


# *A Road Warrior's Last Hurrah*



## **A Traveling Trainer Retires His Rucksack, But Only After a Classic Car Road Trip**

 By Frank Whyte

### **Installment One: The Plan**

*“Would probably get you to north LA with no problem. Having said that, I would not recommend driving it cross-country...”*

Published online through TSOD's [Road Warrior's Digest](#)  
As seen in [The Frederick News-Post](#)

**That was the e-mail message** from the car's seller, after I'd overnighted a cashier's check, after I'd bought an airline ticket, and after my wife had hiked my life insurance policy by a few G's.

If fact, I *did* intend to drive the car cross-country. And I'm talking—literally—cross-country, from sea-to-shinning-sea, from west-to-east, from the mountains to the prairies to the ocean white with foam.

I was planning a road trip... one last devil-may-care odyssey... one last chance for a middle-aged guy with too many responsibilities and too little free time to meander through America, eating at any diner celebrating a cholesterol festival, touring any roadside attraction that didn't imprison innocent animals, and surrendering five bucks to any souvenir stand with a cool fridge magnet.

Ironically, I'd stirred-up a batch of rules for this rule-breaking California-to-Maryland excursion. My plan was to convert a west-coast business trip into an escapade. I'd travel to L.A. on a commercial flight, as usual. I'd attend to business, as usual. Then, the plot would thicken. I'd pick-up a car I'd purchased on eBay, sight unseen. It would be an American-made car, more than 25 years old: A classic road machine. I would pay no more than \$2,500 for it.

I'd set-out in my excellent wheels on an excellent adventure, cruising up Route 66 where possible, catching sleep wherever a clean motel winked a neon invitation, and seeing the sights I'd somehow neglected in twenty-five years of business travel.

“What’s left for you to see?” my wife wanted to know. “You’ve been everywhere. You drive around most cities like a local! Flight attendants call you by name!”

It’s true. As a consultant and trainer, my life involves equal parts facilitating corporate workshops and traveling to corporate workshops. I write a lot of articles about team effectiveness. I write just as many articles about business travel.



You see, some of us just aren’t at home unless we’re away from home. Our chairs aren’t comfy unless they’re moving, fast. So, we go. We are road warriors.

My brand-spanking-new challenge with being a road warrior is that—Surprise!—God gave my wife and me a baby for Christmas. This first-time event occurred rather late in our lives, so we are stunned. We are euphoric. And my leash just got 2,500 miles shorter.

“I haven’t been to Branson,” I said.

It was weak, and I knew it. She’d never fall for the old “haven’t been to Branson” routine. That’s just what happened to come to mind at the moment. But it was weak.

“Buy a ticket, go to Branson,” she said. “See everything in Branson. You can make it back by the day after tomorrow.”

Gentlemen, some friendly advice: If you’re trying to convince your spouse that you need to spend thousands of dollars and a full week playing hooky, while she’s tending to the seven-month-old, don’t use “Branson, Missouri” as your justification.

My wife, though, is a fascinating person. With a day or two to consider things, she decided that a farewell tour might be a fine birthday present for a guy whose leisure travel destiny involves teacups and mouse ears.

Houston, we are GO for a road trip.

The where and how of this adventure were easy to envision. They’d been incubating for decades.

As a kid, I lived in envy of my friend, Ralph. While my single-parent clan seldom ventured outside our Appalachian village, Ralphie’s people were voyagers. His Technicolor travelogues seemed to bleach my surroundings to an ashen gray, even in summer, when Simpson Creek turned an interesting shade of ocher.

Ralph’s family vacations included an annual rail pilgrimage to his grandfather’s house in Boulder, Nevada. Once there, Ralph’s pop would buy an aged—but still serviceable—automobile. They’d strap in and tour the local sights: The Grand Canyon, the Hoover Dam, the Las Vegas Casinos... Man, the stories he told about the grand opening of Circus Circus!

They'd coax their sun-ripened rattletrap all the way back to West Virginia, where its rust-free condition would intrigue the locals. We mountain folk slogged around for months each year on soupy, salt-saturated roads that infected vehicles with a fast-moving strain of cancer. Rust-free vehicles were mystical machines: Automotive icons that were treasured and adored. They were valuable.



Ralph's dad would sell their Nevada car for enough markup to fund their entire summer sojourn. He did this successfully, year after year.

For my last big road trip, I decided to copy his business plan, only with a third millennium twist; I would buy a car on eBay and have it ready and waiting for me in Los Angeles. It would be a vehicle deserving of a grand finale: An experienced American road machine, perhaps weary to the naked eye, but ready to bolt into action upon hearing the call of the open road.

Buying the car was my foremost priority, and for a very good reason: I'm a guy. Faced with a list of tasks, where one of those tasks is "buy a car," we guys become crackerjack prioritizers.

I thought it would be easy. In fact, it was easy to *find* classic cars—amazing classic cars—in the machine-friendly climate of southern California. However, it was shocking to learn what sort of coinage these inland oil tankers were fetching in a city where gasoline prices bobbed between two and three dollars a gallon.

I nearly latched onto a Dodge Polara that lacked a stream catapult, but which was otherwise suitable for use as an aircraft carrier. I bid on a Chrysler 300 with an exhaust system custom crafted by a guy who spelled "fuel" as "fule." The exhaust was "very load," he noted.

Locals outbid me on a half-dozen venerable Caddy and Lincoln land yachts, a couple of promising Mercuries, and a Nash Rambler that had served a stretch as a rabbit hutch. I toyed with expanding the search to include cars "old or new, American-made or otherwise manufactured on Earth."

"Eureka" is California's state motto. "I have found it."

Nearly two weeks into the quest, a forest-green Chevy coupe caught my eye. It was a 1971 Nova, which, when I was a kid, enjoyed the sidewalk punk's rating of "kinda cool."



The seller described the car as having almost no rust, a condition pivotal to the resale plan. Further, it was a good runner, and it hadn't been mangled by a speed freak nicknamed "The Torch." This was mom & pop's one-owner, garage-kept car, ready for the next dance.

While mezzo-sporty, this plain-Jane Chevy wasn't a long-and-low classic cruiser automatically entitled to a ZZ Top theme song. My interest stemmed from its one colossal advantage over the other candidates: An auction price that floated toward \$2,000, then hovered. I poked through some online classifieds to get a sense for the Nova marketplace. Less than three kilobucks for a self-propelled '71 was a real deal.

To cement family consensus, I showed my wife a sampling of eBay auctions. The lineup included a half-dozen lackluster lumps of metal (on which \$3,000 - \$4,000 had been bid) and the green machine, which was treading water at \$1,825.

“I think you should buy the Nova,” she ventured. Then, a clap of thunder shook the house. I’m not making this up: Real thunder. Real load.

Unable to clearly interpret the sign from above, I pressed on.

On July 7, eight days before my birthday, and eight seconds before the auction ended, I offered \$2,777 for the Nova. eBay automatically lowered my bid to the price necessary to win, which happened to be the auction’s reserve price: \$2,500.

A bit of irony: I originally keyed-in a bid of \$2,666, but winced at the “666” lineup and retyped it. After I won the auction, I did a Yahoo! Maps route from the seller’s home address to my home address. The result: 2,666.0 miles. That’s just annoying.

The seller, who I’ll call “Bob” (because his real name is “Bob”) turned-out to be a great guy, almost exactly my age, who was just a bit surprised that I planned to drive (not ship) his late father’s automotive legacy through four time zones.

His caveats began gently, with a phone call reminder that this was an unrestored 33-year-old car. Over time, Bob cranked-up the volume on his warnings. By e-mail, he noted that the car leaked both oil and transmission fluid, that there was “play” in the steering, and that the brakes “require extra effort to stop.” Hmm.

Neither Bob’s exhortations nor the peculiar coincidences (some would say “omens”) dissuaded me from the mission, but they all prompted some deep thought. I upgraded my auto club membership. My bride ratcheted-up the life insurance yet again.

And high school Spanish lessons came rushing back: En Español, “No va” translates to “It doesn’t go.” Let’s hope this car, which spent its entire career only miles from the Mexican border, never learned Spanish.

I’m convinced I’ll have an adventure, the recipe for which specifies a dollop of risk. I keep reminding myself that, in all of recorded history, nobody’s done anything interesting without accepting some risk.

**Next Installment: [A Sleeping Car’s Rude Awakening](#)**

Frank Whyte is Chief Curriculum Officer for [Training Services On Demand, Inc.](#)

