

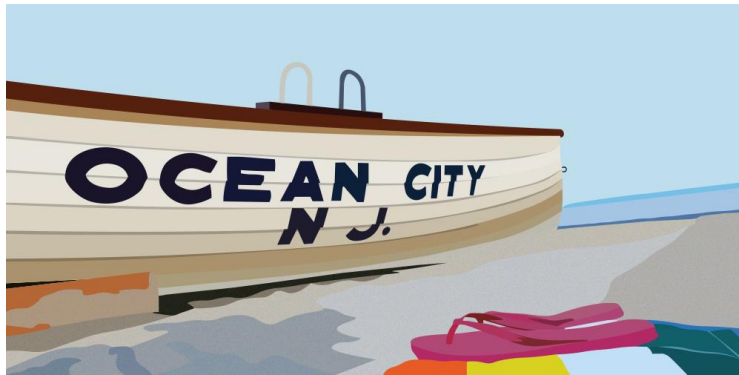
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Get Us To The Jersey Shore — Quick!

Reflections on summer road trips to the shore

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Once summer hits, newbies to the Philadelphia area hear our peculiar expression to “go down the shore.” We don’t go “to the beach;” we go to the beach, once we are down the shore.

By now, these transplants to the region have toured the historic sections of the city; visited the list of museums; saw the Liberty Bell; ran up the Art Museum steps and took a picture with the Rocky statue; cycled around the river; and ate our delicacies of cheesesteaks, hoagies, and scrapple. ‘Tis the season to learn about the norms and mores of the Jersey Shore.

There are some tribal variations to where people from our area go for summer vacation. Some like the mountains; to them, it is almost heaven. Some like the seashore beaches. This may be attributed to our primal instinct to return to whence we came. For the majority of families in this area, the spots to be at for their hard-earned respite are at the Jersey Shore. Jersey shore vacationers are loyalists, with each town sporting hats, T-shirts, sweatshirts, and car magnets, claiming their town is the “coolest by a mile.” Some weddings do not take place, given no resolution by the couple on where to go for summer vacation.

Truth be told, our family of 16 kids went off script for where to go to the shore. We did not go down the shore. We actually went “over to the Shore”—to Seaside Park, New Jersey. If you look on a map with the two states, you will see that Philadelphia and Seaside Park, New Jersey are about the same geographic coordinates. While cartographers will rightly say Seaside Park is Central Jersey, it is customary for those in Philly not to vacation north of Long Beach Island. In fact, there is a natural buffer between the South Jersey beaches and North Jersey beaches in a 10-mile coastal stretch of Island Beach State Park. Go north of Island Beach and you see New York

Giants, Yankees, and Knicks affinity sportswear; go south and people are wearing Eagles, Phillies, and 76ers gear.

Our family bucked the system by not going “down the shore:” we went over to the shore.

Preparing to go to the shore with 16 children was a combination of regimen and ritual. Everyone had a job. We always knew when vacation was approaching. Our older brothers were instructed to go to the third-floor storage room, bring down the large Quaker Storage boxes, and distribute one to each sibling. Equipped with our one storage box, we packed our personal necessities. The art of packing involved not only deciding which clothes to bring but to take advantage of the mayhem by appropriating another sibling’s clothes.

For the load out in the morning, the older brothers would start at the top floor and pass by each room (just once) to pick up our boxes to load onto a moving truck driven by my mother’s brother. They warned us that if we did not have our box ready and outside our room, we would be stuck going to the shore with just the clothes on our backs. This made us anxious, so we stayed up all night fearful that we would oversleep and not have a box ready for the shore.

Another indicator of vacation approaching was top-to-bottom housecleaning involving more than just the first-floor cleaning done for the Holidays. Trying to get out of the chores, we reasoned to our mother that in a few weeks the house would get dusty, so why not just clean it once upon our return? As with Christmas, the stakes were high, and the threat was always, “If you don’t do [such and such a thing], you can spend the vacation in the hot, hot city with [so and so relative].”

The kitchen overflowed with boxes. Every cabinet was opened as our mother spewed order after order as one of us scribbled notes on a piece of paper, a bag, or boxes while someone was looking for tape or scissors. Confused by the task that we were clearing out all our household food supply, we asked if there were supermarkets at the shore. Our mother noted that it was best to bring as many dry goods as possible—whatever that meant.

Over time you learned to stay clear of the kitchen, otherwise, you were put to work. If our mother noted someone was not contributing, she would tell him or her to “go see what your father is doing; he may need help.” He was usually found in his study surveying what books to bring on vacation. Not only did he invest time in his own books, but each year he discovered the latest educational fad and packed skill-building books for us.

While we thought we were off the hook from schoolwork, our father had other plans. He required that we read and build our academic skills during summer vacation. This even concerned our mother. She was working hard to pack a house for the shore, while our father was worried about what books to bring. Moreover, books are heavy, and she reminded him to the square inch how much room was available in the three cars and a truck needed to move the family.

The ride to the shore was about two hours. The tradition was to go early in the morning to the corner store to buy provisions for the long drive. This usually consisted of buying a can of soda, which was then wrapped in aluminum foil, gum, Sugar Daddy taffy, and anything else that would last the journey. Chocolate was forbidden since our mother did not believe in air conditioning (We were told we would gain graces for bearing the heat.). Our mother warned anyone riding in her wagon not to drink; she said she was going bridge to bridge without stopping, and she meant it.

With this trip came a challenge quite different from riding down the crowded, bumper-to-bumper AC Expressway, or the mesmerizing Garden State Parkway. We traveled dead east on NJ Route 70. This took us through the Jersey Pine Barrens — home of the Jersey Devil.



An enduring legend in our parts, the Jersey Devil is said to be the cursed 13th child of mother Leeds; born in 1735. Mother Leeds had had enough of child-rearing, especially one that went through an unnatural metamorphosis. Therefore, she locked this child in the basement and prayed that Satan would take over. You cannot trust kids to keep doors shut, let alone locked, so the creature escaped from captivity and found a home in one of the most officially protected places in the Mid-Atlantic: The Jersey Pine Barrens. These broad and deep forests make up one-fifth of the state's land.

Tales of the Jersey Devil have survived hundreds of years and with uncanny consistency for how he looks, sounds, and acts. Accounts appeared in newspapers, official police reports, firefighters, and forest ranger reports that something eerie lurks in the Pine Barrens. Big Foot and the Loch Ness Monster get more ink and airtime, but the Jersey Devil is abject evil. The former two creatures are not engaging; they do not pursue humans and they are more curious. The Jersey Devil is a child scorned, whose soul was ripped from him at birth — a creature you want to avoid.

As we got closer to the Pine Barrens, the chatter of the children in the station wagon declined. We went from hanging our heads out the window while crossing the Ben Franklin Bridge; playing the states' license plate spotting game; arguing over how many circles are along Route 70; singing songs, to slumping in our seats and peering out the now closed windows, like Kilroy. The obligatory "are we there yet?" query to the driver took on new meaning.

Even the sugar high from all the contraband sweets consumed could not dull the senses to allay our fears of the Jersey Devil. Naturally, a couple of the older siblings bantered about the fine

features of the Jersey Devil. Does he have the head of a horse, a dog, or a dragon? If he has wings, can he fly? Does he come out only in the dark? Does he howl like a werewolf? Could he eat all of us? Can he make it to Barnegat Bay, where we will be swimming the next morning?

Of course, we told ourselves, “There is no such thing as the Jersey Devil.” Nevertheless, part of us wanted to be clear what to look and listen for, in case — God forbid — the wagon broke down. Unluckily for us, one of the older kids chose not to bring *Sports Illustrated*, *Teen*, or *Mad Comics* to pass the time but packed the latest tales of the Jersey Devil.

Learning that this poor Leeds child was abandoned by his own mother, one of the younger siblings in the car reasoned that maybe we could adopt the little devil; what’s one more kid in our large group? We had to explain that this guy is not E.T. He stands well over 6 feet, has a long wingspan, a long thin and pointed tale, horns on his head, and scraggly fur on his body. He has, in fact, a face that not even a mother could love.

About this time, we second-guessed our choice of vehicle to ride for the trip. Each transport to the shore has its plusses and minuses. The truck arrives first, but only sits three, and you have to help unload boxes, and even beds, upon arrival at the rented house. The oldest sibling drives the inherited sedan from our grandfather, but you risk being pulled over by the police for a sundry of infractions. The point of moving through the Pine Barrens is to not stop. Going with our father means listening to talk radio, but he does have his group recite the rosary to pass some time. Not a bad approach to keeping the Leeds creature away.

Our mother tried to temper the tension by asking us to look for hidden police cars, as we entered the township notorious for ticketing PA drivers. Not that she was a speedster, but we heard each year that this part of the ride is where she got her only moving violation in her 40 plus years of driving. Not a helpful idea mother; we don’t wish to peer too deep into the Pine Barrens. It is said that at night, the Pine Barrens is darker than dark.

Before we left home, we frowned about the bridge to bridge, the no-stopping rule in our mother’s station wagon. Now we considered chipping in boardwalk money to cajole mother to step on the gas; we will cover the ticket. Just get us out of these Pines and onto that bridge to the barrier peninsula.

When we made it to the bay bridge our faces were out the windows, to smell the gamy bay. When we finally stopped at the shore home, we ran to the bathroom to unload the bladder as our mother warned, “Watch your fingers” [in the closed doors].

After a long and stressful day of work, wonder, wishes, and weirdness, we retired the first night at the shore with some sand in the bed, dampness in the air, and the sound of the ocean waves hitting the surf. That is the feel of summertime at the Jersey Shore, no matter where you went, south, north, or over to the shore. We talked about all the things we would do in the sun, sand, and surf during these two weeks.

Invariably, one of the siblings would remind us that at some point we have to ride back home. Only one-way out: straight through the Pine Barrens. This is our penance for not doing right by knowing how to “go down the Shore.” It’s always been over to the shore for our family. •

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