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Road Trip

Last weekend I did some longer distance car travelling, as a comfortable passenger with nothing to do but view the passing scenery, in between our conversations. If I relive the journey, in general terms, you can get lots of road travel vocabulary under your belt and the next time you find yourself as a passenger, you can visualise the shorthand for everything you see as the vehicle proceeds along its route.

My friend's car drew up outside my house, parking in the road next to my driveway. I checked that I had all my bags with me, fastened my seatbelt and was ready to start our trip which we estimated would take just under two hours. The satnav was in place, and we were able to track our journey from home to the destination city. My road is residential, but within a few minutes, we were on the main road amidst the morning traffic. We had expected to see cars end to end, as that road is usually very busy at the weekend, but all was reasonably clear at that point. We passed several sets of traffic lights, with their red, amber and green lights, as well as the green arrow filter lights for cars that are turning off the main road.

We exited the roundabout, which is underneath a large flyover, and eventually joined the motorway, then another even larger roundabout and another motorway that leads to the river crossing at Dartford. We had to go through the tunnel under the river. There were notices everywhere about paying the crossing charge. Everyone's car number plate is captured by surveillance cameras and you have to pay by midnight the next day. This is much better than the toll booths that used to be here, where every car and truck had to stop, pay the operative, wait for the barrier to rise, and drive off. There were lots of pay points under that system, but it must have been a bit of a scrum in rush hour, the vehicles fanning out to the row of booths and then converging into the lanes on the other side. Two and a half minutes through the tunnel brought us out into Essex.

The north side of the Thames at this location is an entirely industrialised landscape, with huge factories and warehouses, the best place for them really, along the river which is opening out to estuary and its marshy land. Much as I enjoy scenic countryside, for a longer journey I prefer to be on the motorway to shorten the journey time. However, we were soon travelling through the green countryside, with fields, villages and towns whizzing past on either side. The motorway signboards giving town names, distances and directions are all the same, blue with white lettering. Sometimes there are overhead gantries with lighted displays on them, giving instructions or information such as delays, traffic jams, roadworks, temporary speed restrictions or weather warnings.

Two-thirds of the way through our journey, we came to an extensive area of road building, with great swathes of countryside on each side being prepared and reshaped for new motorway roads. We were surrounded by churned up mud, criss-crossed with tractor and digger tracks, muddy puddles, piles of earth, sand and gravel, and wooden markers and cones everywhere. The two halves of an uncompleted flyover approach, standing entirely on their own amidst the apparent chaos, made it obvious that this is not disorder but the unfolding of a grand plan for an interchange and all the looping slip roads that accompany it.

The motorway we were on was once like that, green fields replaced by concrete and tarmac. Once the concreting work is finished, the surfaces will be marked up with solid and dotted lines, chevrons, arrows, letters and numbers. Signs will sprout everywhere directing the vehicles, and advising or prohibiting certain actions. Continuous roadside barriers will be erected to keep errant cars out of the ditch. The bare soil will be smoothly re-landscaped and grassed over. Very soon this will be covered in sapling trees, and little shrubs each growing up a protective tube, eventually emerging from the top,

Road Trip

above rabbit nibble height, to cover and stabilise the slopes. In summer the edges and verges will be carpeted in tall grasses and occasionally brambles doing their best to advance towards the road. Near the end of our journey, on a smaller road, we saw the result of such encroachment by brambles and hedges, namely a digger with a branch snipping tool instead of a bucket at its end, and men in high vis jackets wielding chainsaws, trimming back the overgrowth.

I am glad to say we did not have any police cars chasing or ambulances passing us en route to an accident or incident, although we did pass one police car pulled up behind a motorist. In this country the sound of the siren will always result in drivers slowing down, and even pulling in to the verge or a side road, to allow the emergency vehicle to pass. Motorists at traffic lights know the vehicle is likely to drive round the traffic islands, taking any route that gets it through the bottleneck. Drivers will squeeze themselves to the side, go up kerbs and do their best to create room, and I often wonder if this custom is peculiar to this country or if it is the norm in other countries as well.

I like to observe the drivers in passing cars. A very expensive looking car might have a very scruffy and dishevelled driver, and a rusty old banger might be driven by someone in a smart suit. Some are packed with holiday bags and luggage that obscure the rear view. Some have wobbling bikes lashed upside down to the roof rack or a trailer that weaves and bumps along behind. Some drivers are busy looking at their phones, eating, drinking, talking and turning their heads towards their passenger, or apparently singing along to music. I am glad to say that most are just staring ahead, staying out of trouble and intent on getting to their destination in one piece. There is no longer the supposed "freedom of the open road", as it was described in the early days of motor travel. Now we have strict speed limits,

information and warning signs everywhere, speed cameras and officers with laser beam speed guns doing random checks on passing cars. I did read once of someone standing at the roadside holding up a similar-looking hair dryer, which had the desired effect of slowing the motorists down, in order to reduce the fast traffic through their narrow village high street.

If I ever felt like flying to my destination, I think the satnav can do that for me as well, with its aerial view of our progress and all the buildings in simplified three-dimensional format. That type of display is great entertainment for the passenger to gaze at, when the scenery gets less interesting, but probably not a good idea for the driver to get too involved with for longer than a second or two, to confirm their whereabouts and the features that are coming up, such as slip roads, junctions and roundabouts. In the past I would sit with the half folded Ordnance Survey map on my lap, following our progress from London to Cornwall, and telling the driver what is coming up next.

We reached our destination in the time expected, and parked up next to the steel bollards in the car parking area on the forecourt. Our return journey, which started with a different route, was equally uneventful, apart from a time of delay and slow travelling due to roadworks. There was far less scenery to watch for most of the time, as the mizzly rain produced a mist that covered the countryside and the winter darkness slowly faded out the views. The road ahead going uphill was a long snake of the misty white shapes of oncoming headlamps, and the yellowy orange rear lights on our side. We came back over the QE2 Bridge, with both riverbanks lit up and long streaks of reflections on the river itself. The London traffic grew denser and the cars more closely packed. The road and place names became more familiar and finally we pulled up outside my house, a round trip of about 250 miles (1400 words).