



“STLLLA” our 25’ Airstream trailer and “BIGRBOB” her tow vehicle, sit below the cliffs above Badwater Basin in Death Valley, CA - elevation **282’** below sea level. Mount Whitney, elevation **14,505’**, lies only 84 miles away. 2021 was certainly a year of lows and highs, but we close the year with deep gratitude for our health and the health of our loved ones.

We travelled a lot this year. 9 trips covering 9,612 miles. With STLLLA we’ve now taken 42 trips for a total of 30,293 miles. Being able to bring our accommodations (and kitchen), and choosing uncrowded places to stay, makes these experiences feel not only fun and comfortable, but relatively safe.

Our first journey, in mid-January, was to the Sonora desert, to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, only a few miles from the Mexico border. We were amazed by the beauty and the triumph of Nature on display. In the words of a visiting Saudi Arabian prince “This is not a desert... this is a garden.” Inspired by our grand-daughter, Kara, who has earned 5 National Park Junior Ranger badges, Danielle and I read the information guide, completed the field studies, and earned ourselves Desert Ranger badges 😊



Above: Twin Peaks Campground, site 146 | Arch Rock, Ajo Mountain Drive | Organ Pipe Cactus | Desert Ranger badge

Making our way home, we stopped briefly in Gilbert AZ to visit our niece, Chelsea, her husband, Justine, and their 8-month-old son, Hudson. The newest Hoese, Haley Jeanne, was born November 30. We spent the night at White Tank Mountain Regional Park. Before leaving we hiked one of the many trails, and even spotted a “squadron” of javelinas! We’d love to return to this beautiful park. Our next overnight stop was at Cattail State Park along the Colorado River. Being so close to Lake Havasu City, we made the ‘obligatory’ tourist-y drive into town to see the relocated from England and rebuilt London Bridge. Really, not much to look at, but an impressive undertaking nonetheless.





Above: Justin, Danielle, Hudson, and Chelsea | Ironwood Trail, White Tank Mountain Regional Park | Saguaro Cactus

Before we moved to Nevada, the idea of visiting Death Valley would have been quite low on our vacations wish list. But we've come to really appreciate the beauty and magnificence of the deserts.

This trip we decided to route our return home through Death Valley National Park and it was one awe-inspiring view after another. Early morning light at Zabriskie Point revealed a sweeping vista of unexpected colors and textures, over mountains and salt flats. Near the west exit, we stopped at Padre Point, overlooking Rainbow Canyon. Nicknamed "Star Wars" Canyon, US Navy fighter pilots challenge their nerves and piloting skills, a la Luke Skywalker, while flying at over 600 mph just below the twisty canyon rim. No F-18s flew through while we were there.

So much that we didn't have time to see: Dante's View, Artist's Palette, perhaps the Racetrack. Must return – especially with the grandkids.



Above: Zabriskie Point, overlooking Badwater Basin | Rainbow Canyon, aka "Star Wars" Canyon

In June, we made our second long trip of the year. We met Danielle's sister, Lisa, and her husband, Frank, who were travelling the western states in their 36' RV. We took Highway 50, which Life magazine labelled "The Loneliest Road in America" to Baker, Nevada. From there, our intended destination, Great Basin National Park is only a short distance. The next day we hiked the 2-mile trail to Stella Lake, elevation 10,400'. We wanted to visit the Lehman Caves, but reservations are required and are filled months in advance – next time...





Above (Great Basin National Park): Stella Lake Trail | Lisa and Danielle - Stella Lake | Wheeler Peak

We might have stayed longer to explore more of Great Basin National Park, but the heat wave there and across the western states had us seeking cooler temperatures in Idaho.

Heading north, we first spent two nights at Welcome Station RV Park, a little oasis with a lovely stream flowing through the property. While there we made a day trip to nearby Angel Lake, elevation 8378'. After a night in Twin Falls, we continued north and settled in for 3 nights at the White Knob RV Park in Mackay, Idaho.



Above: Angel Lake | Shoshone Falls, Twin Falls, ID

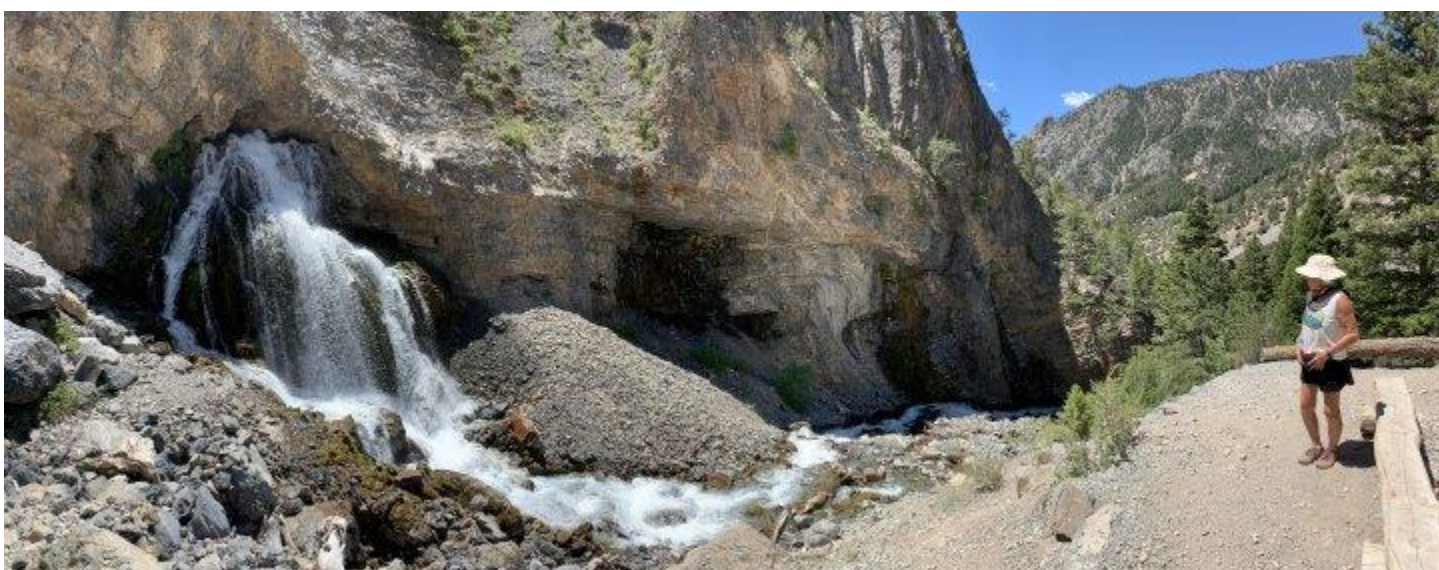
A highlight of our stay in Mackay (pronounced "Mackee") was a hike up Lower Cedar Creek canyon. One of the prettiest hikes we've made anywhere. Moderately difficult, especially at the end where there is a relatively steep vertical ascent, it culminates at this amazing waterfall that literally (almost Bibilically) gushes forth from a crack in the face of a granite wall! Michael ventured over to the left-side of the falls, where a stream of (refreshingly!) cold water cascaded over him. We did a short *misogi/shin kokyū* practice; then sat on a small wooden bench to the side of the falls for a light snack before heading back.

The next day we bade farewell to Frank and Lisa, promising to meet up again, somewhere, in September, and started our journey home. Our route west followed scenic mountain roadways along the Salmon and Payette Rivers.





Above: Lower Cedar Creek Trail | Pool – Lower Cedar Creek | Danielle cools her feet in the creek after the 3-mile hike



Above: Lower Cedar Creek Falls

Interwoven between these longer trips we made two shorter trips (in April and August) to Monterey. We also went down to Yucaipa for a nephew's wedding in June.

In mid-July, with temperatures above 102F, we decided to head up into the mountains for 10-days of R&R at Blue Lakes.

Several days after we set up camp, the Tamarack fire (after being ignored by Cal-Fire for weeks!) broke out about 8 miles to the northeast. We are essentially 'off-the-grid' up there. Prevailing winds kept the skies clear at Blue Lakes, so the fire grew for several days before we were even aware of it. Michael made a solo hike up to Granite Lake and took a photo of the expanding fire. Another photo that Michael took from Upper Blue Lake was later used on the front page of the local newspaper. Two days later, just as we were finishing breakfast, we heard helicopters flying low overhead with loudspeakers blaring out "Evacuate immediately!" We broke camp in record time! Arriving home, about 30 minutes later, we found the roads and sidewalks covered in ash and soot, the skies filled with smoke, and the AQI at 500! Our "summer of smoke and fire" had begun ☹️. Coming within 8.5 miles of our home, the Tamarack Fire eventually burned over 68,000 acres before it was contained.

Almost concurrently, the Dixie Fire raged out of control, ultimately consuming almost 1 million acres. Although 100 miles to the northwest, smoke from that fire poured into our valley for months.





Above: Blue Lakes, Middle Creek Expansion Campground | Upper Blue Lake | Danielle catching some hammock time



Above: Tamarack Fire, view east from Granite Lake | helicopter flies toward the fire, view southwest from our backyard

August 14: the Caldor Fire, which eventually burned over 220,000 acres, erupted 42 miles southwest of us. Three days later, the first tendrils of smoke appeared above our valley, like an invading, angry 'smoke dragon'. By 4pm, the thick smoke had turned day into **DARK** night. Street lights automatically came on, cars drove with headlights, farmers reported that their chickens fell asleep where they stood. Before it was contained, it burned to within 15 miles west of our home. Hoping to find fresher air, we headed to West Yellowstone, MT to meet up with Lisa and Frank. We didn't even visit Yellowstone Park; we simply relaxed for 10 days. Below, right: Danielle along the Madison River, Montana.





By late October the fires had been contained and the air had cleared. Our last big trip of the year was to Pinnacles National Park. We had visited the west side of the park a few times when we lived in Monterey, but never the east side, which is where the campgrounds are located. We loved walking the trails and exploring the talus caves. We've already reserved a return trip for this coming April; with luck the wildflowers will be in full bloom!

While we were in the area, we made a quick trip to Monterey. Michael met with his boss at SHOP.COM to let him know that he is planning to fully retire at the end of March, after more than 24 years with the company and more than 50 years as a software engineer.



Above: Pinnacles National Park, Bear Gulch Trail | exploring Bear Gulch Talus Cave || Monterey Plaza, Monterey

Although it might not seem to be the case, with all of our travelling, we do **LOVE** our home. We arise to some of the most beautiful sunrises; and our days close with awesome sunsets silhouetted by the majestic Sierras. Nature celebrates the occasional rainfall with gorgeous rainbows.

In May, we finally finished the backyard landscaping. Michael transported and spread hundreds of pounds (tons?!) of gravel to complete the dry-scaping. When it came time for the final step, adding the lawn, we went ahead and had sod installed by a landscaper.

In July, long-time close friend Sheila Haddad and her husband visited us. We made the 40-minute drive up to Silver Lake and had a nice lunch at Kit Carson Lodge. That same month, our across-the-street neighbors, Michelle and Jerome, who were the first to welcome us (before we even moved), invited us over for their wedding ceremony in their backyard.



Above: rainbow, backyard | with Sheila and Jeff at Kit Carson Lodge | neighbors Jerome and Michelle



Throughout the year we stayed connected with distant family and friends via Zoom and FaceTime. We continued to participate in various Aikido and Aikibojitsu activities throughout the year, primarily through Zoom, including a three-times-weekly morning *misogi/shin kokyū* practice led by our good friend and teacher, Linda Holiday, 7<sup>th</sup> Dan. We even joined in while travelling, which earned STLLLA the nickname “the *misogi*-mobile.” ☺

In early August, our son Colin and his wife Jaclyn lost the very favorable lease on the 4-bedroom 2-bath North Highlands home they were living in. Skyrocketing rents forced them to consider different alternatives. For now, needing to remain in the area for their work, they, their four children, and their dog are living in a 26-foot ‘bunk-house’ travel trailer. They have a Thousand Trails membership which lets them stay up to 21 days at participating RV parks. Ultimately, they hope to move to, and build a home on, their property near Clark Fork, Idaho.

Throughout the year we made several trips to visit them. In June, we met at a park in Truckee to celebrate Brennan’s 6<sup>th</sup> birthday. Danielle created a “Monster Truck” birthday cake for him. In August we met at a park in North Highlands to celebrate Keeva’s 4<sup>th</sup> birthday. We hired a local ballon-ista to entertain the grandkids and Danielle baked a special chocolate cake. In October we rendezvoused twice in South Lake Tahoe to celebrate Jaclyn and Aria’s (11<sup>th</sup>) co-birthdays, and Kara’s 9<sup>th</sup> birthday. Danielle, birthday cake chef *par excellence*, made pumpkin cheesecakes for each occasion.



Above (left to right): Brennan | Keeva and Jaclyn | Aria and Jaclyn | Kara and Brennan

Below: Kara, Keeva, the “Ballon-ista”, Brennan, Aria | Kara, Jaclyn, Aria, Keeva, Colin, Brennan, Danielle, Michael



In addition, several of the grandkids stayed with us for short visits throughout the year. Aria and Kara visited in March, during which, between cooking ‘classes’, Danielle taught them some basic self-defense. Keeva and Aria visited in August and spent a lot of time with various art projects. Aria and Kara were here for Halloween and had fun carving pumpkins,



dressing up in costumes, and trick-or-treating. They also visited just before Christmas and we worked with them on making their Christmas gifts. The girls collaborated on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of “Aria and Kara’s Creative Cookbook”, with 3 recipes and hand-drawn decorative borders. They also practiced playing the kantele and the organ, recording solos and duets of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” and “The Skye Boat Song” which we put onto thumb drives and then into tiny, cloth purses which they had decorated. Aria has a naturally beautiful voice. Kara is exceptionally gifted with musical instruments, quickly learning proper fingering on both the kantele and the organ. She even taught herself to play the melody on the organ pedal board! To help nurture her interest and natural ability in music, the grandparents all chipped in and bought her an 11-string kantele for her birthday/Christmas present.



Above: Keeva the artist | Aria the elf, Kara the cop | way too much sugar! | Kara and Aria, Christmas duet

We embrace 2021 with gratitude for the many blessings we received. We lift our hearts with joy for the new year, in faith, hope and courage. We feel the connection with you and envision being able to once again embrace our families and friends. Blessings for peace, health, and joy in abundance.

Love,  
Michael & Danielle



Above: sunset colors | rainbow points to Sierra gold? | Kara and Aria hail a low-flying hot air balloon