

Two Suffern men take the baseball trip of a lifetime, for a good cause

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As they go around telling their story, this is what two 21-year-old lifelong friends from Suffern hear over and over again from adults:

"I'm so jealous."

I know because I said it.

Starting tomorrow at Shea Stadium, Alon Mass and Neal Koral will begin a sports fan's fantasy, an odyssey tour of games in all 30 major-league ballparks. Yeah, it's been done. But it probably hasn't been done with all the ultra-cool pit stops Mass and Koral have planned. And it probably hasn't been done with such an emphasis on raising money for charities. And it probably was never done with the zeal these two kids possess for this dream about to come true.

Six years ago, when they were students at Suffern High, they came up with this idea. They thought about when the time would be right, and now is that time. Koral, who just graduated from Indiana University, will join the real world in September when he begins working for Ernst & Young in Manhattan. Mass, a senior at Cornell who plans to attend medical school, has to be back at the books Aug. 20, or 12 days after the scheduled finish line in Philadelphia.

But these guys aren't only seam-heads. They will also hit just about everything there is from sea to shining sea: the Preakness, Niagara Falls, Las Vegas, New Orleans, Napa Valley, Disney World, Cape Canaveral and about 20 national parks. They will go to Canada several times (Banff, Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Windsor), and Tijuana, Mexico, and hope to see some NFL camps in July, and Lambeau Field and the Grand Canyon. They will visit the Baseball Hall of Fame, and the Louisville Slugger factory and Churchill Downs, and the actual Field of Dreams in Iowa, maybe an NBA Finals game if it's in the Midwest. Not among the 30 games is

the MLB All-Star Game, which they will either attend or just spend afloat in kayaks in McCovey Cove during the home-run derby.

They will make the trip in Koral's pine green 2003 Hyundai Santa Fe, which has been back and forth from Indiana about a dozen times and which made a 24-hour test drive from Indiana to Texas. Koral said his passengers had no complaints about the comfort or the driver.

"I have about 49,000 miles on it, and come August it will have about 71,000 miles on it," Koral said. "It's in good shape. It's only 4 years old. We just bought a GPS, which is pretty amazing. We actually went to the Nets game (Monday), and it was perfect."

"We have an inflatable tent that we throw up into the air and it erects in two seconds," Mass said. "It's called a two-second tent. We're also staying with friends and family for about 35 or 40 of the nights. Cheap motels. At Yellowstone Park we have a shack with no electricity and no running water. We have tent grounds at Yosemite and Kings Canyon. A few of the places we haven't arranged yet."

Alon's a go-getter. He has a Web site - mlbroadtrip2007.com/charity.html - for those who want to donate to the American Cancer Society or the Make-A-Wish Foundation or the Harlem RBI Foundation. They suggest donations be based on a dollar amount per home run they see in person, but will take straight donations, and will even direct funds to other charities if asked to do so. The site will be updated throughout with photographs and blogs and vignettes. They will buy a program and keep score and eat the local-specialty food and have a beer and take pictures and add a bumper sticker to the car at each ballpark.

Mass has called people from ballclubs and been promised free tickets to 14 or 15 of the games. He has set up interviews at some of the parks, and will have a NESN camera crew follow the two of them around on the field during batting practice and in the stands during the game at Fenway Park later this month. He has a great-uncle who knows Linda Murray, the widow of the late, great columnist Jim Murray, and she arranged a private curator's tour of the Hall of Fame.

"I like traveling," Mass said. "I've been to Kenya and Peru and I go to Israel every year, and what I like best about those experiences is the unknown. I know that I can picture our route on paper, but I can't really picture what it will be like, who we'll meet, the different types of people who are out there in America and traditions we're not accustomed to, and just all the random adventures or fiascos that will happen along the way. Obviously, the national parks, I'm really excited for. Grand Canyon, Bryce. I love nature and scenery and photography."

They've both had brushes with greatness. Mass' dad, Ronald, a rabbi now, was a ball/batboy for the Yankees in the early 1970s. He used to warm up the right fielders between innings, and told Alon how scared he was while warming up Oakland's Reggie Jackson, who had a scattershot cannon for an arm. Alon once tossed a ball to Sandy Koufax for an autograph, and since Koufax tossed it back, he says he's "had a catch with Sandy Koufax."

They are both Yankees fans who have attended the baseball writers' annual dinner in Manhattan. Koral's favorite memory is Barry Bonds and Mike Piazza on the dais wondering what the score was of the 2001 NFC championship game, and Koral being able to provide it for them.

Koral, the accountant-to-be, figures the whole thing will cost under \$5,000 a man (excluding money lost or won in Vegas).

"I think it will be less," he said. "If we do 22,000 miles, my car can get on average 22 miles to the gallon, so figuring conservatively it will be 1,000 gallons of gas, which if you figure \$3.25, that would be \$3,250 for gas, but we'd split that. Food you have to figure \$20 a day. Eh, we'll have to eat cheap. I'll eat cheap. I don't know about him. I think we could do it under \$4,000 each."

And if it's \$5,000 or more, "It's a once-in-a-lifetime trip. It's well worth it," he said.

Admit it. You're jealous.