

Travel

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DAVID COBBING FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
THREE STATES, THREE DAYS A rear-view mirror reflects the Teton Mountains in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

On the Road in Big Sky Country

A car-averse traveler finds an exhilarating freedom in the driver's seat, as the miles roll by in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho.

By STEPHANIE ROSENBLUM

If you long to answer the call of the open road but lack experience behind the wheel, look no further than the rental lot at Billings Logan International Airport in Montana.

On this sleepy strip of pavement you can spend a leisurely half-hour trying to deactivate the electronic parking brake you unwittingly turned on; practice a few turns to help ensure you won't deep-six anyone; and attempt to allay the rising trepidation of your fellow traveler. Then, perhaps you will

do as I did: drive (the wrong way) into town for lunch at the Burger Dive, a 1950s-style diner with chrome-trim chairs, burgers with names like the "Outlaw" and tattooed employees who look as if they'd just stepped off the L train from Brooklyn.

Thus, with a side of onion rings, began my all-American road trip, the one most romantics take when they're 22 and there's "no-where to go but everywhere" as Sal Paradise put it in Jack Kerouac's "On the Road."

I've had a driver's license for years, but in New York City the miles I log are on foot.

Besides, I had never understood people's fascination with driving. A car, in my mind, was merely a means to move from here to there, a burden to its owner and the environment, and potentially a way to get hurt or do harm.

Yet the remote, roughbewn beauty of the West has beckoned since I was a teenager. Who can say why you finally decide to do a thing?

On a cool June morning, I slid into the driver's seat. The plan was to travel from the peaks of the Beartooth Range in Mon-

tana, through Yellowstone in Wyoming, to Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve in Idaho, some 700 miles. In the rental lot I buckled myself into a white Subaru Legacy alongside my travel companion, Dan, an unflappable, natural teacher tasked with the job of keeping us alive. To that end, he would do most of the driving. I'd try my hand at it here and there, putting my cowboy boot to the pedal where the road was wide and empty, hoping to experience a flash of transcendence.

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