

# Florida 2011 – Trip Diary – Part 1

Friday January 14 – We left our hometown about 4:40pm after loading the car, getting kids' school stuff stashed for the week off, the gas tank filled up, and some snacks from the drive-thru for the kids. I noted the dashboard temp at 20°F. Around 8pm, we found a Goldstar Chili to stop at in Westchester, a suburb of Cincinnati – we love to stop for Cincy chili and coneys! We took about an hour there, giving the little ones some time to run off some steam since there weren't many people there that time of night. Luckily we asked first and that's how we learned that the McDonald's Playland across the street had been removed – otherwise we would have taken 4 kids into the Playplace-shaped McDonald's and had much disappointment to contend with. Dinner went well, despite the waitress' well-meaning attempt to reward our cute kids with balloons – *helium balloons*. Really, lady? 4 helium balloons to add to the 6 people and the 6 people's week's worth of luggage in the mini-van about to trek 1000 miles? So we managed to sneak out of the restaurant with only 2 balloons, and one popped right after we got on the expressway – thankfully it wasn't too distracting to driver Hubby or we would have all been in trouble. That last balloon made it all the way down to Florida with us, and it bopped around our rental house for the rest of the week until I “forgot” to pack it for the trip home. After the Goldstar stop, the kids bedded down for the night, and they were all out by 10:30 – not bad, not bad at all!! I had such a great time talking with Hubby and keeping him company as we drove down the country together that I didn't want to go to bed, but I made myself try for some shut-eye around 2:30am. I do really like the schedule we've made for these long drives to Florida, but there is just one downside – the most beautiful part of our trip, the winding drives through the breathtaking

Tennessee mountains, is always done during the night when we cannot see anything outside but the lights of the towns in the valleys far below. Hubby (and me) arrive in Florida tired, but the kids are well rested, and this is a way to break up the monotony of a 20+ hour car ride for those kids.

Saturday January 15 – We all woke up around 6:30am when we stopped for gas; I can't remember where we were. But the kids were in good moods, and the sunrise was beautiful. Since the south was just coming out of a cold snap at this time, the air had an odd smell to it – a hard-to-describe tropical-climate-frozen-over kind of smell. The kids awoke in wonderful moods, and we ate up all the miles we could until we began to get hungry for breakfast. We decided to stop first for breakfast and then head to the beach since we had made the extra 90 minute jaunt over to the coast to visit while we were in the area. We chose St. Augustine Florida since it's coastal, and I had been there as a kid and kind of wanted to see it again. But when we got off the expressway, there was no place for a family breakfast. The Shoney's that was on the roadside attraction sign had turned into a Chinese buffet, and even if we decided to stomach Chinese food for breakfast, they were not open at 8 in the morning. So we headed east to the coast, and we found St. Augustine to be somewhat of a ghost town. There were shuttered buildings and for lease signs everywhere; it was sad. There seemed to be 2 sections to the city, however, and while the one section was full of shuttered attractions, empty storefronts and loiterers, the 'original' part of St. Augustine was bustling and beautiful. Hordes of people were walking around the streets near the quaint shops, and we found our first glimpse of the ocean beyond the [Castillo de San Marcos](#). We weren't able to stay long since everyone was starving and St. Augustine does not seem to have any family-type restaurants (mostly seafood and steak here), but we did get to glimpse some of the oldest city in the United States and marvel at the narrow streets as we tried to find our way out. We got back on I-95 and exited miles south;

near Palm Bay, I think – everyone was SO hungry at this point I wasn't paying much attention to where we were, just that there was food nearby. The Golden Corral here was excellent and satisfied our hunger pangs quite well. And I have to note how incredibly amazing those hungry, tired kid behaved!!! All they wanted was to get to the beach, and they were SO hungry, but they were SO patient while we looked for food – unbelievable!! Next it was time to find a beach, so we drove east and found a nice place where we had been before. It's a minimal \$2 toll to get over a bridge and to the coast, but well worth it since there is ample parking and shelters with bathrooms and showerheads to get the sand off.



We had a great time at the beach, even if it was cold (I think in the 50s – I'm writing this so long after it's hard to remember!) and the locals were walking along the coastline wearing hats and gloves while we were wading. The kids LOVED the beach, but we got cold and very tired since we were on minimal sleep, so we threw everyone into the car; most of the kids were half-dressed. At this point, all we wanted to do was get to our rental house in Orlando, and we were so excited when we spotted Orlando's familiar landmarks along the I-4 corridor. But we had one stop to make – Downtown Disney to check how many Disney World tickets we had left – you can't do this over the phone anymore. Downtown Disney was MOBBED and we were a bit discouraged, but then again, we go through this every time we take a trip to Florida- we think it's crowded

down there, but everything ends up ok. This year was quite crowded comparatively, so we asked a Disney cast member, and they summed it up in one word, "Brazilians." After she said that, looking around, there were a lot of Brazilians, I guess because in January it's their summer vacation since they are in the southern hemisphere. But anyway, my husband was walking around Downtown Disney, trying to find our ticket info, and things had been so crazy when we dropped him off, that he got out of the car without his shoes (remember he was on 0 hours of sleep!). So he's walking around Downtown Disney, confused, shoeless, and smelling like the ocean – people are staring, some are laughing. Then he realizes – his toenails are painted!! He had promised our 6 year old a week before that if she was good about getting up and going to school in the morning for a whole week, she could paint Daddy's toenails. We and some random strangers had a good laugh about that.

We left Downtown Disney, and we were SO anxious to get to the house we made a beeline straight for it except for one problem – we were an hour early for check-in. So we headed back to the tourist area (Irlo Bronson Highway), and we looked for some timeshare presentations to sign up for. Don't get me wrong, it's not that we like to do timeshare presentations, but we've gotten great at saying no, and Hubby and I used to make little games we'd play (insert funny random word in the conversation, things like that) that would make the 2-3 hours fly by. Plus they would feed you and pay you for your time, so we recovered some of our vacation expenses that way. Little did we know that the Orlando vacation scene is changing – timeshare presentations are no longer a dime a dozen; in fact, we never found one that paid enough to be worth our time.

So we're trying to kill an hour before we could get to the house, and we make a stop at the gift shop when we realize that most of the kids are not even dressed. So I open the

back of the van, and everything that we had just haphazardly thrown in the back when we left the beach tumbles out – including our bag of collected seashells. So I'm picking up the seashells from the parking lot, one by one, and since I was half asleep, I didn't really notice what I was doing until I heard, "Uh, Mom..." I look in my hand, and I had picked up a couple of someone's old discarded cigarette butts!! Having had barely any sleep, I lost it then, and I laughed with the kids until I cried.

We pulled ourselves together and made it back to the house, which was finally ready – YAY!!! Hubby took the kids in the pool while I unloaded and unpacked – I was happy to do this chore without little ones underfoot, and their behavior on the long drive was so incredibly stellar that they deserved a swim. In a couple of hours, some of our fellow vacationers arrived (my mom and our friend Jamiahsh), and we headed out for some stuffed Chicago style pizza at Giordano's. We have had the question, why go all the way to Florida to get Chicago-style pizza, but it was YUMMY and we had gotten a Groupon for it which saved us money.

After that, Hubby and I went out together while the kids stayed with Grandma and Jamy, but we didn't do much – we were still looking (in vain) for timeshare presentations to attend. We went to Old Town, which is an area in Orlando set up like an old-fashioned midway. There are blocks of little shops – and bars, which were overflowing this Saturday night with intoxicated people- and carnival and thrill rides at either end of the strip of shops. We normally have fun at Old Town, but I don't think we will be going back on a Saturday night- definitely wasn't for kids.

*(continued in part 2, a more abbreviated version!)*

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# 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:





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# 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?