

The Long and Winding Road to Breck

Eric Smith Special to The Commercial Appeal

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Sometimes the journey is more important than the destination. My wife, Sandy, and I discovered this when we embarked on a weeklong ski trip to Colorado at Christmas.

Everything seemed in order for our excursion. We had booked a flight to Denver on Dec. 20, reserved a rental car and secured six nights lodging at nearby Breckenridge Ski Resort - known to locals as Breck.

We both worked there nine years ago, and it's also the place we spent our first Christmas together, in 1997, so this holiday trip was extra special for us.

But our dream vacation quickly turned into a nightmare.

On the morning of our departure a fierce winter storm pummeled Denver and shut down its airport. The blizzard, which created massive snow drifts and paralyzed much of the region, ultimately would rank among Colorado's top 10 worst storms in history.

With our flight canceled, we were naturally dismayed - and depressed - at the thought of our ski trip being, well, snowed out.

Then, over lunch at Corky's, Sandy said, "Why don't we drive?"

I initially dismissed the idea. I wasn't as concerned with driving the 1,100-plus miles to Colorado as I was with driving that same distance home after our vacation. We agreed to see how soon United Airlines could get us to Denver before deciding whether or not to drive.

When I got through to United, I was told the earliest available flight was Christmas Eve - four days later than scheduled. And that was contingent on Denver's airport being open. I hung up and said, "OK, we're driving."

We were frantic in our preparation to hit the road. We poured two pots of coffee into thermoses. We stuffed holiday candy and snacks into a box. We filled our water bottles. We got an oil change. We picked up our dog, Mattie, from the kennel so she could accompany us.

Finally, we loaded our Honda C-RV and left Memphis around 5:30 p.m. as a light rain fell.

The first 14 hours were uneventful: west on I-40 to Oklahoma City; north on I-35 to Kansas. We stopped twice to catch some shuteye in the car, and by 8 a.m. Thursday morning, we were headed west on I-70 from Salina, Kan. In perfect weather, it would have taken about six more hours to Breck.

Then we saw a sign that told us I-70 was closed at Hays, Kan., about 65 miles ahead. We found another route along a rural Kansas state highway into Colorado. The road was desolate, and the towns along it were dreary, but at least we were heading in the right direction.

And it wasn't snowing - yet.

We hit the blizzard about 150 miles from the Colorado border. The snow blew toward us with a vengeance, sideways and from the north. As we crept along the icy road at 30 mph, my knuckles turning white, we began to curse our decision to drive. We contemplated turning around.

But then a Ford Escape with skis strapped to the top passed us. We figured if they could plow forward, so could we. Our mantra was this: Even one day on the slopes would make all this worthwhile.

We finally crossed the Colorado border and reveled in this milestone. It was short-lived, however, because immediately the road worsened. Now it was completely covered with ice - an unmarked, two-lane hockey rink with snow berms on either side.

At Eads, Colo., our journey took another detour because the road, State Highway 96, was closed. The alternate route would take us farther south and even more out of our way, but we had no choice. By now it was too late to reach Breck, so we settled on making Pueblo, Colo., by nightfall.

Before long, the snow stopped, the sky cleared and the Rocky Mountains came into view. As the sun set behind us, creating alpenglow on the peaks ahead, we found a motel in Pueblo with our sights on rest and food to rejuvenate us for the following day's final leg.

The next morning the road from Pueblo to Denver was clear but not without danger. Our vehicle almost got clipped by a bulldozer hauling snow from the side of the road, and we ended up missing the exit to I-70, which heads to the mountains. But Sandy navigated our way back on track, and before long we arrived at our lodge.

We pulled into Breck at 2 p.m. on Dec. 22, about 45 hours after leaving Memphis. We estimated 30 hours of drive time, which normally would have taken 17, plus time for sleeping and other stops.

Overjoyed with our decision to press on - and overwhelmed by the hard-fought miles behind us - we celebrated with pints of Fat Tire beer at Downstairs at Eric's, one of our favorite haunts in Breckenridge. Exhausted but elated, we toasted to our salvaged vacation.

We awoke the next morning to a cold, clear day and skied Breck's world-class slopes, which were uncrowded because of numerous cancellations.

During the next three days we rejoiced with each ride up the ski lift, with each run back down the mountain, with each snow-capped panorama, with each breath of thin, mountain air.

At night we strolled Breck's Main Street and gazed at the stars sparkling across a sky otherwise darker than the nothingness of dreamless sleep.

The rewards for our perilous journey were infinite.

On Dec. 26 we packed the car to head home. Though we had clear roads all the way to Memphis, we knew

we would have been ready for anything. We knew the adventure had been worth every obstacle and setback. And we knew we wouldn't have changed a thing about it.

Eric and Sandy Smith live in East Memphis. Eric is a publications coordinator at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and freelance writer, and Sandy works at Diversified Trust Co. Since moving to Memphis from Alaska in 2005, they've discovered the joy of road trips throughout the "Lower 48" with their dog, Mattie.



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Mattie is dogged about tagging along, even on extreme excursions such as the recent journey to Breck in a blizzard. "Good dog!"