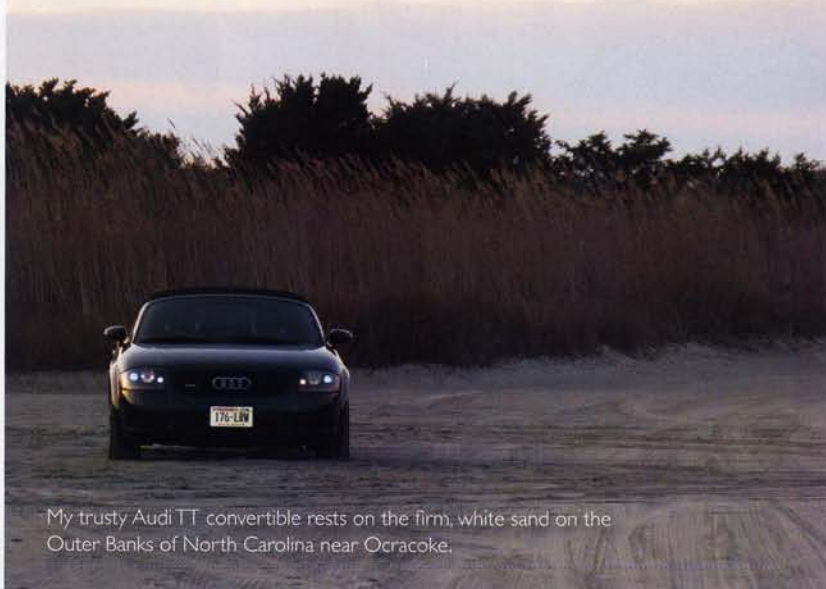


# A 50TH BIRTHDAY QUEST

One woman's itinerary  
comprises 50 trips for 50 years.

by **SUSAN C. SCHUYLER**  
CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS



My trusty Audi TT convertible rests on the firm, white sand on the Outer Banks of North Carolina near Ocracoke.

The indignities of aging come into sharp focus as the “milestone” birthdays loom ahead.

Don't get me wrong. The early milestones are indeed worthy of celebration: the heady freedom of driving at 16; the thrill of coming of age at 18 and 21; and the firm foothold on adulthood at 30. However, the later landmarks lack luster. The hidden agenda is that the best is behind you, and you're just lucky to be alive. This is especially true for women, who face the added burden of body betrayal known as menopause.

In her book with the oxymoronic title *The Secret Pleasures of Menopause*, women's-health guru Christiane Northrup, M.D., reassures readers that “physical and mental decline is *not* a natural consequence of aging.” Baby boomers are here to change that perception, and there is strength in our numbers. Northrup cites a U.S. Census Bureau statistic: One in five adults in the United States today is a woman over 50.

Our “friends” often mark these later “Big-O” celebrations with cruel public humiliation, like surprise appearances of the grim reaper at parties, splashy billboards and “happy” ads in the local paper. (Yes, I've been a victim of all three.)

The end of my marriage marred my 40th year. The decade that followed was a blur of pain and foolish relationships I embarked on to dull its effects. I wanted 50 to be different—a significant emotional turning point. Although I'm often at the epicenter of larger-than-life parties, I wanted my 50th year to be something uniquely private that I could celebrate for more than just one day.

Then it occurred to me—why not take 50 trips during my 50th year?

This perfectly “Susan” celebration dawned on me as I watched New Year's Eve fireworks explode over the canals of Amsterdam when 2008—my 50th year—arrived.

## A birthday quest

Travel has always been at the top of my list of guilty pleasures.

Even my bachelor's degree in Spanish was a thinly veiled excuse to live abroad for a year. Like all children, I blame my parents for my affliction. I was only 7 when my they got me my first passport and loaded me and my younger brother on a big, shiny jet to visit Panama, Costa Rica and Guatemala. I was hooked.

Since then, I have cultivated an insatiable passion for leaving home, which is fueled by the luxury of the academic calendar that my career affords. I don't let being single stop me, either. I often travel alone. I have discovered that people reach out with brief but deeply intimate slices of their lives to lone travelers.

Excited by my birthday quest, I announced my intention to anyone who would stand still long enough to listen when I returned from Amsterdam. The more cynical among my friends and family attempted to diminish its significance by asking if going to Onalaska from La Crosse would count as one of my 50 trips. So, I had

to come up with “rules” to guard against their taunts and guide my planning efforts.

The best part was that since it was my quest, they were my



I had to overcome my fear of heights to enjoy the exhilaration of zip-lining over Costa Rica's lush jungle.



**Left:** The Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac Hotel is perched on Quebec City's hilltop, overlooking the breathtaking Saint Lawrence River.  
**Right:** From left, Pj Leehey, Aidan Smerud and Schuyler Leehey ham it up in New York City's Times Square.

rules. To qualify, a trip had to be more than two hours away by car with an overnight and had to include something I hadn't done or seen before.

That's when the fun began.

### The rules of the road

Suddenly everyone I knew wanted to help me reach my goal. They suggested destinations, offered places to stay and often eagerly offered to join me. As a result, I satisfied my travel lust and connected with people I loved and cared about with the backdrop of amazing and memorable scenery.

Here are a few of the highlights:

- **March 15-23:** My spring break seemed the perfect time for a solo drive in my beloved Audi TT convertible to the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where I walked the breathtaking 13 miles of the National Seashore every morning.
- **June 20-25:** My friends Raj and Rose joined me for a trip to Montreal

with a side trip to Quebec, which was perfectly quaint as it prepared for its 400th anniversary celebration.

- **June 30-July 1:** My girlfriends hosted an overnight party for my "real" birthday at my friend Laura's cabin. It was the perfect slumber party, complete with a bonfire and a birthday-morning kayak ride on a glass-smooth lake.

- **July 14-16:** My dad drove with me in the TT to his hometown, Danbury, Iowa, where he told me stories and showed me landmarks to help me weave the narrative for a book I'm writing about his mother, whom I never met.

- **July 19-27:** I zip-lined through the steamy jungles of Costa Rica with my friend Kathy, who also helped me appreciate the exotic flora and fauna and floated with me in the warm turquoise waters to watch the sunset each evening.

- **August 1-18:** I stayed in my brother's New York City apartment in Greenwich Village, where my friend Ronda and, later, my sons Pj and Schuyler joined me for shows, music, museums and restaurants too numerous to recount here.

- **August 21-23:** I planned everything my best friend Tori loves for a Chicago trip, including a Chicago Symphony Orchestra performance with John Williams conducting soloist Yo-Yo Ma, the show *Wicked* and Elvis Night at a White Sox game.

I counted down each of my adventures on a plain, white sheet of notebook paper, which is now softened by age, dog-eared and stained. I still have it tucked behind a flap in my planner, and it makes me smile every time I glance at it.

I didn't make it to 50 trips; my tally stops at 42. I had planned to score the last eight trips in December during a solo road trip along the famed Route 66 to California. I even had the folks at AAA create a stack of "trip ticks" to get me there. The uncertainty and the dire consequences of the economic downturn made me leery about its expense.

However, I do not consider the year a failure by any means. Far from it.

The 50-trip quest gave my milestone birthday a rich texture that I will treasure throughout what's left of my life and deepened relationships that I value even more. More important, my adventures gave me permission to live my passion out loud every day on the way to discovering a new self. I invite you to do the same—with or without a passport. ❀

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50 TRIPS		
MAR 1-13	AMSTERDAM	1
MAR 15-16	CHICAGO - DAD - SNOW STORM	2
MAR 28-30	CHICAGO - DAN - SNOW STORM	3-5
MAR 15-23	NORTH CAROLINA - (ASHTON, OCEANVIEW, RANDOLPH VA)	6
MAR 28-30	CHICAGO - JANEI HUBBARD ST.	7
APR 4-6	CHICAGO - RANDOLPH VA	8
APR 22-27	CHICAGO - CSO - WAGNER - W/ PAVELIN	9
MAY 10-11	CHICAGO CSO W/ MOM - MOTHER'S DAY	10
MAY 15	MONTREAL - CONCERT RAS + RAS - KT TUNGSTALL	11-12
MAY 21-26	CHICAGO / FT. WASHINGTON JANE @ PATTY'S	13
JUNE 5	MINNEAPOLIS MOSA CLASS	14
JUNE 6-8	CHICAGO / BUBBLES FES - W/ JANE	15
JUNE 12	MINNEAPOLIS MOSA CLASS	16
JUNE 19	MINNEAPOLIS MOSA CLASS (2)	17-18
JUNE 20	MONTREAL / RAS + RAS QUABEE	18 19
JUNE 20	MINNEAPOLIS MOSA CLASS	20
JUNE 20	MINNEAPOLIS MOSA CLASS	21
JUNE 30	Laura's Cabin - OVERNIGHT FOR BIRTHDAY	22

This is the first page of the "official" list of my 50 trips, which still reminds me of the joy of my milestone birthday year.