



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

*Over long drives on Utah's highways,
hikes through national parks and steep
canyons, Charukesi Ramadurai
rekindles an old friendship*

If you had paid close attention to the road movies made by the Akhtar siblings, you would remember that there is not much conversation between the friends while on the road. Three young(ish) men drive along impossibly picturesque countryside in Goa and Spain—*Dil Chahta Hai* by Farhan Akhtar and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* by Zoya Akhtar—in companionable silence, contemplative quiet. There seems to be no need for conversation, given the mellifluous soundtrack of Bollywood music in the background.

In my recent road trip with Sunitha in Utah, we found no soundtrack to cover up any silences. Neither of us had the first clue about connecting our phones to the car's system, and found it better to go songless than have tinny sounds coming only out of the phone's speaker. Ergo, conversation.



(From far left) Dead Horse Point State Park in Utah, Delicate Arch in Arches National Park, and the road leading to Monument Valley.

Sunitha and I have been friends since middle school. That is to say, we have known each other for over 30 years, losing touch for a long time after school, only to reconnect on social media and pick up the threads naturally.

We had been talking about a holiday spent hiking in the national parks of Utah for a few years. While we kept making plans, life took its own course—Sunitha moved back to India from the USA and I carried on my battle with my chronic pain. A few months ago, we realised there never was going to be a right time, planned it all out over a weekend (and several dozen online chats in the following weeks), and flew to the USA from different cities in India.

Utah has five national parks, dozens of state parks, and innumerable diversions off the beaten path. Over the next few days, we drove to Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, then down south towards the Arizona border to Monument Valley, stopping at isolated spots such as the Natural Bridges Monument and the San Juan Goosenecks. And although we saw just a tiny bit of Utah, it was enough to make us long to stay on forever.

We drove slow on the smooth highways connecting the big parks, and on empty country roads leading into the smaller ones. We watched technicolour sunsets over the Colorado river as it meandered through rocky ravines. We hiked up and down red, red mountain trails and on the

brehtaking rim of sharp canyons, Sunitha egging me on when my energy flagged. Most importantly for me, we spoke openly about topics that we had only joked about on WhatsApp chats and skirted around carefully in person.

Speaking of road trip movies, the trope of women friends driving out on American highways has always been used by Hollywood to convey escape. Escape from a crime committed unwittingly, escape from a life of misery or of monotony, or in rare cases, just a celebration of the friendship. I am thinking of personal favourites like *Thelma and Louise* and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. But even without a car on the road, the idea of a woman travelling has been about escape, occasionally involving the discovery of gelato, inner peace, and love in exotic lands.

In our case too, it was an escape of sorts. We had both gone through serious health problems, and the idea of Utah meant leaving it all behind, literally and metaphorically. I had also just gotten out of a toxic friendship that I had clung on to for the best part of my 20s and 30s, and was still shaky and sceptical about the notion of close friendship.



Escape we did, from blinding city lights and noxious air pollution, from the concerns of professional deadlines and from prying eyes. In the process of talking and arguing, gossiping and fighting, I discovered things about myself that I had not even suspected, things that delighted me and worried me. Things I immediately realised I had to reinforce or resolve once I got back to reality. Did I say fighting? Of course, we fought. We bickered and argued and called each other names. But walking in the vast open spaces of Utah, breathing in the unfiltered mountain air, it was impossible to stay petty or angry for a long time.

Science says that Oxytocin is released during time spent with friends, the feel-good hormone that makes us happier, more trusting and generous towards others. To be sure, the same hormone pops up in case of friendships between a man and a woman, but often enough, other hormones are released too, leading to unexpected complications. Which is what makes female friendships—the ones that leave you warm and fuzzy—so important in life. With my girlfriends, I find myself talking about the most serious and most inane subjects, fully expecting them to respond with enthusiasm and without any judgement. Bad haircut? Bad hair days? Just bad days? Nothing is too small or too silly.

The best friendships get tested on the road—female friendships even more so. But in Utah, by the time we started driving back towards the airport at the end of our road trip, we had figured out the technology. We drove in a state of content calm to the sounds of Ilayaraja's melodies from the 1980s. ■

TAKE THIS TRIP

GETTING THERE: Fly into Colorado's Grand Junction airport, the closest entry point to Utah's Big Five.

WHAT TO SEE: While Zion and Bryce National Parks are the most popular, Arches, Canyonlands, and Capitol Reef are less explored and therefore, less crowded. It is possible to drive to all the five in a long loop over 8-10 days.

WHERE TO STAY: We stayed at the La Quinta Inn in Moab to explore Arches and Canyonlands, and at the Desert Rose Resort in Bluff for Monument Valley and surrounding areas.

WHAT TO EAT: Utah's towns have ample choices for Indian travellers, including vegetarian and vegans. But there are no facilities inside the parks, so make sure to carry picnic lunches.

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