

# TEXAS SHORTCUT

BY JOE SAGE

In many ways, this may be the biggest drive event over our last cycle—tied, at least, with the TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo, its purpose.

The paradox is not lost on us that we do a lot of flying, when *Driver* is our middle name. But it's the spirit of the open road that inspired all this in the first place, and as Truck Rodeo loomed—our first destination event since February—the idea of driving there took hold. We've flown the route many times, normally quick and easy, but it was proving more complicated this time (see story in this issue). Driving seemed nearly irresistible.

To be ready for our long-day drive event in the Texas Hill Country west of Austin, we had to arrive in time to get some sleep. The drive totals about 17 hours, and we'd lose two hours from Mountain Standard to Central Daylight time. Sensible solutions seemed to suggest an overnight en route.

Having not put our heads on strange pillows for the duration of the pandemic to date, we looked up motels. And on this major cross-country Interstate, there really are none from El Paso to Austin. We considered just packing a pillow and blanket and folding down our rear seats for an expanded trunk. But a nonstop seemed most likely. But this would mean leaving at 2 am to get there by 9 pm. But if we left by 4 am, got there at 11 pm and unwound by midnight, we could still sleep six hours. Heck, that'd be just 10 pm our time. Then again, it would be a wake-up call at 4 am our time.

Most weekly review vehicles have a 500-mile cap, plus would have to be back, guaranteed, in time for the next swap. Instead, we changed the



oil and checked the belts and hoses on a vehicle of our own—a first-year 2008 Audi S5 with just 35,000 miles on it, 354-hp 4.2L V8, 6-speed manual, road-hugging quattro, and a 160GB iPod Classic plugged into its fine Bang & Olufsen audio system.

The whole trip was iffy for its own reasons, and by the end of the week, we figured we'd missed it. But on the last barely possible night, we bargained that if we happened to wake up at 4 am, we could pull it off. We packed, just in case, and went to bed,

no alarm. And woke up at 4 am. And were showered, loaded and underway by 5 am.

Some official highway signs are amusingly unusual in southern New Mexico, and billboards for classic tourist stops are plentiful. I-10 turns south at Las Cruces and heads down the Rio Grande Valley to El Paso—the biggest city between Phoenix and Austin, Dallas or San Antonio, a bit bigger



than Tucson (700,000 vs 550,000). And it's the last reliable stop for gas or food for almost 600 miles.

With Texas extending well below New Mexico, we've long joked that you can drive from Arizona to Texas while holding your breath. The clock changes at the New Mexico line and again just a bit east of El Paso, so perhaps you can change two time zones while holding your breath, as well.

After El Paso, I-10 runs along the Chihuahua border for about 65 miles—a couple of miles separating us from the farms and mountains of Mexico across one last fertile patch of the Rio Grande.

Widely scattered towns from that point east are vestiges of once thriving US Highway communities, before the Interstates blew past them—now with a *Last Picture Show* look and feel. We pulled into several—Sierra Blanca, Van Horn, Fort Stockton, Ozona and others—for a look and to try our luck on fuel or meals. And water. Pro tip: load up your own pallets of water for this drive

You could maybe drive the whole route with your eyes closed. From Phoenix, it's I-10 east, exit at US 290 just west of Luckenbach and roll into Austin. For San Antonio, it's I-10 all the way. For Dallas, exit earlier at I-20 through Midland-Odessa.

Our plan worked. We pulled in to our hotel at exactly midnight with exactly 1100 miles on the odo.

Driving, and also taking our own vehicle, also gave us the flexibility to visit a friend or two before we headed back west. When the Truck Rodeo wrapped, we dashed north to greater Dallas-Fort Worth as the sun went down—another few hours and few hundred miles on our total tally. This also meant we'd return via Midland-Odessa, famed twin oil towns of West Texas, for our first time.

We left Dallas at 9 am (7 am Arizona time), figuring another midnight arrival back home. Central Texas greenery gives way to wide open spaces, punctuated only by the wide-ranging oil fields, concentrated development and distinctive thick,



white air of Midland-Odessa, till you rejoin I-10. From there, you feel like someone coming out West for the first time, on the best possible route—successively more open space, giving way to outcroppings and buttes, ultimately to the dramatic volcanic peaks and rock formations of Southeast Arizona. It's a dramatic evolution and different feel than, say, endless fields of wheat across Kansas till the sudden wall of Rockies in mid-Colorado.

We hit southeast Arizona about 1 am. We could

be home by 4 am or so, but that's 6 am Texas time. Plus we had become used to the idea of a strange pillow again while in Texas. We grabbed a sandwich at Willcox, checked apps and found a great room at the Arizona Sunset Inn, well off the Interstate, good to know for future runs to Chiricahua National Monument or Inde Motorsports Ranch.

In all, we were gone for five and a half days, to do an eight-hour drive event, covering 2500 miles. And it was, as always, great to be back home. ■

