

IHOP Over Idaho

On a mother-daughter road trip, a foodie mom confronts her fast-food demons.

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Cross-country road trip -- Day 33.

We're in Twin Falls, Idaho, and the rain is coming down in sheets. My 10-year-old twins and I have just spent more than three hours slogging from the Best Western to the Sleepytime Inn and everywhere in between, looking for a place to spend the night. But there's a softball tournament in town, and all the motels are full of girls and their parents lugging duffels full of sports gear.

As the rain clatters hard on the car roof and the dampness begins to steam off my daughters' pink and purple slickers, I can feel the tension rising from the back seat.

My instinct is to keep driving, heading west before darkness entirely envelopes the plains. But at the last place we stopped, the desk clerk had told us that there were no vacant rooms between here and Boise, more than three hours away. The girls are anxious, though, and I'm afraid that hunger will feed their fear.

"We'll have to go on to the next town," I say. "Let's find a place for dinner before we get back on the highway."

Twin Falls looks sad in the rain. There's no one out on the streets of the old-timey downtown, and the rest of the city seems to be one long strip of malls, McDonald's, and muffler shops. Near the entrance to Interstate 84, there's a huge sign for an IHOP, the pancake house chain.

"Momma?" Michaela asks, chewing absently on the end of her dark braid as she gazes out at the fluorescent-lit building, beckoning with its glow.

"Could we?" Talia chimes in, bouncing up and down, without even having to say anything else.

They know that I'm a total food snob when it comes to fast-food restaurants. In the 2,000 miles we've driven so far, our only fast-food stop was at a Burger King, and it was just to use the bathroom.

I look out at the shiny sign and then back at the girls. Thirty-three days ago, we had left our home in Boston, en route to a new home – and a different life – in western Canada, where my husband had recently started a new job. When I had first begun planning this road trip, a meandering six-week drive from one side of the continent to the other, I saw it as an unexpected gift. A time to be together with my girls, unfettered from the demands of day-to-day life. A time for exploring. A time for just hanging out. It seems corny, perhaps, but I had envisioned a mother-daughter bonding adventure. A last gasp of togetherness before they began to dismiss me with their impending teenage scorn.

Yet I also imagined us on a kind of cross-country food odyssey. We were moving north to Canada, and along the way I wanted my daughters to eat their way across America. I've never been particularly patriotic, but somehow, I hoped that Michaela and Talia would have happy memories of their home country – or at least its fresh-baked biscuits, its barbecued brisket, and its homemade strawberry pies.

In our 33 days on the road so far, my daughters and I have enthusiastically sampled red-sauce Italian at Niagara Falls and fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and cream gravy outside of Indianapolis. We've lunched on wiener schnitzel with spaetzle in New Ulm, Minnesota, and on "Indian tacos" in Custer, South Dakota. We've roasted

marshmallows over a campfire and stopped at roadside diners for buffalo burgers and fresh-caught lake trout.

The girls, too, have uncomplainingly visited all the strange food places I've been able to find. Along a back road in upstate New York, the Museum of Jell-O. In Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, the Mustard Museum. On the Minnesota prairie, the Museum of SPAM.

Perhaps now it's my turn to let them take their turn. "OK," I sigh, "let's eat."

In the back seat, both girls whoop and cheer.

It's 7 o'clock when we pull into the pancake house parking lot, and the IHOP is indeed hopping. The dining room is full of families and pairs of elderly ladies in polyester pants.

I'm all in favor of breakfast for dinner, but as we sink into the bright red booth and open the massive menus, I look hard for something that's not sickly sweet.

The girls sensibly select basic buttermilk pancakes, while I'm lured by the "Harvest Grain," labeled "healthy choice!" but slathered with a gooey substance that purports to be strawberries.

Talia and Michaela are chewing silently.

"Good?" I ask. They shrug, noncommittal, their mouths full. Perhaps they're wondering: if they confess to liking their dinner, will the fast-food devil take their souls?

"Can I taste?"

They both push their plates toward me.

The buttermilk pancakes aren't bad. And I begin to realize, despite my food-snob ways, that maybe fast food isn't some kind of moral issue, an evil that will cause my kids to grow up to be prisoners of American consumer culture. Maybe it's a part of that culture, as much as homemade biscuits, New England clam chowder, and Wisconsin cheddar cheese. And really, why shouldn't I encourage my daughters to be as curious about IHOP as they are about dim sum parlors, taquerias, or down-home barbecue joints?

Of course, I want my children to share my love of different cultures, foods, and people, wherever they might go in the world. But on a frustrating road-trip day, when we're far from home, maybe we can give a little love to IHOP's buttermilk pancakes, too.

"You chose the right thing," I tell them, and they grin, as though they've just been given absolution by the gourmet gods.

As I lean back into the crimson booth, my daughters gobble up the rest of their pancakes. Then we pull on our raincoats and head back out onto the road.