

New York Trip Diary Volume 5

NEW YORK TRIP – MARCH 20-23, 2009 – TAYLOR: 9 yrs, SAMMIE: 4 yrs, DISNEY: 2½ yrs, CHRISTOPHER: 8 mos

(continued from previous posts)

Monday, March 23 – We left the hotel for the Pittsburgh Zoo and promptly got lost. Many cities are situated on just one river, but some bank alongside 2 or 3 rivers, and that's where Pittsburgh lost me and we, in turn, got lost. Multiple rivers and all those hills – I have lots of trouble navigating my way through hills and mountains for some reason – probably because if you miss a turn, you can't just go a block and correct yourself because there's hills in the way. And Pittsburgh was also not lacking in what had become our nemesis (besides the ever-elusive Waterways bus) on this trip – construction zones. And we already talked about how Jill the GPS doesn't do detours. Lost as we were, we again got lucky and didn't wind up in any bad neighborhoods, but we did have to go without breakfast and almost without lunch. We stopped at a random police station for directions, and they were very nice (though they have some of the funkiest accents I've ever heard there in Pittsburgh – what IS that?), but the directions were very complicated, probably because of the rivers and hills to drive around, and we got lost again. Finally we found the zoo, and we picked up lunch at a little food stand on the river across from the zoo, and we refrained from making good on our threats to throw Jill the GPS in the river. Except now we were down to only getting to spend 2 hours at the zoo before they closed.

[The Pittsburgh Zoo](#) is nestled within some steep hills – like all the zoos we visited on this trip – and you had to take an elevator to get up the main hill and into the zoo. Once inside, we were very impressed. I'm having trouble deciding which zoo I like better between Pittsburgh and Akron –

Cleveland is not even on the same level as the other two. Pittsburgh has a thriving elephant herd – 2 calves born just weeks apart last July! Baby elephants are somewhat rare and difficult to come by in zoos – if a zoo can actually get elephants to breed (and I know the baby in Toledo was conceived via artificial insemination, so breeding might be somewhat difficult), they still have to wait through an extremely long gestation period (almost 2 years!) before seeing if they have a healthy calf. So the fact that Pittsburgh has 2 elephant calves that were born in the same month last year (also the same month as our baby boy!) is nothing short of amazing.

The Pittsburgh Zoo has an awesome aquarium with 3 types of penguin and a huge seahorse tank – next to manatees, seahorses are my favorite animal, and I have never before seen such a nice habitat for them or such huge seahorses! Also in the aquarium is an area where you can pet stingrays, and there's even a tunnel that runs underneath their pool that kids can crawl through and come up in the middle of the pool. Here is a picture of my daughter after she crawled through the tunnel:



And speaking of tunnels, Pittsburgh Zoo has a tunnel that goes *under* their polar bear pool! How cool is that? We didn't actually see it because we were there near closing time, and the bears were pacing by the door to go in for the night – we knew they wouldn't be swimming any more that day, so we skipped the tunnel. But I must go back some day to see that,

and also to spend more time in this awesome zoo – ok, I guess I just decided that I like Pittsburgh just a little bit more than Akron, but it was a tough call! Too bad Pittsburgh is almost 5 hours away, or I'd return in a heartbeat! And I forgot to mention how many fun things they have to kids to do, even beyond seeing the animals. They had a totally awesome looking playground, but we didn't go on that one because we weren't sure we'd have enough time. When we got to the end of the zoo, there was another playground, so we let them play on that until closing time. Our 2-year-old got "stuck" at the top of the playground – she was too scared to go down the slide and refused to come back out through the tunnels. I was worried that we'd get locked in the zoo like a couple of college kids I read about in Jack Hanna's hilarious book, *My Wild Life* – they got locked in the dark reptile house, where they could hear things splashing around all night! After we got my daughter to come down off the playground (thanks to her big sister who lured her away), the sea lions were putting on a little show right in the front of the underwater viewing window – which reminds me, we had also gotten to see an impromptu sea lion show earlier in the day – the zookeepers were training them and rewarding them with fish, it was really cool to watch!

On the way home, we stopped in Elyria, Ohio for dinner at a Golden Corral (always delicious) where my husband was a victim of racial discrimination by the steak griller, and we found what must be the last non-Super Walmart left in the world. Trying to save room in the car, we had neglected to pack enough diapers for our two children who still wear them, and we had to break into the new packs of diapers right there in the Walmart to change a double poopie from the baby and his big sister! It was interesting to be in a Walmart without groceries where the employees were actually preparing to close the store for the night – almost like time travel, but if I traveled in time, the last place I'd go is Walmart!

So anyway, now we had only 2 hours left of the drive home, and it passed uneventfully – the kids slept. We got home sweet home at about midnight, and the kids were really excited to see their pets and their room – they had trouble getting back to sleep. The pets were happy to see us, and my thanks goes to our great friend Carol who kept the pets healthy and happy during our absence. I was really surprised to see how big the rats got in just a few days though, Carol, what did you feed them?!? ☐

So, I had an amazing adventure with wonderful people. And this is the end of my diary. Well, not really, I will have one more entry to go back to the World Trade Center site visit, but I'm waiting for the right time to blog about that – it was a very moving experience. So thanks for reading, and I hope you had fun and maybe even learned a little something about places you may or may not want to visit some day!

New York Trip Diary Volume 4

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(continued from previous posts)

Sunday, March 22 – Learning from our mistake the previous day, we decided to eat breakfast in the room, and it was much less expensive, we had plenty of room, and we didn't have to worry about the kids disturbing anyone. After breakfast, we headed to the city again, even though we were all kind of sick of it at that point. But when I had heard that we'd be going to New York, the top site to see on my list was the World Trade Center site. So even though we were sick of the commute to the city and searching for buses, we headed out to see Ground

Zero. We caught another bus tour, but this one was “hop on, hop off”, meaning you could get off at any of the stops, unlike the bus tour we had taken the night before. But in New York city traffic, we still ended up being on the bus for about an hour, much to the kids’ dismay since they were starting to find the bus tours boring. But 3/4 of the kids took a nap (and hubby too!), which left me and Jamy to listen (and giggle) at the tour guide – a very hyper Asian woman with a very thick accent. She was very informative (when we could understand her, of course), but she would interject between her touring tidbits with concerns she had about the traffic – at one point she talked (nicely) to another bus, telling it we were there first and not to hit us. Another time, a man boarded the bus who was selling water and popcorn, and she felt the need to tell us, “this is not a movie theater”. Duh.

Anyway, we arrived at Ground Zero, but I think I’m going to do a separate post on that experience – it really was mind-blowing.

We left the Trade Center site and went into the World Financial Center – a beautiful building where people were very nice and gave us detailed directions about how to get to the ferry without using the famous New York grunt n’ gesture. The best news is that we weren’t going to have to take a Waterways bus! Seems the ferry came right over to the financial district – YAY! On the way to the river, we found some gelato to buy in the financial center. Gelato is a type of Italian ice cream handmade on the spot, and it is incredible. I had trouble deciding on just 3 flavors, but I chose well: cookie dough, pistachio, and raspberry. They were all delicious, but the raspberry was especially amazing. For those of you who know me, you will be shocked to learn that I like gelato even more than I like Dippin’ Dots – that is how good it is!

So we made our way to the riverfront, and when we got to the ferry station, it was closed. Honestly, you’d think that at least 1 of the 5 or more people who had given us directions

would have known this, but I guess not. And I don't think they were playing a trick on us because unlike the grunt n' gesture-ers, they were really nice – I think they just genuinely didn't know. So here we were again. Stuck in New York with no Waterways bus to be found. My husband was very smart when he read the fine print on the Waterways card we had that said Waterways buses would stop at any city bus stop on a Waterways route, so all we had to do was find one of those. We asked some not-so-friendly construction workers, who said that there were NO city bus stops on the entire street we were on. So we used the map on the Waterways card, and we went a few blocks this way and a few blocks that way, and we found a city bus stop which we thought was on a Waterways route... Unfortunately the only way to check if we were right was to sit and wait for a bus that might never come, but lo and behold, there was another Waterways bus, and my husband again jumped in front of it while we quickly scooped up all the kids before the driver changed his mind. We were really getting the hang of this now, but that was our last Waterways bus, thank goodness! Here is a picture of our 8-month-old's ET impression – Manny Jamy was the lucky baby-wearer since my back never would have tolerated it all day and we wanted to leave my husband open for our clingy 2-year-old:



We got back to the hotel which is where we had left our car, and my husband used their Wi-Fi to find us a hotel in Pittsburgh. We were having such a good time that we figured

we'd extend the trip a little and make one more zoo stop. The only problem is, we didn't make it to our Pittsburgh hotel until 3 in the morning due to a 2 hour stop at Houlihan's for dinner! Why did it take so long? We were kind of a large party, and the place was mobbed. Add in 2 poopie diapers and a bathroom full of drunks, and well, you do the math. Some guy stopped on his way to the bar to gush over the baby, and while he was doing that, his girlfriend took a nasty spill up the bar stairs, glass (already empty, of course) flying out of her hand and everything. Instead of trying to get up, she just lay there, probably because she was so drunk (she wasn't hurt; I saw her later and she was fine), and her equally drunk boyfriend didn't even notice all of this. So I said, "Is she ok?" and when he turned to look, I fled with the baby. Interesting experience, but one that makes me even more thankful for home sweet home – we never have those kinds of crowds in our restaurants! Like I said, we got to our Pittsburgh hotel about 3 in the morning, and we had kids who didn't want to go back to sleep. But we finally got them down, and we got a few hours of shut-eye before it was time to get up and add a new zoo to my list!

New York Trip Diary Volume 3

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(continued from previous posts)

Saturday, March 21 – We awoke about 8:30, which seemed early since we had arrived at our hotel late the night before and the kids stayed up for a little bit even after we arrived. So we went down to the hotel's restaurant to get breakfast, which

was a mistake. I had thought it'd be cheaper to eat in the restaurant rather than get room service, and I had also thought we'd be cramped trying to eat in the room. But down at the restaurant, our kids went nuts, and continued to do so while it took about an hour for the food to come. And this was a nice restaurant – not a friendly mom n pop place where they actually like and tolerate kids like we're used to back home. They did have pretty good hollandaise sauce for their eggs benedict, but my enjoyment of it was severely compromised due to the stress of the kids. Our server kept walking by and mumbling things, and I'll admit that our 8 month old son does make a mess when he eats, but don't they all? We cleaned up the best we could, but that didn't stop the server from "stealing" our change. That's right, when we paid the bill, the included 14% gratuity apparently wasn't enough for him because he failed to bring the change back. Rather than try to track down Mr. Rude (we are SO not in Kansas anymore!), my husband took up the issue with the front desk.

Next it was time for the business meeting (the reason we came, I guess), and so Manny Jamy took the kids down to the pool while hubby and I met with the clients. Except they were late, and while we were waiting, I began to have doubts about the baby and I being disruptive to the meeting, so I took him back to our room to put on his bathing suit so he could join his sisters in the pool. Just as I arrived, so did Manny Jamy with the rest of the kids, and we decided to take them for a walk outside instead. Our hotel was on the New Jersey side, and offered a postcard view of the New York skyline:



Even though I had never been there before, it seemed to me that there was indeed a gaping hole where the twin towers used to stand, and Jamy who had been there before confirmed this. We watched many a garbage barge sail by, and I was surprised to find that the sea gulls in New York are quite bashful – I guess I'm used to the ones at Sea World and Marineland Canada where they'll just swoop down and swipe the fish you buy to feed the dolphins and whales. But it was a nice day, and our hotel offered a nice little pocket of solstice tucked away from the frenzied traffic of the city. I wanted to kill as much time down there as possible since we were short on room in the car and my packing of toys for the hotel room had to be limited. But my oldest was tired – she fell asleep on a bench outside – and her little brother started losing it because he also needed a nap so badly. So we went back up to the room to wait for my husband's meeting to be over. Manny Jamy was nice enough to watch the two middle girls so that I could catch a nap with my oldest and the baby, and it was MUCH needed and MUCH appreciated. Our 2 year old fell asleep as well, which was a good thing, but I was disappointed I couldn't take her to be shown off to the clients when my husband called – she is awfully cute! So anyway, I went down to meet the clients, and they were extremely nice. They have a baby who was born just 9 days before my son, and she was really adorable! I was disappointed – if I had known they had brought the baby, I would have stayed at the meeting and let the babies play together! Oh, well, at this point, I was just glad to be done

with work and ecstatic to be well-rested so that we could go to the city and have SOME FUN!

Because we were on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River, every time we wanted to go into the city, we had to wait for our hotel shuttle to take us to the ferry station, then wait for the ferry to take us across the river, and then board a Waterway bus (different from a city bus, as we later learned) to take us to our destination in the city. Not a big deal, but by the end of the trip, it had gotten a little tiresome to add that much traveling time to get where we wanted to go. So anyway, Saturday night, we ventured into the city to take a bus tour on one of those double-decker, open-topped buses. On the way to the tour bus stop, we weaved our way through the massive crowd that is the Manhattan theater district on a Saturday night. We did have a few celebrity sightings; including the actor Morgan Freeman:



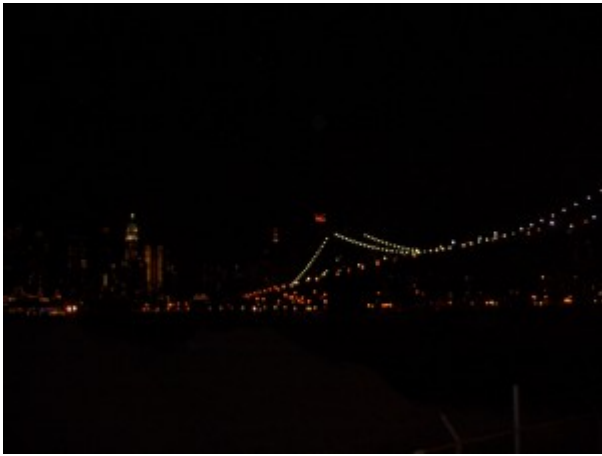
though Mr. Freeman did have the personality of a candle, as [Jamy](#) pointed out. We also saw multiple Statues of Liberty walking around, but a few of them were getting into trouble with the police. Now that's something you don't see everyday – a Statue of Liberty getting arrested – too bad I didn't get my camera ready in time to take a picture, that would have been one for the scrapbook! We also saw Bugs Bunny, Elmo, 2 Cookie Monsters, a walking sandwich, a naked cowboy (don't ask), and Batman. Except I don't think it was the real Batman unless he's always been African American – besides, the real

Batman would have been fighting crime in Gotham City, not posing for pictures on the streets of New York. Here is one of the Cookie Monsters – look carefully and you can see Elmo to the right:



We got suckered by some street vendors and sampled their wares of smoked meat, hot dogs, and art. My husband bought a caricature of our oldest daughter and a sign with our youngest daughter's name in calligraphy, but walking around with those souvenirs was like writing "suckers" on our foreheads – we got hit up for everything after that, from purses to sunglasses to comedy show tickets. Actually, we kind of got "had" again – when my husband bought the \$5 sign for our daughter, the artist started putting a frame on it, which would have upped the price to \$20. My husband kept saying, "no frame, no frame!" but all of a sudden, the artist no longer spoke English, so he went ahead and framed it and charged us \$20. My husband did not pay him the full \$20, but I know it was still more than the \$5 it was supposed to have cost – oh well, you only visit New York once, at least in our case – I won't go back, at least not with little kids!

So then we boarded our tour bus, and that was really neat, informative, and offered gorgeous views of the city at night.



Ok, the picture obviously doesn't do it justice, but here is my 2-year-old daughter seeing her first skyscraper:



It was kind of chilly, and we tried moving down to the first floor of the bus, but the view did not compare with what we could see on the top, so we ended up moving upstairs again. The city was gorgeous at night, but when we went over the Manhattan Bridge, it was so high up, it was kind of freaky! Being on the top of the bus and looking down, you couldn't even see the road, just the water below, and I couldn't help but think how easy it would be to just leap over the side... not that I would do that of course, I'm just saying.

After the bus tour, we tried to find the Waterways bus – the one that would go back to the ferry station, but we had some trouble. We ended up sitting on a street corner for about two hours. We stopped a passing taxi, figuring we'd just pay the expense just to get us and the kids off the streets of New

York, but we couldn't even all fit in one taxi. I was strongly against the idea of splitting up in any way, shape or form, so our next idea was to stop a passing horse and carriage. While asking the very friendly Irish driver directions to the ferry bus, his horse took a gi-normous leak right there on the street, but at least the girls were momentarily entertained. We declined the \$70 horse and buggy ride, and finally the Waterways bus arrived – my husband practically jumped in front of it to stop it since the previous one had passed us by, but it worked – the bus actually picked us up!

Overall, an interesting night in New York. And it's not like I expected people to be overly nice. I certainly didn't expect it to be like my hometown, where you can't walk down the street without strangers saying hi and you can't walk around with kids at night without people offering you a lift. But it was still an adjustment – every time we'd ask how to get to the Waterways bus, people would just point off in a general direction and grunt, even police. And it was amazing to me how a family with 4 small children could set up camp on a street corner for 2 hours without one soul taking notice – I swear, we could have moved there and no one would have known nor cared. By the end of it all, I can't believe how sick of Times Square I was... Oh, and I forgot to mention, while we were searching for the Waterways bus, we came across a small deli that was actually recommended to us by our tour bus driver – Z Deli. The place had amazing falafel and gyro sandwiches! And their prices were reasonable, especially for New York City – no, reasonable is not even the word for them. I'm talking \$.99 slices of pizza, and the huge gyro sandwich was only \$3.99! Its only shortcoming was the lack of places to sit, but the guys who run the place went out of their way to accommodate us (in anti-New York style, it seems), letting us dine at their “internet cafe” area.

So after the “miracle bus” picked us up, took us to the ferry

station, and we rode the ferry and picked up the hotel shuttle, it was very late and we were exhausted. It exhausts me just to type out the story, as it probably exhausts the reader to absorb my excruciating details, so now's a good time to cut this volume short – more later...