

POSTCARD FROM A NON-VACATION

Couple miss flight to Sante Fe, land in attractions close to home

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This is the story of a vacation that never happened.

It started at the Detroit airport, right about the time my fiance and I missed our flight to Sante Fe for reasons that were beyond our control. (Well, mostly.)

Unable to catch another weekend flight — they could guarantee us only so far as Cincinnati — we were forced to drive back to Toledo and re-evaluate our plans for the next three days.

Did we cry? No.

Did we pout? No.

Did we stop to comfort ourselves with greasy pizza? We most certainly did.

One of the first things we did was agree on some ground rules: Officially, we were still on vacation, and we would act like it. We would call no one to let them know of our misfortune. We would use this as an opportunity to explore the attractions around us that we'd never made time for before.

The rest of the extended weekend proved — a little to the surprise of both of us — just how much fun you can have within 150 miles of Toledo. We hit three states, traveled more than 600 miles, and never had to stay in a hotel.

Day 1 involved a leisurely drive to northeastern Indiana for a canoe trip on the Pigeon River.

People complain about how flat and boring it is to drive the Ohio Turnpike, and they're right. So we took the road less traveled by, U.S. 20 in this case, which took a parallel path through lovely little towns, past roadside produce stands and antique shops, and right by a church whose sign read, "Stop Drop & Roll Will Not Work in Hell."

Even better, the road took us almost the entire way to little Mongo, Ind., 100 miles west of Toledo. (I selected the canoe livery here, west of Angola, because of how cool the town's name sounds.)

There, we paddled our way through a relaxing four-mile canoe trip down the Pigeon River. The secluded waterway flows through a state fish and wildlife area, and it was lovely to see turtles, fish, and all sorts of birds along our journey. The bugs were a bit of a pest but other people were not, as most of the time we floated past lily pads and fallen trees unbothered by humanity.

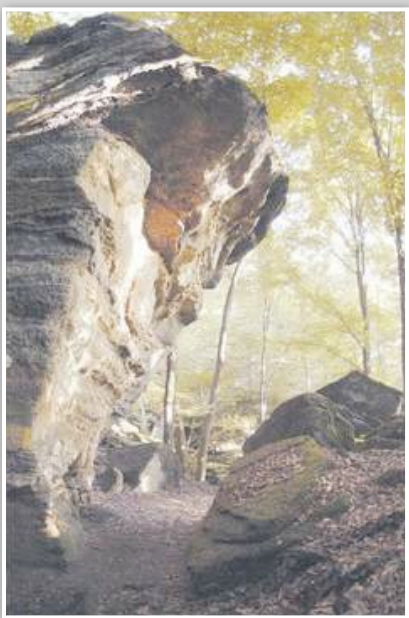
The river isn't far from Pokagon State Park, which offers boating, fishing, and swimming in the summer and a toboggan run in the winter. We didn't make it to the park this time, but I made a mental note as we headed home to come back with the snow.

The highlight of our "vacation" had to be Day 2, when we trekked east to Nelson-Kennedy Ledges State Park. Located east of Aurora, the park is a hiker's paradise, with rugged cliffs and trails that snake through rock formations with names such as "Devil's Icebox" and "Old Maid's Kitchen."

The jumbled rocks are the result of erosion, but it looks more like a giant came through the forest and made the boulders his personal building blocks.



A sunset from the waterfront in downtown Sandusky. (JEN ROHER)



Nelson-Kennedy Ledges State Park in northeast Ohio is a hiker's paradise, with rugged cliffs and trails through rock formations. (MIKE WILLIAMS/ODNR)

I grew up not too far from the park and remember with glee all the times my brothers and I scrambled up and down the craggy rocks, always looking for a new way down into a little cave or mini-canyon, always trying to squeeze through a little crevice to climb back out.

Those pleasures remain as an adult, though some of the crevices seemed a bit smaller this time around. We enjoyed the cool refreshment of a pair of small waterfalls and gaped in awe as trees miraculously clung to the sides of boulders.

We left the park exhausted and, after making a very necessary stop for ice cream cones, made our way back to Toledo by way of Sandusky. Forget about Cedar Point — we came for a lakeside view of the sunset.

It was dazzling as we walked along the pier at the edge of the town's historical waterfront. Red, yellow, and orange spilled out of the sky as the sun sank lower and lower until it kissed Lake Erie.

We had front-row seats for the show from a park bench at the end of the pier, where we could alternate between watching people fish under the setting sun and following the path of amusement park roller coasters visible in the distance.

On Day 3, we ventured north to Ann Arbor. Sure, you're thinking, only a Toledoan would consider a trip to Trader Joe's as a vacation activity. (And yes, we did go there. I got some tasty corn salsa.)

But there's more to the spritely town than deluxe grocery stores, great restaurants, and streets of cute shops. We caught a film at the Michigan

Theater, an opulent movie house that's home to a 1927 Barton Theater Pipe Organ that is played regularly before shows.

We also kept an eye out for the "fairy doors" that have popped up around the entranceways of numerous downtown businesses. Built into doors or walls, the whimsical creations have tiny doors with intricately detailed tiny door frames.

At first I thought: maybe a little fairy dust could have helped us find our way to Sante Fe. By the time the night was over, though, I was sure that we'd found just as much magic on vacation without leaving home.

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[< previous](#)

[next >](#)