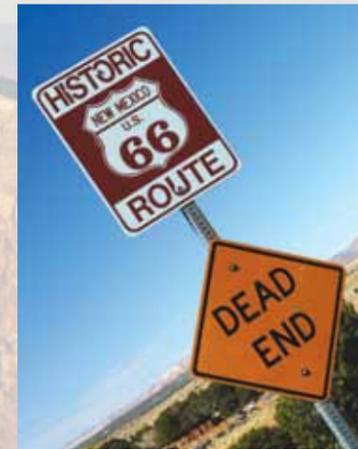


finding yourself in the great south-west



Road trips don't come any more vivid or memorable than a journey through the USA's most seminal desert landscape.

STORY | PHOTOS KIM WILDMAN

'DEAD END. GPSs are wrong!' blears the giant billboard in the front of our rental car. "I told you the GPS was leading us in the wrong direction," I snap at my parents, impatiently brandishing the road map I'd picked up at the airport.

The last time I remember going on vacation with my parents was when I was 10, packed into the back of the Holden station wagon along with my three siblings for a road-trip down the Pacific Highway to see our relatives in Melbourne. Fast forward some 30 years and here I am in the back of a rental car an hour outside Albuquerque, USA, wondering 'what am I doing?'

We'd both visited the States before, but never together and never to the South-West. An invitation to a friend's wedding in Santa Fe, New Mexico, however, soon inspired a Griswold-esque, two week, cross-country family road-trip taking in some of the South-West's greatest natural sights.

After a weekend of wedding festivities, we briefly detoured south to marvel at the oddity that is UFO-obsessed Roswell and explore the gleaming snow-white dunes of White Sands National Monument, before finding ourselves back in Albuquerque joining America's legendary Route 66 for our own rock 'n' roll journey west across New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada to Las Vegas. As we set off I can't help but hum, 'Get your kicks on Route 66'.

Crossing into Arizona, we divert north to Monument Valley. Straddling the

“
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Utah/Arizona border, it looms large in Wild West road-trip fantasies with the towering flame-red sandstone buttes and spires serving as the Technicolor cinematic setting for countless Hollywood films, from John Ford's 1956 classic western *The Searchers* to *Forrest Gump* and *Thelma and Louise*. Yet no matter how many times I had seen them on film, as the monolithic buttes appeared on the horizon I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

Entering the valley we self-drive the 27 km rutted red dirt road passing enormous rocks bearing names such as Elephant Butte, Three Sisters and Totem Pole. The highlight of the circuit – at least for Dad and I – was John Ford's Point, a rocky outcrop that offers a spectacular view of the northern half of the valley which played a starring role in many of his movies. Excitedly, Dad and I walk to the viewpoint, draw our cameras and shoot the Wild West of our imaginations.

From Monument Valley, we head south-east to the Grand Canyon. One of the seven natural wonders of the world, the gaping 1.6 km deep canyon swathes its way 446 km across northern Arizona. Sitting on the edge of the rim, looking out over the vast chasm, we watch mesmerized as the layers of red rocks intensified and then dissolved into soft lavenders and misty blues as the sun set.

That night we bunk down in Williams, a railroad town on Route 66 full of

MAIN IMAGE: GRAND CANYON AT SUNSET. ROUTE 66 SIGN, ARIZONA. RIVIERA, LAS VEGAS. STRINGS OF CHILLI, NEW MEXICO.



nostalgic old-style diners and fading motels with wonderful neon signs, and tuck into a delicious juicy steak at Rod's Steak House. Back out on the street, music spills from a rustic Wild West themed bar, enticing us in. Taking a seat around an outdoor campfire, Mum and I wait as Dad disappears inside the bar's swinging saloon doors to order us a drink. He soon returns with two beers for himself and I and a wine for Mum unwittingly served in a glass jar.

"I can't drink out of that," she cries indignantly. "Wine's served in a wine glass, not a jam jar!" "They didn't have wine glasses in the Wild West," I try to appease her, stifling a laugh.

Next morning as we're loading the car, Mum produces the jam jar from the inside her handbag. Dad and I stop mid-packing and look at her aghast. "No-one at home will believe I had to drink wine from a jam jar, so I had to take it," she smiles sardonically, hopping into the front passenger's seat.

From Williams, we continue along Route 66 to Kingman before turning north to Las Vegas. While the city attracts thousands of visitors each

year eager to strike their luck (the average tourist apparently loses US\$500 gambling in Vegas), after the raw beauty of the South-West, the cavernous casinos with their blinking neon lights seem excessive. So I save my money and seek refuge from the monotonous 'ka-ching' of the slot machines in our room.

Two days later, as we let the GPS guide us through the confusion of Vegas' highways and motorways to the airport, I am suddenly sad our family road-trip has come to an end. While we had taken many wrong turns on our journey as we had done throughout our parent-child relationship, in spite of our arguments along the way, what we did find was a new respect for each other.

How to get there: Qantas (13 1313 or visit www.qantas.com.au) offers connecting flights from Brisbane to Las Vegas, Nevada, via Auckland and Los Angeles. United Airlines runs regular domestic flights from Las Vegas to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Avis (www.avis.com) and Hertz (www.hertz.com) both have offices in Albuquerque International Airport.

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MAIN IMAGE: WESTERN RIM OF THE GRAND CANYON. HIGHWAY SUNSET, ARIZONA. CLASSIC DINER, NEW MEXICO. JOHN FORD'S POINT, MONUMENT VALLEY, UTAH/ARIZONA. CIRCUS CIRCUS CASINO, LAS VEGAS.

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