

Vacation Diary – Chapter Six

NOTE: This is the final part of a 6 part series about a family vacation to Florida

Friday, October 24, 2008 – We slept in (at least I did – my husband got up with the kids) and packed up and decided to depart early. We were toying with the idea of renting an air boat to take into the swamp, but it was overcast again, and we weren't sure how the kids would fare in the swamp. So we headed out of the Orlando area, and we stopped at two beaches. The first one was not memorable, and I don't remember where it was – somewhere south of Flagler beach because we stopped there next after heading north up the coast. The first beach had crushed shells for sand and it was still overcast and windy which made it a little chilly. It was really cool to see two different moods of the ocean this trip; especially since we're used to landlocked Ohio. Well, we have Lake Erie, but that's not the same as the ocean. On the way there, it was a beautiful blue/green with soft, rolling waves. On the way home, it was gray, and the waves had white caps and sometimes a large one would sneak up and catch us off guard and soak us. At Flagler Beach, we found a coconut and a log, which we took with us – only after asking the park ranger on duty, of course. He was friendly, and he said that coconut must have come a long way – and now it calls Ohio home! Flagler Beach is a Florida State Park, and it was very nice. There was a ramp leading down to the beach for the wheelchair-bound or strollers. And the bathrooms were very nice for being outdoor state park bathrooms – they should have been a step away from port-a-potties, but these were really nice and clean too.

Since we were ahead of schedule, we decided to spend the night in a hotel, so we stopped outside of Savannah, Georgia at a Comfort Suites in Pooler. It was a nice place, and we went swimming in the morning. I think their chlorine content in

the pool was way high because my husband's eyes were burning and for weeks my girls and I had problems with our hair. It was getting tangled really easily, and it wasn't smooth or soft anymore. My husband held my ponytail up to the hair closer to my head and there was a huge color difference – the ends of my hair were shades lighter than the top! I have long hair, so I think the bottom part of my hair which was in the pool the longest got bleached by the chlorine. I actually haven't had the time to go and get it chopped off, but it seems to be getting back to normal now, thank goodness.

Saturday, October 25, 2008 – The hotel had a breakfast, which was actually kind of crowded, but we enjoyed bagels and cereal before our morning swim. Got on the road about noon, stopped around 1:30 for lunch in the car. I had an avocado sandwich (good!) from Atlanta Bread, and the kids had Bojangles Chicken, which has really good fries. Chicken is pretty good too. Stopped at a Shell gas station around Spartanburg, South Carolina, where we were approached by a man who had “run out of gas”. Luckily, he had plenty of jewelry on display inside his coat to sell, so hopefully he wouldn't be stuck at the gas station for long. Traffic got a little backed up near Asheville, and it was bumper-to-bumper, but for only about 10 or 15 mins. We decided to get off of I-40 to enjoy the mountainous scenery since we're not usually in the mountains when there's daylight on our trips down south. In the peak of autumn color-changing season at sunset, the mountains were nothing short of gorgeous, and we pulled over at a few scenic overlooks for observation and picture-taking. We stopped at a wonderful little restaurant in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee called “BBQ Garden Cafe”, and I can't say enough great things about the place. The ribs and corn were the best of each that both my husband and I have **ever had**. And that's really saying a lot because we are tough critics when it comes to food at restaurants. Unfortunately, as we chatted with the owner we learned that they were days away from closing – just not enough business in the mountains. It's a real shame too –

best food I've had in a long time. And it was a family owned place, so the owner got your order and went to grill it himself, and he even had his kids helping – a really nice family, and a really nice family atmosphere also. I really hope that by some miracle the place doesn't close – I was going to make sure we go back there every time we're in Tennessee. Here is the address, just in case you're in the area; I can't say enough how much I recommend the place. You might want to call first though, since they did say they were closing down! It's located at: 3323 Cosby Hwy, Cosby, TN 37722

After the delicious dinner, we headed for home in Ohio, and we arrived at about 5 in the morning, a little early compared to usual. But that's ok, we needed the day for catch-up on sleep, laundry, unpacking, etc. As you can see, I've been busy ever since which is why it took me a month to finish the trip diary. But now I have, and all I have to do is cut and paste all 6 parts into one diary for our family to read for years to come. Thanks for letting me share it with you; here is a picture of the autumn Smokies at sunset:



Windy City White House

“Windy City White House” is more of a reference to our visit to the Windy City rather than a blog post about the recent election – it’s over and done with, and although I won’t talk much about the outcome, I am happy to not have to hear about it on the news anymore. While in Illinois, my mother-in-law kept talking about what huge news it is that Obama was elected and how his pick for Chief-of-Staff, Rahm Emanuel is a fellow Chicagoan – making it a ‘Windy City White House’.

But back to our family – it’s my blog, after all. We scheduled an early Christmas with our family in Illinois this past weekend (the early Christmas theme is something that seems popular with tangents.org bloggers), and overall, it was great. There are a few reasons we decided to do things this way – 1) We’re sick of the hustle and bustle of opening our presents from Santa and then rushing off to Illinois on Christmas Day – add to that having the flu during this trip twice and UGH. Best to travel *before* flu season. 2) My daughter was off school Friday for parent/teacher conferences 3) We wanted to beat the rush and other travelers. Overall, it was a really great decision, although the trip was last minute, and so we did forget a few of the presents which we’ll now have to send. We left Ohio on Friday morning and after a bit of traffic-sitting (of course), we got to my grandparents house about 40 minutes past schedule. But no matter, they’re fully aware of the traffic problems plaguing their area. We were treated to a delicious lunch of my grandma’s sloppy joes (love ’em), and the girls got to open presents. My grandpa gets tired really quickly, and so we didn’t stay too long there, and then it was on to our hotel. My husband uses hotwire.com and got us a suite at the Sheraton for \$49 – a nice price for the area. When we pulled up to our hotel, we were pleased to see it was the same hotel where we spent our wedding night – that was a nice surprise. My mom and my

sister brought her two boys over for some swimming, and we all had a blast even though their indoor pool was chilly. Luckily, I had thought to turn up our room's thermostat so when we got back to the room we didn't freeze, although it was quite crowded trying to get 10 hungry people changed out of bathing suits and trying to order pizza at the same time. It was a suite, but it was probably the smallest suite I have ever seen, and we had 6 little kids and 4 adults in there. My mother and sister wisely decided that they couldn't wait for the time it would take to get pizza, and they got something to eat on the way home. That was a good idea because my mom had to get up early the next day and didn't want to be out too late. They know their area well enough to realize that pizza delivery on a Friday night would take over an hour – and they were right. My poor kids were starving and I had to raid my diaper bag. I found a little bag of oyster crackers and two small bags of peanuts, so I divied everything up 3 ways (Survivor-style) and it quieted them a little until the pizza came. Overall, the kids were kind of spastic all day, especially my oldest for some reason... My husband blames the tension of the Chicagoland area, but then again, he hates it as much as I do. We love seeing family, just wish we could visit them somewhere else!

Saturday morning we were up bright and early to meet my mother-in-law for breakfast at Uptown Cafe in Arlington Heights – the place has the best eggs benedict in the nation. And I know this because way back when, before we had all these kids, my husband and I used to travel constantly, and one of the things we would look for was good hollandaise sauce. We never found any that came close to Uptown Cafe's. And the owners remember us – we used to go there a lot when we lived in the area; I was pregnant with my first daughter. They are surprised every time they see us because we usually have a new baby or two. After breakfast, we went back to my mother-in-law's house, and I felt badly for dropping in on my husband's sister and her family without any notice. This is one of the

details that was overlooked in the last minute planning. But it was ok; I didn't have my gifts for their 3 kids, so I'll have to send them. But our kids had lots of fun playing together, and it's important to me that my kids know their extended family, especially since a lot of hatchets have been buried over the years on this side of the family.

Next, it was time to see our good friend, the author of the sublife blog on tangents.org. It was great to see him, especially on his own turf, but he's right in his blog – there really wasn't much time for chatting. The kids wouldn't have allowed us to just sit and talk peacefully, and we wanted to take them somewhere fun, so we went to an overflowing Chuck E. Cheese. After waiting in line to park, I realized that I hadn't seen our camera since I took a picture of the kids on the luggage rack at the hotel that morning. Sound familiar? Yes, I have terrible luck with digital cameras. And worse, this one was not mine – I had borrowed it from Jamiahsh for the trip, so I was sick about losing it. Luckily for me, it turned up when we got home though – YAY! I was especially upset because I knew that I had put it in my diaper bag – I really thought someone had taken it. Pessimistic of me, you'd think, except that we did have our tokens stolen from our table at Chuck E. Cheese with my husband less than 5 feet away. Takes all kinds to steal game tokens from little kids, doesn't it... at least they didn't also steal my digital camera. We got lunch at a Vienna Beef hot dog place in Arlington Heights called Jimmy's – highly recommended you get real Chicago-style beef sandwiches and 'dogs if you're in the area – YUM!

The ride home was uneventful – the kids slept most of the way, thank goodness. We did manage to stop and get me my crave case of White Castles, and so our car reeked of steamed onions – thank goodness we weren't pulled over or we may have gotten a ticket for disturbing the peace. Maybe I wouldn't have stopped if I'd known what White Castles would do to a 2-year-

old's diaper. I tried to deliver some to my friend Carol who graciously pet sits for us, but for some reason, she neglected to pick them up. My husband says that not everyone likes White Castles. We picked up the slyders (as White Castles are known) in Dolton, Illinois; not the best area, but it just off the expressway so we made it unscathed. Ironically, something made me talk about Dolton just before the stop; I was telling my husband how it's gotten to be a really bad area and that I knew a family that had left there in the '80's because it was getting so bad, so imagine it now. Then we saw a sign that said "Dolton Bowl" right across the street from the White Castle, and we laughed at the irony. But overall, a nice trip, especially considering the area where we had to take it. One positive thing I will say about the area is that they have excellent food.

Three quarters of my kids on the luggage cart:



Vacation Diary – Chapter Five

Thursday, October 23, 2008 – Started off the day at Golden Corral for breakfast again, and then we stopped at a Wi-Fi place so my husband could download the Chicago Bears game from the previous Sunday because the internet was too slow in our

condo to do anything. That's a good thing though, I wasn't able to check email all week and it was nice to take a break from bad news on cnn.com and the real world. We were lucky enough that it didn't rain during our trip to Florida until this day when we were already done with the parks. It really didn't rain much, just a little drizzle, and even though the day was overcast, we spent much of it at the two pools in our condo complex, followed by a nap while my husband juggled the kids, the Bears game, and his own nap. We then went to our favorite flea market place and let the girls spend their money that Grandma had given them. NOTE FOR NEXT YEAR – the souvenir shopping was kind of a mistake. Sammie (4 year old) wanted to be impulsive with her money, and we got tired of telling her to wait to spend it. Finally she was allowed to buy something, and then she saw other things she wanted after she was out of money. She also spent the rest of the trip whining and pitching fits about wanting the same souvenirs that her older sister Taylor had picked out. Disney's (2 year old) idea of "shopping" was running around and picking up things she wanted and playing with them, so overall, I would not recommend the souvenir shopping for kids this age; if we go back within a year or two, we're going to skip this aspect of the trip. If they earn spending money for next time, maybe we'll pick out something for them with it!

Dinner that night was interesting. My husband has wanted to take me to a Japanese restaurant for awhile, so we decided to try a place called Kabuki. I was always under the impression that Japanese food would be like Chinese food, but I was wrong. We sat at a "cooking table", which is where the chef comes and does little tricks and stunts with the food and cooking utensils while he cooks right in front of you. At first, I was a little nervous about this because we were seated with a couple from a country called Luxembourg, and having strangers at our table was a little nerve-wracking because my kids can be wild at the dinner table at times. Everything was fine; the kids were really entertained by the

chef's show. Better yet, they were mindlessly eating their food without thinking to complain about it or ask for something else. And the couple from Luxembourg took pictures and later emailed them to me – check it out:



Overall, I liked the Japanese food experience – taste and show – and I would recommend it to others if it's something you've never tried before. As you can see, our chef was not Japanese – the guy from Luxembourg predicted that and recommended we retry the experience with a Japanese chef.

Vacation Diary – Chapter Four

Wednesday, October 22 – Breakfast at Golden Corral – best omlette I've had in a long time. Then it was off to the Magic Kingdom where our group got separated. It was ironic because they make an announcement on the monorail on the way over to the Magic Kingdom about picking a meeting place in case your party gets separated, and during that announcement, I had a feeling we should probably do that. We ended up finding everyone but not at the meeting place we had designated. The Monsters Inc. show is funny as always, and my husband was

chosen *again* to participate, this time playing "Sully". We skipped Space Mountain this time around because the line was long and by the time we remembered to get fast passes, we were ready to leave Tomorrowland. I also skipped one of my favorites, Peter Pan's Flight, but it was well worth it to get my husband a wheelchair so he could get off his extremely painful infected toe. Besides, the girls still got to ride it with our friend, Jamiahsh. Splash Mountain was fun, although the recent updates the ride incurred saw the song on it changed from the extremely catchy "Zippidy Doo-Dah" to something else I don't even remember. That's 0/2 for me liking the rides they've updated this trip, if you're keeping track.

And this is the second Florida trip where both my husband and I saw a strange and unidentified creature. We're not crazy, but both times we both saw the same things. This time, it was a black figure running across the road which was actually a bridge over another road. When it got to the edge of the bridge, the black shape just kept going – which means it was airborne. I didn't see it "running" really; to me it was a black oval traveling across the road – I couldn't make out any legs. My husband, who has better eyesight than I, saw something running and then flying. Either way, none of this describes any animal I'm familiar with, especially one who is native to the United States. And since I'm on the subject, I will describe our first unidentified creature encounter. It was a few years ago on our way down to Florida, somewhere in the wilderness of Georgia in the middle of the night. I saw something sitting by the side of the road, and then it opened and flapped a LARGE pair of wings and flew a short distance upwards onto a low branch in a tree. It's wingspan was huge – a diameter of a full grown man at least, 6 feet or more. This sighting was witnessed by my husband also, and we call it "Batman". I've looked up various birds and the largest I've found is a condor, but this creature seemed even larger and its body was bigger and shaped less like a bird's body.

Mysteries as yet unsolved...

Well, anyway, talking about the strange creature on Wednesday night disoriented us, and after we got out of Disney World's huge tangle of roads, we went to the Boston Lobster Feast where at least one kid stayed passed out. Because we had 3 of the 4 kids asleep by the time we got back to the condo, Chris and I decided to take our night out that had been scheduled (and cancelled due to kid neediness) for the previous two nights. We went over to the Fun Spot, a newer amusement park next to Old Town. We went on an extreme ride – check this out:



It actually was much more mild than it looks – and no, that's not us in the picture. The ride was kind of lame, really... Conversely, two of the 4 go-cart tracks at Fun Spot are wicked, simply put. And I'm not exaggerating when I say that someone might be killed on those tracks. Unfortunately, I had to witness a little girl speed out of control and hit the wall at a high rate of speed. I think she was alright; she was conscious at least, but she was very scared, and it was terrifying to witness. The one track starts by winding up a ramp, and then when you're at the top, the track drops off so suddenly that I'm sure a cart could get some air if one was on a suicide mission and wanted to try it. So your cart picks up speed down this steep hill, and before the track even levels out, there's a hairpin turn – looks like you're driving in a bowl – followed by another downward slope. I can't believe they let kids drive the course, and I shudder to think what careless, invincible (so they think) teenage boys would do with a go-cart on that track – especially a whole pack of them driving it together. But for us adults, it was lots of fun, although I prefer something much more mild in a go-cart – the things have no padding! Another course they had there was very small but it had a lot of sharp turns, and it reminded me

of a live version of Mario Kart – without the fake gift boxes and shell weapons, of course ☐

Here is a picture of crazy go-cart course – it doesn't even show the “32 degree banked bowl”, just the “shear drop”:



Vacation Diary – Chapter Three

Tuesday, Oct 21 – We visited Universal Studios, Islands of Adventure, and the Out of Control Magic Show at Wonderworks. Universal and Islands are right next to each other, but there is a lot of walking between the two. A lot of walking and not so much for the kids. But they did have fun, especially Disney who got to see Barney Live. I missed the Animal Actors show this year, but I was more in the mood for rides, and we got to ride plenty. The new Simpsons ride is actually better than I expected. It's the old Back to the Future ride except you are now riding through Springfield. The waiting area is themed well, and you get to watch little Simpsons snippets while you wait – talk about making the time go by fast! The ride is very cool, and you actually feel like you're riding around Springfield. The Mummy ride is still my favorite thing in both parks, and it's as cool as I remember. I especially like sitting near people who haven't been on it before – it's a blast to see the reactions to the haunted house meets roller coaster. Over at Islands, we got positively soaked to the core riding the Bluto boat ride, but that was expected because I rode it twice – those huge raft rides are my favorite type of water ride. My 4-year-old Sammie hated it, much to my

surprise because she was just playing in the sprinklers at Epcot the night before. But she felt better after going on one of the kids' favorites, the Cat in The Hat ride. Our two-year-old loved that one too. We were a bit strapped for time and didn't get to try some of the coasters and other rides I've never been on over at Islands, but oh well, we still had fun. And my husband got chosen again (4th time now) to be an "actor" in the skit they do before the Earthquake ride which is now known as "Disaster". They redid it and added a cool hologram of Christopher Walken. And they chose my husband to be the "hunky" lead actor – but then, I always knew that ☐

The magic show was a lot of fun and it made me want to produce something like it locally for our community theater. It's kind of like stand-up comedy AND magic in one, with lots of audience participation. My husband, daughter, and our friend were all chosen to go on stage, and I filled up the camera's memory card trying to record everything. And a note to Jamiahsh – you really don't know me well enough by now to not point at me when they're asking for volunteers?!? You are so lucky he didn't pick me – I would have blamed you and had your head! Just kidding... well, kind of, but don't do that again!

Vacation Diary – Chapter One

Because Disney World and the Orlando area in Florida are our favorite places to vacation, we make it a point to go as often as we possibly can. The last few trips we've made, I've been careful to keep a trip diary – a notebook log of things we do as well as hints that might help us make the next journey. Each trip to FL sees me taking a notebook for our trip diary, and I write about various things in it, depending how much downtime I have to write while the kids are sleeping. Here is

an excerpt from the diary for this trip:

FRIDAY OCT 17, 2008 – Left town about 5:30pm. Unfortunately, our local Burger King we decided to get for dinner took about 30 minutes! Kids were rambunctious, so we stopped at a McDonald's Playland in downstate Ohio, wondering how we were ever going to make it the remaining 1,000 miles and back again (at least I was!). The good news is, the Playland seemed to tire out the kids and they fell asleep. They woke around midnight, but a trip into the gas station seemed to comfort Disney (almost 2 year old) and the kids slept until about 8 am Sat morning.

SAT OCT 18, 2008 – We stopped at another McD's Playland to blow off some steam, but it was raining, so their outdoor playplace was closed. The kids handled it well. This was north of coastal Brunswick, GA, so we made pretty good time the night before – thanks to sleepless driver Chris! Since the weather was nice, when we saw a sign around Jacksonville, FL that the beach was only 4 miles away, we decided to stop. We had a great time, and the kids had lots of fun wading in the ocean and collecting seashells. After that, it was on to Orlando, and we stopped and picked up the key for our condo rental when we got there. We then made it to the condo – which was over 10 miles away, much to our surprise – where our faithful driver promptly crashed leaving me to facilitate the activities of 4 well-rested kids. But no problem, I was glad to do it. After all, I had been afforded a nice nap in the car on the way down, a luxury my husband didn't get. Of course, I'm a person who does best with 8-10 hours of sleep, not that I ever get close to that, but still... So I'm doing my best to summon all the patience I have so I can watch the kids who would not let me nap, and I ended up taking the younger two to Walgreens with me to get some supplies. The place we stayed in was very nice, but it didn't come with anything – no soap, shampoo, paper towels, beverages... for a family of 6 staying for a week, these were necessities I would need at the local Walgreens. I killed some time there, got lost on the

way back, and by the time I had unloaded kids and groceries, my husband was rested and ready for some fun. We went to Golden Corral for dinner... delicious. Reminder for those of you who live in urban areas – we're not used to a variety when it comes to eating out. So, when we eat out, even at major chain restaurants, we appreciate them in a way we never did when they were available constantly.

SUN OCT 19 – slept in, had lunch at Golden Corral. Read my post about the previous night's activities if you don't understand why we had two meals in a row with Golden Corral. I would say the lunch is even better than the dinner. So then we went to Old Town, which is a row of shops fashioned like an old fashioned Main Street – there's even a general store where they sell little glass bottles of Pepsi for 50¢. When we first started going to Old Town 10 years ago, those little bottles were a quarter, but I'm not complaining – there's something about the glass bottle that makes that Pepsi taste extra good. Maybe it's the thirst quenching relief it provides after walking around in the Florida heat, or maybe it's the always much needed caffeine boost – whatever the reason, that little bottle always hits the spot. The Main St. part of Old Town is about 4-5 blocks long, and at each end, there are carnival rides. The roller coaster is jerky but fun, and I went on the swinging boat ride which was scarier than it looked! My fearless daughter, who always wants to try the big rides but isn't tall enough yet, was shaken enough on the swinging boat ride that she cried. We sat on the end, which I knew would be more thrilling than the middle, but I didn't realize how much more mild the middle would be until I rode there with our friend Jamiahsh. We had lots of fun at Old Town and kinda lost track of time. We wouldn't have been late for the dinner show Arabian Nights if we hadn't left the tickets back at the condo... oops. We had to walk around in the dark and missed the first few minutes of the show. At least they let my husband in, who let us out at the door and had to park the car. The worker in the parking lot told him

to give all the tickets to me, but when my husband tried to get in, they gave him a hard time without a ticket! Thank goodness he was able to get in and also find us in the dark. [Arabian Nights](#) is a great show. Think Medieval Times (if you've been there) without the chivalrous games. Well, there is a chariot race, but there are more acrobatics and horse dancing – the horses are gorgeous. My husband calls it Medieval Times for girls, and all us girls in the family love it. My husband was able to get a good deal on tickets online, so the show cost less than a regular dinner! And their food is really good. It's served with all-you-can-drink pop, which backfired a little bit because in the dark with the show going on, it was difficult to notice that our 2-year-old Disney was drinking A LOT of pop. So next thing I know, she's walking around, and she starts going up the stairs and tells me she'll be right back. I said, no, Disney let's stay in our seats, and then she YELLED at me – "I'LL BE RIGHT BACK!". It wasn't a really angry outburst, but if you know sweet little Disney, it was so out of character for her that it was hilarious. She was all hepped up on sugar and pop. So there's our first 2 days in Florida. We started Monday off with a time share presentation – ugh – so I'll take that as my cue to stop posting for now. This post is long enough, wouldn't you say?

Fall Back

It's been over a week since we've been in NW Ohio, and really, not much has changed. There are many less leaves on the trees than there were when we left for Disney World last Friday, but other than that... We haven't yet had a chance to check in with friends, so hopefully all is well everywhere. I have to admit that I was a bit scarred from our last vacation – we returned to the horrible news that my beloved kitty had passed away.

So this time, I was nervous about coming home. I told our pet-sitter that if anyone dies this time to not tell us while we were in Florida, thinking, what good would that do... but that decision ended up backfiring majorly because then the whole time I was worried that something had happened and I didn't know about it because I had left the instructions not to call us... But nothing catastrophic occurred, at least not to us or any of our pets, and we had a wonderful time. Now more than ever I know what people mean when they say that they need a vacation from their vacation. After taking 4 little kids on a 1,000+ mile road trip each way and returning with the trashed car and the dirty laundry and housekeeping catch-up for a family of 6, I could really use a vacation!

Oh well... we had a great time and I wouldn't trade our experiences for the world – or all the laundry in the world. More to come about the trip after I unpack some and get used to the fact that I did not gain an extra hour this weekend like Jill my GPS friend told me I had – guess she (along with my alarm clock – glad I noticed that before tomorrow morning) is pre-programmed for the “fall back” switch for daylight savings time. The only problem is that Jill and my alarm clock were programmed before the daylight savings hours were adjusted thanks to President Bush. So they are now an hour behind... but no matter, they can stay that way for another week or two, whenever we change the clocks... and then, I will get my extra hour of sleep – always fun!

A Twisted Episode of Survivor

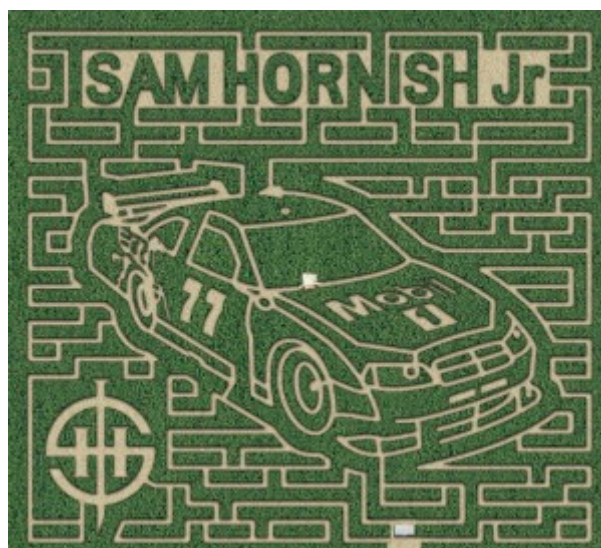
I had a wonderful weekend. It all started with another visit to a haunted house on Friday night. Although I enjoyed my previous haunted house experience at Ghostly Manor earlier

this year, I just wasn't feeling the Halloween vibe enough to subject myself to scariness – I didn't sleep well the night before and little sleep makes me feel claustrophobic – weird. But anyway, the haunted house was actually a haunted corn maze and they had other things to do at the farm, so I enjoyed myself immensely hanging out with my kids and the coolest teenager I know. There is just something about farms that make me feel an inner peace; something that was illustrated again during the weekend – more on that in my next post.

Literally a cornfield in the middle of nowhere, [Leader's Family Farms](#) has things to do to keep all ages entertained. There were even a few things we didn't even get a chance to try after spending so much time being lost in the corn maze. Next time I will have to check out the hayride and the coop shoot – I have a special affinity for hayrides because they remind me of the week-long vacations to a dude ranch I took with my family as a kid. But one thing about Leader's that really impressed me was their ability to make appealing and fun attractions without the large budget or the mechanical reliance that a major theme park would have. The "Barnyard" or family area had several things for the kids to play with: bouncy castles, a zip line, haystacks to climb on, a hay maze, slides – all physical activities which would guarantee kids' exhaustion giving the parents some "mommy-daddy time" at the end of the evening – the problem is everything was physical for Mommy and Daddy too, and like the DJ noted, "I don't know who is getting tired out more – the parents or the kids!" But that illustrates my point about the ability to entertain every age group without spending big bucks – and that is true for both the patron *and* the establishment. Actually, let me back up for a minute and go off on a tangent – the purpose of the site, right? □ Why do they call it a hayride when you're actually sitting on straw? I learned from a display at the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo that hay is green and made from grass. Straw is yellow and made from wheat. So the kids were climbing on *straw* stacks, they played in a *straw* maze,

and people were enjoying *straw* rides... doesn't have quite the same ring to it as hayrides, I guess...

But back to Leader's – they had a DJ, who hosted Karaoke and played wedding-style audience-interactive songs like Hokey-Pokey, The Chicken Dance, YMCA, and Shout. I was trying to teach Disney (my almost 2 year old) the YMCA, but she only liked the part where we clapped. Maybe next time we will get down on the dance floor – this time my other girls were too shy and tired was I. My insanely brave (or psychotic, depending upon who you ask) 4-year-old Sammie was intent on going into the haunted house, and my husband was actually going to take her in, but before she could even enter, she was frightened away from the experience by the scary music alone. We got a cell phone call just as we were entering the corn maze, and so we retrieved Sammie and let her enjoy the experience of the corn maze, which ended up being what I would describe as a twisted game of Survivor. Take 4 kids, all under the age of 9, into a corn maze and wander around in the dark for over an hour. No bathrooms, no snacks, and you only have enough stroller for two of them, so the other two have to walk. It was fun, but also quite an experience. I would love to go back and explore the maze – without kids though. And when I got home, I looked at an aerial photo of the thing, and now it all makes more sense. Here is where I spent my Friday night:



You enter at the small white building at the bottom of the picture and go left. Where we really started losing it was around the back tire and the spoiler of the race car. You can see how many forks and circles there are in the paths in that area. And again, while in the thing, I had no idea what it looked like because I didn't think to check a map before going in. I would also bring a flashlight next time; well, maybe not if I didn't have kids to worry about. We were using our cell phones for light, but then the other half of our group who went into the haunted house called to see where we were and when I said I didn't know, the cell phone lost service – adding to the stranded feeling we were experiencing. I must have stashed my cell phone on top of the stroller really quick because my daughter had turned backwards in her seat and was falling out, so after I fixed her, I frantically searched for the cell phone with no luck – apparently it had fallen off the stroller in the corn maze. So when we finally got out, I had to tell the staff that I lost my cell phone in there. As they laughed at me, they asked if it was on vibrate or silence mode – “Of course it is!” I said, because it would have been too easy to find it otherwise, and let's face it – a lost cell phone in a corn maze wouldn't be funny if you could call it and hear it ring. So a small black silent cell phone lost in a corn maze in the dark? Forget it. They did call me the next day though, saying that they did eventually find it, probably with the light of day. Well, anyway, the corn maze with 4 little children in the dark was quite an experience. Not horrible, but not recommended... quite an experience – I can only describe it as having felt like I came through an ordeal after we got out... it was kind of like being stranded in the wilderness, not knowing when rescue would arrive. Sure, there are “corn cops” and all you have to do is yell, but I don't know how they'd hear you and I honestly didn't want to be the group that yelled for help. We did it on our own, and for that, we got the satisfaction of accomplishment.

Well, I've rambled about that long enough... I had fun. I

loved the serenity of the farm at night, and it was a beautiful night weather-wise. It was cool but not cold, and being in rural Ohio meant that we were navigating the maze under a canopy of thousands of stars... I would love to go back and explore the maze without worrying about the kids being hungry, thirsty, having sore feet or having to go to the bathroom. And someone remind me that if I have any more kids, a corn maze is NOT a good activity for a pregnant woman – too much walking and not enough bathrooms. This post is so lengthy I'll have to save our alpaca farm adventure for the next post... stay tuned!

Coollest Coaster

I got an email today called "What do you remember?" – it's a list of tv shows that aren't on anymore. You add your name and a show you used to watch to the list and send it on. It made me think of a kids' show I used to love called, "The Roller Coaster Gang". I wasn't totally positive that was the name of the show, however, so I did a google search – and that's how I found what sounds like the coolest roller coaster ever!

It's called The Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster, but unfortunately for me, it's on the other side of the world at the Warner Bros. Movie World theme park in Australia. It's a haunted house / roller coaster combined, and here is the press release about it that so intrigued me:

November 30, 2002

Guests will be treated to a hair-raising journey complete with laser lighting and sound effects, animatronics and a kaleidoscope of colour, depth, height and trickery of

dimension this holiday season thanks to the Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster Ride.

A \$13 million indoor rollercoaster ride inspired by the first feature film shot at Warner Roadshow Movie World Studios on the Gold Coast starring Sarah Michelle Gellar, Freddie Prinze Jr., Matthew Lillard, Linda Cardellini and Rowan Atkinson, the Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster Ride is not a ride for the faint hearted.

Featuring carefully replicated coaster cars from Scooby-Doo the film, guests enter the creepy dimly lit courtyard and move into the heart of Spooky Castle, where ghouls, gargoyles and the odd talking suit of armour may appear!

Housed in a 25 metre high building, the Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster Ride features two distinctive experience zones, thrilling guests with different aspects of laser lighting.

While the laser lighting embraces and creates the entire illusion, maintaining it throughout the experience and simultaneously performing for multiple audiences moving through three dimensional space at high speed, the ride continuously alters direction, velocity, elevation and trajectors.

Warner Village Theme Park Chief Executive John Menzies explains that Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster is a world first and is a unique combination of two different types of entertainment experiences.

“Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster is completely innovative, no other ride in the world can be compared to this combination of experiences – the classic haunted house utilising the latest technological advances and lighting and sound effects and the adrenalin pumping thrills of an indoor rollercoaster,” said Chief Executive John Menzies.

The first experience zone further develops the Spooky Castle

theme into a ghost train ride featuring the best in traditional movie inspired theming and amusing animatronics.

Just as guests begin to think their journey is nearing conclusion, they find themselves drawn up over 17 metres into the castle's creepy tower. This unsettling experience heralds their reversed entry into the ride's second zone as guests are then pushed into a darkened void.

Disoriented in the dark, riders are now subject to the will and influence of the ghouls and gargoyles that Scooby-Doo warned of earlier.

Then, it's time to be afraid...be kind of afraid!

Perched precariously on an elevated turntable the car is turned 180 degrees to face the fate awaiting its anxious passengers.

Transfixed by an apparently infinite tunnel of emerald green laser light the riders are lurched forward into the shimmering abyss as the Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster Ride propels riders through infinite voids, passing ghost-like through shimmering walls, floors and ceilings of light and speeding into tunnels of green swirling mist.

Finally, plunging over seven meters on the adrenalin-pumping journey, guests are hurtled towards a grotesque creature and the 'ring of life'.

The Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster Ride with its ever-changing web of penetrating green laser beams, bumps, breathtaking drops and special effects thrills and excites every rider.

The multi-million dollar blockbuster, Scooby-Doo, was filmed at Warner Roadshow Movie World Studios on the Gold Coast in 2000/2001 and is the highest budget production ever filmed in Queensland to date.

Join Scooby-Doo and the Mystery Gang for the scariest,

spookiest, spine-tingling rollercoaster ever created – Scooby-Doo Spooky Coaster Ride.

Visit Warner Bros. Movie World on Australia's Gold Coast – where movie magic happens everyday!

I've never heard of Warner Bros. Movie World, but it sounds pretty neat. Too bad I didn't make it over there a few years ago – I also found out they used to have a Marvin the Martian 3-D movie, but they replaced it with Shrek 4D. That stinks; I would have liked to see that; I'm a big fan of Marvin the Martian. Oh well, hopefully by the time I get to Australia they'll still have the Scooby-Doo coaster. If only we could increase the budget we have for the haunted attraction we're building by a few million so we could add a coaster...

And I didn't end up using "The Roller Coaster Gang" as my show to put on the list. By the time I was done being distracted with looking up Australian thrill rides, I thought of another show I put instead – one whose title I was sure about. Belle and Sebastian was a Nickodeon cartoon that was about an orphaned boy named Sebastian and his big white dog, Belle. Each episode would follow the pair (along with a small dog named Poochie who would fit into Sebastian's pocket) as they ventured through the mountains looking for Sebastian's mother. People would always mistake Belle for a ferocious dog or sometimes even some kind of snow monster. I loved that show – wonder if Sebastian ever found his mother?

Moving The Choo-Choo

If you've grown up in Chicagoland as I have, then you'll know what I'm talking about when I describe a few staples of a typical suburban 1980's Chicago childhood. #1 – You've

attended a taping of the Bozo show. As I've stated before, the girl I went to the show with was put on the waiting list for tickets when she was a fetus. We went to the show taping when we were 9 – that's how long it took for her name to come up, thus illustrating how popular the experience was. #2 – If you had perfect attendance in school, you won tickets to a White Sox baseball game. Even I, a true-blue Chicago Cubs fan, ventured over to the south side as a youth to cheer on the men in black as a reward for not missing any days in a school year. Don't tell anyone though; it's not something I'm proud of. #3 – You got your grilled cheese served to you by a miniature train at the Choo-Choo restaurant in Des Plaines.

Now that it's 2008, I doubt they give away major league baseball tickets for perfect attendance in school anymore. I know for a fact that the Bozo show is no longer around, but I also know that the Choo-Choo restaurant is alive and well – for now anyway. The Choo-Choo is a small diner that serves typical american fare – hot dogs, grilled cheese, burgers, and the like. If you sit at the counter, your food is delivered by a miniature train that circles the dining room and disappears into the kitchen. It seems they are thinking of moving the Choo-Choo to build a new police department. Not putting it out of business, thank goodness, but they are considering moving it. I hope this does not happen because I'm not one to favor change, and I can't help but feel that if the restaurant is moved, it will suffer loss of business which will eventually lead to its demise. I don't understand why the proposal involves moving the entire building; from what I remember it is a very small crowded space, and the magic is in the train serving your food, not in the building itself. Since 1951, this little diner has been there, and many generations have enjoyed it. I think it would be a shame to move it as it would lose at least a little bit of its nostalgia for some people if it were in a different location. Leave it there in its tiny building. Let people stand in lines that often run out the door in order to get a counter

seat where the train runs as they've done for decades. People are more likely to return with their children and later on, their grandchildren if it's left exactly the way they remember it.

My husband and I had very different upbringings; his was a life of "privilege", getting every material item he could ever want, although his parents were never home. Mine was the opposite, a loving family always together although we had to stretch the already tight budget just to be able to afford such luxuries as an occasional happy meal from McDonalds. But we are both products of Chicagoland, therefore we share the memories of the Sox tickets perfect attendance prize (not that my husband ever won any; this is no surprise if you know anything about his school years), being at the Bozo show tapings, and our visits to the Choo-Choo restaurant. My kids have been to the restaurant also, and I hope it's still there for them to visit with my grandchildren someday.