Outdoorsman Mikah Meyer's Record-Breaking Road Trip and Safety Tips

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(Photo Credit: Scott Kranz)

Mikah Meyer, the first openly gay man in an Outdoors Recreation Campaign, shares his favorite moments from his 3-year journey to see more than 400 National Park Service Sites across the U.S. and he reveals much more!

The son of a Lutheran pastor, outdoor adventurer Mikah Meyer was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, an experience that helped galvanized his passion to travel the world.

At the age of 19, Meyer embarked on his first road trip in 2005 just days after his father's funeral, soon realizing the transformative power of road trips. When he was 25 years old, Meyer went on a "Dream Road Trip" traveling to 46 North American states and provinces in a 260-day, 16,400-mile road trip. Five years later, he became the first person to visit all 419 U.S. National Park Service Sites!

(Photo courtesy of Mikah Meyer)

More recently, the 37-year-old travel expert launched his **Outside Safe Space** merchandise – a collection of pins, stickers, patches, and apparel sold on his website and selected items at Eddie Bauer stores – that help outdoor adventurers communicate they are allies of the LGBTQ+ community.

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In this candid interview, Meyer explains what pivotal event sparked his Outside Safe Space idea, discusses his feelings about becoming the first openly gay man in an Outdoors Recreation Campaign with REI, and offers safety advice to other LGBTQ+ road trippers. We also get a peek into his fearless travel personality, and for first-time visitors to Minneapolis, he offers his recommendations about what to see and do, including a fun stop at an iconic gay bar.

Vacationer Magazine: What trip or travel experience sparked your passion for travel? Had you always been into road trips and hiking before the "Dream Road Trip"?

Mike Meyer: No! Sort of a long answer here, but my father was the campus minister at the largest Lutheran Campus Ministry. At one point he won the award for being the "Best Lutheran Campus Pastor in the Country." He worked on Sundays, so we never really did the family camping trip, no Boy Scouts, not even the weekend getaways. But because he worked on a college campus, he got larger chunks of time off in the summer. So, we would do big family road trips to Florida from Nebraska. My dad loved to drive. Either that or he was so cheap that he loved driving rather than flying us all to Florida.

The huge spark for me was right around the same time my dad passed away from cancer. He was 58 and he never got to retire. So, sort of this idea that we've been sold our whole lives of, if you work hard, then when you turn 65 you get to do all this stuff. I learned at a very young age that's not reality. Inspired by his passing, I made it more of a goal to do as much as possible, as soon as possible, with the assumption that I may not live to retirement age.

I joke that the reason that I loved to travel so much was because I grew up in Nebraska and I knew that there was so much out there in the world that Nebraska didn't have to offer. So, my escape in Nebraska was to watch the Travel Channel and imagine all the amazing places I could go once I was an adult, and I had the agency and the ability to do so. As soon as I was old enough to leave Nebraska, I left and never looked back. I've been roaming the world ever since.

(Photo courtesy of Mikah Meyer)

What were some of the most memorable moments from your 3-year journey on the road of more than 16,000 miles?

1. When I finished the whole thing, on April 29, 2019, exactly 3 years to the minute after I started the journey on April 29, 2016. April 29 is also the day my dad passed away in 2005.

2. Hiking within feet of active lava flows in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park on the Big Island.

3. Interviewing an out, gay ranger for LogoTV at the newly established Stonewall National Monument.

4. Driving the Cassier Highway from Seattle to Anchorage, Alaska at the beginning of the summer of 2018. And then, driving the ALCAN Highway from Fairbanks to Fargo at the end of summer 2018 as the leaves on trees were starting to change colors in Alaska.

Is there advice you wish you had before you embarked on your road trips across the U.S. that you would offer to other queer road-trippers?

Many people go to the entrance of a **National Park Service Site**, get their map, pay their fee, drive directly into the park, and skip the Visitor Center. I always recommend that you go to the Visitor Center and talk to either a ranger or a volunteer. So often, some trails are snowed-in or damaged or there are special exhibits that are happening for only the day that you're there. Remember these are experts that you can get advice from for free.

You can tell them you want big vistas; you want to learn about history; you want to see animals or see flowers up close. A ranger or volunteer can help give you the best day at a National Park.

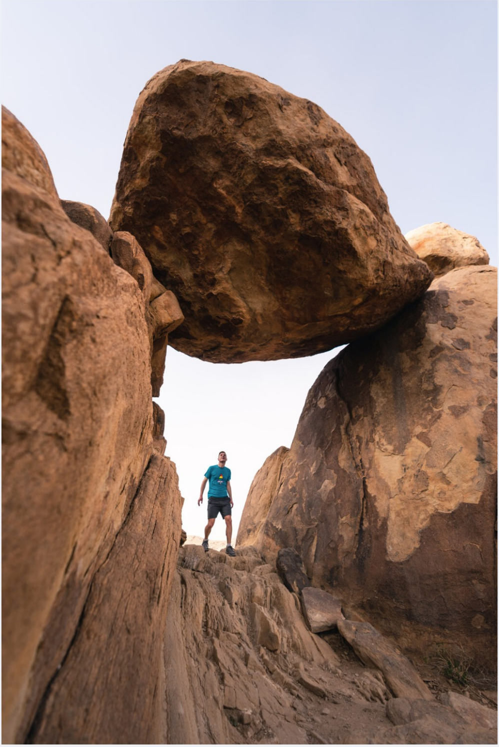
(Photo courtesy of Mikah Meyer)

With the rise of anti-gay legislation in U.S. politics, how would you advise LGBTQ+ travelers questioning their safety on the road, but also interested in seeing the country by car?

Yeah, that's a tough question because as someone who has been to every single state and territory, I can tell you there are nice people everywhere. There are kind people who will accept you for who you are everywhere.

No matter where you're traveling, always try to assume the best in people and plan for the worse. But also if you can travel in numbers – having one other person with you – just makes the situation so much more comfortable and safer for you.

I'm privileged in the sense that if I really have to, I can pass for straight, although my friends would vehemently disagree. In general, there are kind people everywhere, listen to your viscera, listen to your gut, and if something tells you to get out of "Dodge," then get out of "Dodge."



(Photo Credit: Scott Kranz)

So, I learned that you were the first openly gay man featured in an Outdoors Recreation Campaign and with REI no less. How did that feel blazing that trail for others to follow?

It was both amazing and disheartening. I use that stat during all my speaking gigs and have for years, and it still blows my mind that it was 2018 before that happened. That's insane that it took that long.

It was such an honor and also it was disheartening to realize what it took to get a gay man in an outdoors industry ad campaign. I had to devote three years of my life to visiting every National Park Service Site and setting a world record. Meanwhile, straight people are featured just for existing, and yet to break that barrier, I had to do something no other human had ever done before just to be seen as equal.

Ofu Island, American Samoa (Photo courtesy of Mikah Meyer)

Your visibility has allowed you to create a platform to launch cool initiatives such as Outside Safe Space. What was the thought process behind the idea and the merchandise created to identify an LGBTQ+ ally when out and about?

The idea came to me during that three-year road trip because I got over 1,500 pieces of media coverage from that. And as a result, people from around the world learned what I was doing. They knew I was gay and would write me page-long emails telling me about their experiences about being queer and in the outdoors. So often, they'd say, "I never thought I'd find someone else like me who was queer and enjoyed this." They would also share their experiences of not going back to places because of how straight people had treated them.

And so I was reminded of the original safe space symbol – the upside-down pink triangle with the green circle – that some teachers would put on their doors (indoors). I realized there needed to be a way for people who are in the outdoors or who are allies to communicate that.

The spark to finally put this idea into action happened because of the murder of George Floyd. I was living just a couple miles away and one of the main messages I heard during that time was, “Hey, white people, you made the world f’ed up like this so how are you going to fix it?” I felt that within my niche, my profession, my privilege, and my platform that this was some way I could try to make the world a better place. And then I spent that whole week we were in lockdown working on this design and I launched it later that summer 2020.

Mikah Meyer wearing Outside Safe Space apparel. (Photo courtesy of Mikah Meyer)

That’s cool! So, where can people purchase the Outside Safe Space pins and patches?

You can go to your local Eddie Bauer store now to get Outside Safe Space pins or stickers to put on your outdoor gear. You can also purchase stickers, pins, patches, and apparel on **my website**.

You just mentioned Minneapolis. It’s such a gay-friendly city that I decided to come out there when I lived there several years ago. No pressure, but what are three things LGBTQ+ travelers should do when visiting the city?

They should visit our local National Park which is the **Mississippi National River and Recreation Area**. One of the reasons I chose to move to the city is because it is very unique in the sense that it has a National Park Service Site running through the entirety of the urban area. It was like this perfect blend of my road trip life and my previous urban life in Washington, DC because the national river next to the booming skyscrapers in Minneapolis. So, I would recommend taking a walk, running, or biking around the river trail that follows the Mississippi River.

The cool thing about the city is that we really don’t have a gayborhood and that’s because there are so many accepting people everywhere. I always tell people that if somebody calls you a gay slur that it’s more likely that the people around them will chastise them for calling you that rather than joining in and making fun of you too.

Horseshoe Bend in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (Photo courtesy of Mikah Meyer)

The second thing I would say is to go to **Como Park**. Go to the zoo and the gardens because even if you visit in the winter, there's still an indoor enclosed area so you can have a cute romantic date with your partner, friends, or whomever.

The third thing would be to visit the **Gay 90s** because I know RuPaul has spoken about it. It's an iconic location and it's a huge physical queer space where there's so much to offer. If you go to the bar during the Minnesota State Fair, you'll meet so many people at the bar who live in Minnesota but are not from Minneapolis.

And this may sound like a joke, but queer people should consider buying a house here. So, Minneapolis is really welcoming and gay-friendly, but unlike most cities, the housing here is ridiculously affordable. It's one of the reasons I chose to move here. I looked at all of the cities in North America with large gayborhoods, and in all of them, you could not live anywhere near a gayborhood for under $1000 a month in rent. But by the time I moved here, you could easily live in Loring Park for under $1000 a month in rent.

Yeah, it was affordable when I lived there, too.

So, beyond Minneapolis and the U.S., what places are still on your bucket list to visit? Why?

I want to go to the **Seychelles** because their flag is rainbow. It's that super cool rainbow design. And then I really, really want to go to the **Holy Land** – Israel, Egypt, and Palestine. My dad was a pastor so it's the places you hear about in Bible stories. I want to go in real life. And then the other big bucket list item I have is that I want to complete **an outdoor adventure in every single country it's illegal to be gay**. That's like a life goal.

Mikah Meyer snorkeling in Guam. (Photo courtesy of Mikah Meyer)

Next week, we continue our interview with Mikah Meyer and ask him about his favorite National Park Service Sites. Until then, you can follow all of Meyer's outdoor adventures on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.