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The Return—and Rethink— of the Road Trip

Huge numbers of Americans are heading out to drivable destinations. While some things have changed, the allure of vacationing behind the wheel remains as strong as ever.

BY TOM VANDERBILT

Scenic routes are getting a closer look from travelers this season.

FROM LEFT: GETTY IMAGES; PAUL COSTELLO/AUGUST

MY WIFE AND I typically fill our summers with a tangle of airline connections and a geography lesson's worth of stops. This year, with most international travel stymied by government restrictions, limited airline schedules, and a flurry of Cold War-style checkpoints, we instead looked closer to home as we prepared to leave New York City for the first time in three months.

Though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "level 3" advisory to "avoid nonessential travel" was still in place, Vermont had lifted its quarantine rules for out-of-state vacationers. Suddenly, escape seemed possible—and, arguably, essential to our mental health. So we decided to check out the newly "contactless" resort **Twin Farms** (twinfarms.com; doubles from \$2,200), in Vermont. Just as suddenly, reality set in. Would we need to get tested before leaving? Would there be bathrooms along the way? Would my favorite stopping point, the Chelsea Royal Diner near Brattleboro, with its burger smothered in grilled onions and Grafton cheddar, be open for pickup?

We were hardly alone in hitting the road. "Getting away from it all" has acquired a new meaning," says analyst Henry Harteveldt, president of the Atmosphere Research Group. Travelers, he notes, buffeted by economic uncertainty and ever-changing rules, are choosing to go by car rather than by air. The "daily travel index," compiled by the data-mining company Arrivalist, showed a big spike in car trips over Memorial Day weekend, though overall volume was down relative to years past.

Spurred by concerns about safety, Harteveldt says, travelers are seeking out smaller lodgings in less-visited areas that are within comfortable driving distance. Hotels are now advertising PPE-equipped housekeepers the way they once touted thread counts; Airbnb is

suggesting that hosts leave days between stays to maximize safety. Some road-trippers are skipping the traditional roof altogether, says Matt Gaghen, CEO of the "safari-inspired glamping" company **Under Canvas** (undercanvas.com). "We've seen a tremendous response to our camp reopenings," he says. The RV-sharing company **Outdoorsy** (outdoorsy.com) reports a 2,600 percent increase in reservations from late March to early June; in May, almost nine in 10 bookings were made by first-timers.

Our trip to Vermont felt not just like we were returning to some cherished place, but to travel itself. Yes, my favorite diner was open for takeout, but Vermont's cheery welcome centers were closed. (We did sign a mandatory form for Twin Farms, confirming we'd followed all of Vermont's rules (healthvermont.gov), and signed up for the state's

free Sara Alerts, which asked us to report any COVID-19-like symptoms.)

At Twin Farms, social distancing was easy, as we were virtually alone on the 300-acre property for what I quickly dubbed our "lockdown-moon." We were disappointed that the Japanese *ofuro* (a stand-alone bathhouse with a hot soaking pool) was closed, as was the entire spa. But things felt mostly normal, just with a hyper-attentive focus on sanitization—such as the blue tape that marked the just-cleaned bikes and croquet mallets. As we sat on the restaurant's outdoor terrace one evening, exchanging pleasantries with a masked waiter and the other couple, who were seated 20 feet away, those simple joys were more than enough.



▲ The garden terrace at Twin Farms, in Vermont, where social distancing is the norm.