

I haven't seen that much ice, in such big chunks, since my brother-in-law's retirement party from the Air Force 30 years ago.

And, it hasn't been that loud in one of my cars since I blared Bonnie Tyler's "It's A Heartache" on the highway in northern Wisconsin and didn't notice the highway patrol car coming up from behind.

I can't recall ever being in a hailstorm like that one on Friday, June 11th. Of course, we had chosen to navigate into and through "Tornado Alley" - Fort Morgan, Colorado - on a day a storm was forecast so maybe it shouldn't have been that big a surprise. But, it was. And, I wouldn't wish the experience on anyone.

Two circumstances led us into the storm haven.

First, we're planning a trip by Amtrak later this year and have debated whether to leave from Denver or from Fort Morgan.

Second, we had to be in Denver on Friday for a medical appointment.

So, it seemed we could kill two birds with one stone (is that too graphic or not) and plan an excursion to Union Station in Denver after the appointment, then trek out to Fort Morgan. We packed so we could stay the night in the small city if we chose.

We didn't so choose.

We should have so chosen.

Anyway, we found our way to Union Station in Denver and walked around the inside of the seemingly abandoned, once stately, train depot and got our bearing, should we decide to leave from Denver. I also wanted to see what was available in terms of long-term parking near the train station. In a word, nothing. To park for eight or nine days near Union Station costs the equivalent of a down payment for a new Toyota you can't stop.

The forecast for that Friday was not good. Rain was expected.

I parked almost directly across from the train depot and my wife took our life's savings of quarters and plugged the meter. It's no wonder the meters accept credit cards. You can't carry enough quarters.

After we spent a few brief minutes in Union Station and decided we'd rather fly out of Cheyenne (which is an absolute, nonnegotiable "no-no" to me) than take Amtrak out of Denver, we decided it was about time to grab some lunch - being almost 3:00 pm and we East Coasters like to eat lunch and dinner fashionably late. And watch our late night news at 11:00 pm. Right. We went into a restaurant in the old Ice House (Riggatoni or something like that) and took a look at a vague "menu" they had mounted on the wall that didn't tell us what their fare was. Lunch was \$18.95 if you wanted some kind of "a bit of everything" offering. We were looking for a lunch we could handle - not a feast that would put us to sleep. I still had to drive 80 miles to Fort Morgan after we ate and I didn't want that much to eat - not to mention that \$18.95 should buy lunch for three, AND get a toy.

The hail you say!

They had a salad bar, which sounded okay. I asked my wife, a much more selective eater than I, to scope it out and rule on whether that's what we wanted or not. Her short review earned a thumbs down. So, we moved down Wynkoop down to The Chop House. Their menu offered sandwiches, burgers, salads, etc., and that was good enough for the bare-foot pair from northern Wisconsin.

There was as much help in the place as customers at 3:00 in the afternoon and we had a very good lunch in a very nice place and left. With a lighter wallet.

Not so fast, pilgrim.

We weren't looking out any windows and didn't know it had started to rain. But, it had and we scampered back to the car a few blocks away and headed out of Dodge. I kind of wanted to see Ubaldo pitch that night for the Rockies but we couldn't be in both places - at Coors Field AND in Fort Morgan to see the train come in and depart. We were curious how baggage and boarding was handled in a "no-staff" train station. There is a depot there which is opened for two hours cocooning the arrival and departure of the once daily (each direction) Amtrak train.

It was raining hard as I navigated I-25 north far enough to take I-76 toward Fort Morgan. About 4:00 by then, traffic was building but in our direction it wasn't bad at all. On I-25 headed south, traffic was backed up forever. As far north as we went, traffic was stacked and stopped.

The sky was blue ahead of us and I correctly predicted that the rain would end and we'd be in for some beautiful sailing shortly. It did and we were.

We got into Fort Morgan about 5:00 pm and drove straight to the train depot. Just blind luck - there was no signage until we got there. My northern Wisconsin instincts perhaps. Just follow Main St. - duh! We were interested in the long term parking availability and how safe it appeared to be. When I spoke with a gal from the Fort Morgan Chamber of Commerce a month or so ago, she assured me that leaving my Maserati there for eight days would be safe. To be honest, and the Cheyenne Herald has made its reputation by being honest, the attraction to leaving from Fort Morgan was parking. Not just safe and convenient but free. And FREE is good! Free is very good.

Union Station in Denver parking would cost either side of hundred bucks for our eight day trip. For that much money, I could drink more than my fill of Leinie's at our trip destination. Or, Courvoisier.

In Fort Morgan, it took about thirty seconds to size up the situation - the depot is within sight of City Hall and the local police department both opens the depot for the two windows of time each day and they patrol the lot to insure cars are safe. I'll leave them the key to my Granturismo and tell them to take it for a spin whenever they want to in our absence. So, we had assessed all we needed to and

it was just after 5:00 pm. The train comes through from Denver at 9:05 pm - FOUR HOURS HENCE!

We had just eaten at 3:00 so killing some time in a restaurant was not an option. While it's obvious I don't miss many meals, I don't eat them two hours apart.

Before leaving Cheyenne for the quality health care of Denver, I had checked into availability of motels in Fort Morgan. Paying \$75.00 - \$100.00 a night to sleep in a strange bed when I had my own 105 miles away did not appeal to me.

Waiting for the train was no longer mandatory. I felt comfortable with leaving from Fort Morgan. And, with the ominous weather already being experienced in the Denver area, I decided to head for Cheyenne in the daylight. The travel would be almost exclusively on two lane roads and driving strange roads after dark does not appeal to me. So, we left Fort Morgan.

Angry clouds hovered to the west - not exactly over our path, but close.

I chose to go up Hwy 52 to New Raymer, then Hwy 14 to Ault and north. To New Raymer was a piece of cake. Then we headed west - on a wider roadway that appeared to be in very good condition.

Maybe a dozen miles on Hwy 14, all hell broke loose. Chunks of hail that sounded like frozen turkeys being dropped from a helicopter (sorry, WKRP) pounded on the car. (And, it's not a Maserati, it's a Ford Taurus.) Visibility was a few feet. No, make that a few inches. Thankfully, there was no oncoming traffic as we could barely see the yellow center line and the white shoulder stripe. I was expecting the windshield and back window to break and the hail to be on our laps at any time.

The hail just kept coming. It seemed like probably far longer than it was and it seemed like forever. I was looking for a place to get off the highway and finally spotted one - a driveway to a farm or ranch. I backed into it and we waited for the onslaught to end.

And we waited. And we waited. We could see the hail accumulating on the highway a few feet in front of us and on the ground on both sides. Headlights and flashing warning lights could be seen as vehicles, mostly semis, approached - almost exclusively from the east. They were crawling along. Maybe 5, 10 miles per hour. We couldn't even talk inside the car. (I think my wife liked that.) To be heard, we had to lean over the center console and almost scream at each other. There wasn't much to say. We just had to wait out the assault. I think my wife at one time questioned whether we should have stayed in Fort Morgan for the night. Her hindsight has always been 20-20. In truth, we *should* have stayed in Fort Morgan.

It was a certainty that the damage to the car would be extensive. The windshield had been cracked just above the passenger side bottom. A rainbow shaped, multiple crack. But, both glasses and the

moon roof also held. Thankfully.

I've seen hailstorms before. Been in them. And they always were of short duration. This one seemed to be the length of a Joe Biden speech. And just as much a downer. Finally, we could see further down the road to the east. A long ways. And visibility is always key as to whether a person should drive or park.

The hail turned to rain and we were off.

Except for the cracked windshield, we didn't know the extent of the Taurus's body damage. That pounding made it pretty apparent it was going to be sizable. Seriously, for the longest time, it sounded like someone was sitting beside us with a front-end loader and was constantly dumping buckets of rocks on the car. It just didn't let up. At least we were off the roadway and didn't have to worry about an oncoming car wandering across the center line and nailing us head-on. Safe.

Not until we got back to Cheyenne did we look at the damage. It's not roll-over damage. But it's a bunch. We can't quite play Chinese Checkers in the indentations but they're noticeable. Deep dimples.

We had heard on KOA earlier about the car crashes on I-25 and were glad we had taken a route to Fort Morgan. Getting away from the heavy traffic around Denver was the right thing to do. Leaving Fort Morgan was not the right thing to do.

After getting back on Hwy 14, we had about 30 miles to travel to Ault. There were stretches where the hail had ruted on the road up to 4-6" deep. In one place, the field to the south of Hwy 14 was white - as though it had snowed. This hailstorm covered a wide area. And water was running in the barrow pit beside the road like a stream, with water standing in the fields like ponds.

I have always believed the interstate freeway system in the United States, in spite of the high speeds, has provided a great benefit to safe travel. Two lane roads when there is poor visibility or one driver falls asleep are just much more exhausting. Growing up driving on icy and snow covered roads, I consider myself a good driver. But, no one is a good driver when they can't see ahead. You take it slow and hope oncoming drivers do the same. As we sat beside the road waiting out the hail, vehicles still traveling went by right in front of our windshield. Drivers were clutching the wheel with all their might.

In the end, insurance can cover the property damage. We accomplished our objectives for the day. Now, I have to decide whether I want to repair my car body before we leave it in Fort Morgan for eight days a few months from now. Is there a far greater risk of hail storms there than at DIA or downtown Denver? We won't leave from Union Station under any conditions. It's just not under consideration after having seen the place and its location. So, we made it home safe and sound and slept very well the night of the adventure. In my own bed. With my favorite pillow, thank you very much. (*Note: My Taurus was totalled. I will soon travel to Minnesota to pick up another car.*)