

Dan's phone died. Its number was finally up. Besides keeping in touch with people, he used it to look up campgrounds around the country and he updated his Facebook page. He took photos with it everyday, including one each morning out the front windshield documenting where we start each day. It also got left on the subway in Philadelphia and dropped in sand at Sleeping Bear Dunes National park. It got soaked in Florida when it rained all day at Universal Studios. So after days of communication problems and missed calls, we hunted down a Verizon store in Portland, Oregon, and a well-deserved new phone for Dan.

After browsing an assortment of flip phones and smart phones, a very personable salesman, Mykal, made some recommendations. It wasn't long before he started asking what brought us to Oregon. When we told him we're traveling for a year, he became enthusiastic. He asked us about planning it and driving and what different places are like. Then he told us about a great bike trip he took for a week along the Oregon coast. He said he'd love to take a trip like ours with his girlfriend who might be "the one." Finally, he asked us what so many people wonder. "What's your favorite place?" I love this question because it's more than just one question. I often tell people how the Grand Canyon amazed me. Before we saw that, I said the Florida Keys was a favorite. But I could describe anyplace as my favorite place, and that would be true too. That's why I love when people ask. Because I can hear the question behind the question, which is "What can I learn from your travels? What can you share with me?"

To really answer the question, my favorite place is wherever I am. Maybe I don't understand what the word favorite means. But it's true. When I'm driving the Pacific Coast Highway taking in the view, it's just where I want to be. When we're changing a flat tire on the side of the road outside of Las Vegas, it's my favorite. When I get a call from a friend back home, my favorite thing to do is talk to them. I'm learning to recognize that what I'm experiencing, good or bad, is just right thing.

I've learned some practical things too. Like, public transportation is your friend. All the years I lived in Columbus, I didn't use the bus much because I wasn't sure I could figure it out. Since then Dan and I have navigated the family through most major cities in on buses, commuter rails, monorails, subways and taxis. With the help of online planning, I've learned that anyone could do it.

Also, three essentials while sightseeing are comfortable shoes, sunscreen and drinks for the kids. Everything else is secondary.

Or when a campground has the full sign hanging out front, pull in anyway and ask. We've work our 45-foot, two-camper system into at least three "full campgrounds."

In addition to taking lots of pictures, keeping a written record of the trip really jogs the memory. That's how I remember the misty day we spent at the river walk in Bangor, Maine, nine months ago.

Ask the locals. We learn more about a city or road or park by asking the people who live there.

Finally, travel is more than a geography lesson. It's a learning experience involving people and places and self. Travel is an education.

Before leaving the Verizon store, we asked Mykal what to see in Portland, his favorite place. He suggested Powell's, a bookstore others have told us not to miss on the west coast. It covers a whole city block. He called it legendary. So last Thursday I found myself in another favorite place, a gigantic bookstore.

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