

Strong and Free

by BROCK WEIR

When we set out, we had just a few objectives: taking in all the attractions Universal Studios had to offer, getting in a bit of beach time and, as far as souvenirs go, and as likely as it sounds, a physical copy of a movie soundtrack that was surging in popularity.

It was going to be a long road trip to Florida, but it was as much about the journey as the destination.

The journey, however, did present some unforeseen minor challenges.

Road conditions were great, but on a multi-day trip, you need a bit of music to accompany you. But, by the time we got there, after flipping our way through dozens of radio stations as reception allowed, we could check one item clear off our to-do list: there was no longer a need to procure a copy of the aforementioned soundtrack.

Its most popular track was played endlessly along our route. And I do mean endlessly.

By the end of Day One, we had memorized every single word and nuance of Whitney Houston's just-released rendition of I Will Always Love You, and, upon arrival, the less that was said about The Bodyguard the better.

That's how long it's been since my brother and I went on a road trip of any significant length ? but that all changed last Monday morning when we set out for our first in some 32 years.

Earlier this spring, Prime Minister Mark Carney announced that King Charles and Queen Camilla were Ottawa-bound on May 26 and 27 not only to meet with Canadians, but to read the Throne Speech, the first time the Sovereign had done so in nearly 50 years.

The historic nature of the event was not lost on me and I considered the best and most practical methods to get there for the occasion in a week where there was precious little time to spare here at home ? and was surprised in the best possible way when my brother called suggesting a road trip.

Now, his interest in the royal family was never really all that evident growing up, so I was a little surprised at his sheer enthusiasm to make the trip. I'm not sure what shifted, but I'm glad it did ? and plans were soon afoot to put the pedal to the proverbial metal.

We set out shortly after sunrise last Monday, taking the scenic route through some smaller communities I hadn't been through since living in the National Capital region between 2003 and 2009.

The route, as it turned out, just happened to get us to Ottawa in time for the monarchs' second event of the day, a ceremonial tree planting at Rideau Hall.

Still, it was a long drive, and it offered plenty of opportunity to brainstorm just how the visit would unfold, particularly on Tuesday when Ottawa played host to an event that hadn't happened since 1977.

Who would be there in the smaller, temporary Senate Chamber? What types of ceremony and spectacle were planned to showcase the best of Canada? Most importantly, what carefully chosen words would the King deliver on behalf of his Canadian government to ostensibly send a message of Canadian unity to? well, let's just say, whoever needed to hear it?

While we didn't have the best of luck getting to meet the King and Queen as they made their rounds, we had ample opportunity to see them ? and meet others along the way.

When you're standing in a crowd for a few hours waiting for an arrival like this, meeting new people is unavoidable, and, in cases like these, I've always found it to be a welcome opportunity to hear where they're from, what brought them out, and more. For some we met, it was a generational thing of wanting to bring their children to see the King as their parents did for them when the late Queen was in this country. For others, there was a bit of a celebrity sighting element. For the majority, however, the prevailing sentiment was this was a historic occasion that all of us wanted to be a part of, even if in a minute way.

From our vantage point on Wellington Street outside the Senate Chamber on Tuesday morning, I was bookended by a mother-daughter duo, complete with fascinators that fascinated the local media to no end, who made it their business to be at as many homegrown royal occasions as possible; on the other side, a mother was accompanied by her gaggle of kids under the age of 10 who were all simply eager to watch history unfold.

Unfortunately, the speech was not broadcast to those of us standing outside that day, but thanks to our phones and devices, we were able to hear the words from all angles. In fact, the only portion of the goings-on indoors that we could hear outdoors was the almost deafening applause that followed the last line in the speech: "As the anthem reminds us: The True North is indeed strong and free!"

The words we were able to hear resonated strongly with us outdoorsy types, including the unprecedented from-the-Crown land acknowledgement, with which the King concluded, "The land acknowledgement is a recognition of shared history as a nation. While continuing to deepen my own understanding, it is my great hope that in each of your communities, and collectively as a country, a path is found towards truth and reconciliation, in both word and deed."

"It has been nearly 70 years since the Sovereign first opened Parliament," he continued. "In the time since, Canada has dramatically changed: repatriating its Constitution, achieving full independence, and witnessing immense growth. Canada has embraced its British, French and Indigenous roots, and become a bold, ambitious, innovative country that is bilingual, truly multicultural, and committed to reconciliation."

"The Crown has for so long been a symbol of unity for Canada. It also represents stability and continuity from the past to the present. As it should, it stands proudly as a symbol of Canada today, in all her richness and dynamism."

In my view, the speech hit all the right notes. While largely written by the government of the day, it did a brilliant job of outlining what unites Canada as an independent and strong nation on the world stage "and its path to remain so in the years to come."

Nothing too inflammatory, but the message was clear.

As a Canadian, I was proud not only of the message that was sent, but by being there to witness just a little bit of it, a sentiment that was shared by the vast majority of the people around me "barring, perhaps, a small handful of protestors demonstrating for Gaza, Ukraine and, unusually given the fact we're living in 2025, the late Princess of Wales."

Heading home shortly after the ceremony, we listened to the speech a couple of times along the way to take it all in "and I couldn't help but smile when, turning the radio on, Whitney Houston joined us for an encore."