

The RoadScholarz RV Guide

How to Plan an Amazing, Kid-Friendly RV Adventure



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Dear reader—

Congratulations—you’ve got a road trip on your mind! Thank you for reading my eBook—it’s chock-full of information to help you plan your own RV adventure. You can read this how-to guide from e-cover to e-cover, or you can skip around to the parts that are most relevant to your needs. It includes loads of links to online sources as well as a countdown timeline and a wide range of sources to steer you in the right direction. Feel free to e-mail me with any questions and to let me know how your adventure goes.

Travel safe and happy RVing!



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*The RoadScholarz at the Alamo.
(From the left: Sammy, Gretchen, Jackson and Lilly)*

Introduction

The old cliché couldn't be more right: You are about to embark on *the trip of a lifetime*. No matter how many miles and time zones your trip covers, it will be unique, memorable, and fun. You'll have breakdowns and breakthroughs and along the way create memories that will last a lifetime.

I took our children on a three-month RV trip in the fall of 2008. The kids were almost 11, just 9, and 5½ years old, and going into fifth grade, fourth grade, and kindergarten, respectively. We left San Diego on September 2, 2008, and by the time we returned home on November 30, we had put 10,042 miles on the odometer and visited 19 different states. Since I had pulled my kids out of their public elementary school, I took on the responsibility of becoming their teacher, homeschooling them while we traveled. A good friend of mine coined the phrase “The RoadScholarz,” and the name stuck. I was the ringleader: Mom, driver, planner, teacher, tour guide, cook, cleaner, maintenance person, and septic tank emptier. It was an incredible, life-changing adventure—so much so that the trip has lived on in our lives. I wrote this book in the hopes of helping and inspiring other families to create an RV adventure of their own. If you're contemplating making the country your classroom, as it was ours, read on and let the journey begin.



Why Go RVing?

One aspect of an extended RV trip that appealed to me was finding out what it would be like, especially for the kids, to live with less stuff—to focus less on things and more on experience. I wanted to spend time with my kids and not be held captive by the crazy, busy schedule to which our life was so often tethered.



Another desire my husband Mike and I shared was to not just *show* the United States to our children but give them the opportunity to *live* our country's history. Learning from a book is wonderful, but seeing history brought to life is extraordinary.

I wanted a simpler existence, and driving an RV is certainly simple. You have your favorite pillow and blanket, your best books and games, a camera, and the open road; freedom is waiting for you to

Left: Wounded Knee. Above: Mt. Rushmore

discover and explore it. Since we came home, not a day goes by that I don't think about our trip, and someday I know we'll take another one like it.

Is an RV Trip Right for Your Family?

RVing is not for everyone, and it may not be right for everyone in your family for reasons of age, abilities, and interests. Toddlers and little kids require much more patience and a significantly slower pace than older children. If you've got kids in their preteens and beyond, it may be harder to take them away from their increasingly independent lives. I felt that my kids and I were in the perfect window when we traveled. They were old enough to fully experience our adventure, but not so old that they couldn't leave their friends and lives behind.

If you're planning a longer trip and have older kids—middle and high schoolers, for example—you might consider caravanning with another family that has kids of similar ages. The preteens and teenagers can hang out with their friends, and during stops they can practice the independence and self-reliance they crave, while parents can still keep an eye on them from afar. Caravanning also makes it possible to let the older kids ride in one vehicle, with the younger kids in the other for all (or part) of the trip.

Since different kids have different interests, sit down with them and listen to their ideas. Encourage them to participate in planning. When children take ownership of something, they're far more likely to embrace it. Planning special activities to fit particular interests will give each kid his or her own pleasure to look forward to. My girls love horses, so I found places to ride ahead of time and put them on our itinerary. My son loves baseball, so a trip to Wrigley Field made the list. Offer special points of interest for each child along the way, and they'll be more likely to enjoy most of the stops.

If you're really unsure whether an RV trip is right for your family, take a trial run, and if you're considering caravanning, bring your friends too! Rent—or borrow—an RV and spend a long weekend (at least two nights) camping close to home to get a feel for RV life and how it will work for your gang. It never hurts to test the waters.

Map the Perfect Route

After you've made the decision to go, the next question is, where are you going? There are many ways to design an optimal RV route. The determining factor is always how much time you have for your trip. Here are a few ideas to get you going:

- Will your trip reflect a personal passion? Are you interested in visiting famous ballparks, for example, or exploring Civil War sites?
- Do you want to focus on specific national parks?
- Can't wait to finally spend some time with far-flung friends and relatives?



- Want to follow a historical route, such as Lewis and Clark's?
- Want to get to know a certain region better, like the Great Lakes or the American Southwest?
- Does a certain style of music light you up? Plan a route that immerses you in it. If you love bluegrass, for example, head for the highways and byways of the Appalachian and Ozark Mountains. If you're a zydeco fan, you'll want to be in Louisiana, the heart of Creole country. Keep in mind that if you travel during the summer, you and your kids will find music festivals to enjoy everywhere.
- Do you just want to head due east (or west, north, or south) and see what adventures unfold?

Whatever your route, keep your own and your kids' interests in mind so you have willing and happy fellow travelers.

The Weather Factor

Do some research on what the weather is likely to be when you plan to travel. Pay attention to seasons, topography, altitude, and road conditions, all of which may significantly affect your trip. Depending on your point of departure, your route should follow the best weather. It sounds obvious, I know, but it's crucial. Since we started on the West Coast in the fall, we headed north first to stay ahead of snowstorms, and ended our trip crossing from the southeast through the southwest where the oncoming winter was less severe.

During the planning phase, I asked grandparents, friends, and relatives for ideas on great places to see. I pored over maps of the United States. I researched all the must-sees (www.discoveramerica.com, www.nps.gov, www.historyplace.com/tourism/usa.htm, and a number of other informative websites) and noted them on a large U.S. map. As I researched, I printed any pertinent information I might need and stashed it in a three-ring binder labeled by state. For example, if I booked a reservation at a certain lodge, I filed a hard copy of that confirmation in my binder, which eventually became my trip bible (see the “Packing” section for more about packing documents).

There are countless books with ideas on where to stop and what to see—start perusing bookstores to see what appeals to you. I browsed many, borrowed some, and bought a small selection, each with a different focus, including *National Parks with Kids*, *American Icons*, and *Things to See Before You're 12*. I read them on the trip too, and



The Louisville Slugger Museum—a must for baseball fans.

made detours when possible. There were times when one of the kids wanted to see a certain place but the other two did not. We'd take a vote and most of the time would come to an agreement. My son Jackson and I both regret we didn't take a detour out to see the Badlands of South Dakota—but we all realized we couldn't see everything we wanted to. Again, the key thing is to be flexible within the amount of available time.

If you're visiting one of the almost 400 areas in the national park system (www.nps.gov), it is imperative that you make your reservation in advance, especially if you're traveling during the summer. Make reservations as early as possible to get the best choice of campground. The National Park Service strongly recommends that you do this at least six months in advance if you are traveling during the summer. I was able to get reservations easily since we traveled during the off-season.

How Long Should Your Trip Last?

Your financial situation and work commitments are the two factors that will likely dictate how long you can stay out on the road. In our case, I knew I had to go without Mike. I knew I wanted to be gone long enough to fully embrace the RV experience, but still be home by Christmas. Since we left in early September, weather was a huge

consideration. My overall plan was to keep a good three steps ahead of winter. Who wants to drive an RV in the snow??

If you want to start right where you live, rent an RV nearby and hit the road. Or skip the parts you don't want to see and fly to your starting destination. Rent an RV there, take your trip, and then fly home. I would certainly recommend a longer trip if your time and budget permit it.



Will your route follow the seasons?

We have a Danish friend who bought a used RV in California (while still in Denmark), flew his family to San Francisco, and drove all over the western United States before selling the RV again and flying home. Another friend and her husband took their three elementary-age children on a five-week trip this past summer. They flew from their home in Connecticut to Denver, picked up a rental RV, drove all around the Western states, and finished their trip in San Diego. If you choose to fly to your starting point, you'll be limited to what you can take on the plane, so you'll need a fully equipped rental that includes bedding, dishes, utensils, pots and pans, and so on. Rent some bikes locally, stock up at a grocery store, and you're ready to roll.

I asked several other RVers how long their trips were. Some folks were out for a week, others for months. Retirees often hit the road indefinitely. Some other families I met were two-parent families, and almost all were homeschooling their kids. The best advice I received—and keep giving because it was so true—is the need to be flexible with your timing. Whether you're out for a week, a month, or six months, pad your schedule with frequent unscheduled days to allow for longer visits at a favorite place, a delay for repairs, or any number of distractions and detours that life might serve up.

How to Choose an RV

How do you determine what kind of RV you need? Should you rent or buy, used or new? What do you look for in a vehicle? These are all important questions. Spend time on the many RV sites (www.rv.com, www.gorving.com, www.rvinginfo.com, etc.). They are treasure troves of information on vehicle options, routes, sites to see, and so on. The RV community was very friendly to me and eager to offer tips or weigh in on a particular vehicle's pros and cons. Google RV blogs (like this one), and take full advantage of the wealth of experience available.

The decision to rent or buy an RV will depend on your family's needs and budget. Since we were going for a longer trip, we decided to buy a used rig and avoid the extra fees we'd incur if we went over an allotted number of miles. I personally wanted to extend our trip if we wished. Most companies offer the first 100 miles per day free on a rental. After that, however, you'll get dinged per mile, and that adds up very quickly. You'll also pay a per-night charge. Some RV rental companies to check out are El Monte RV (www.elmonterv.com) and Cruise America (www.cruiseamerica.com). If you're renting an RV and planning to travel one-way only, be aware that most companies charge a hefty drop-off fee for a one-way rental.

Another reason I decided to buy a used RV was so I could practice driving it. Also, I could customize it to my heart's content, without any worry about keeping the rig in tip-top rental condition. Kids are messy, and buying was less stressful for me. The plan was to sell the RV on our return. That hasn't happened yet—we keep taking trips in it—but someday we will. The investment has paid for itself in many ways.

There is a downside to RV ownership, however, and it's significant: You're on your own if you break down; you'll pay insurance costs and need to find a place to park or store your vehicle. Rental agencies will replace or repair your unit, getting you back on the road ASAP. Be mentally prepared for some kind of mechanical failure on your trip—and budget accordingly. Plan on needing repairs, whether you're in your own RV or in a rental RV, especially if you're out for an extended period of time. I have not met a single RV traveler whose vehicle didn't experience some kind of breakdown. When you think about it, you're taking your home on wheels. What homeowner doesn't need to do upkeep on the house? Something always needs attention: I lost my fuel pump the second day out. My roof leaked in a thunderstorm in Bozeman, Montana; my sink leaked; and the fridge went on the blink every few weeks. And we were lucky.

Before leaving town, have your rig inspected by a trustworthy mechanic. If you rent, make sure the vehicle has passed its safety and mechanical inspection (ask to see the paperwork). Have the tires checked (highway blowouts are extremely dangerous), as well as the engine battery and the generator.

Once we made the decision to buy the RV, I assumed that my AAA membership covered us (www.csa.com). Make sure you have this type of coverage *before* you go. You think I'm joking? Before we left, people would ask, "You've got AAA, right?" "Of course I do," I replied, thinking, "I'm not an idiot, you know." Famous last words: I had AAA for the *car*, not the RV. I didn't know the difference until we broke down on day two, and I called for a tow truck. "Well, ma'am," the dispatcher said, "your coverage

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Assume the average night in an RV rental will be around \$200 (more for larger vehicles) including insurance and mileage. If your trip will be on the longer side, buying a used vehicle might make more financial sense.

is for an automobile, not an RV.” Thank goodness, you can change your plan over the phone. (A side note: Make sure your credit card has plenty of room on it!) If you have mechanical failures, you can usually call mobile RV services once you’re in camp (or RV AAA). Twice I had a local RV service repair company meet me at camp. It was very helpful and got us back on the road quickly.

After the kids got tired of playing in the “new” RV, we took it for a trial run, camping for a weekend to learn the ins and outs of RV life. We also took our time customizing it and experimenting with the best packing methods. Of course, you could take a trial run in a rental, and pay for extra days to pack, too.

When I looked at purchasing a used RV, my goal was to find a 1996 or newer model with fewer than 100,000 miles on it. The 1996 benchmark was purely for my comfort level. Older models did not instill confidence that they’d actually hold up on my 10,000-mile trip. I learned that if an RV has low miles but isn’t used often, problems can arise. Parts that just sit around unused can be just as much of a liability as a rig with lots of miles and heavy use. Be sure to check the number of hours on the generator—less than 100 hours is ideal. I ended up finding a 1996 model with fewer than 50,000 miles on it, owned by a mechanic. Perfect! The bottom line is, whether you rent or buy, the decision is what’s best for your plans, your budget, and your family.

If you aren’t a planner, have no idea how to map out a route, or just need (or want) someone else to take over, there are folks who will plan your RV trip for you. Tracks and Trails (www.tracks-trails.com) will design a trip to your liking, make suggestions of where to go and what to see, and create a very easy and enjoyable adventure for your family. My girlfriend used them and said they did a wonderful job planning her trip—it was a great resource.



How to Travel: Alone, with a Friend—or in a Caravan

I had great fun sharing our trip at a dinner party with some girlfriends shortly after our return. We had a lively conversation about a trip that sounded even more fun than my own: Two of my girlfriends hatched a plan to join forces and go with their combined six kids. Laura was reluctant to go alone. A solo RV trip sounded too scary. Lynn, on the other hand, was undaunted. They decided that they would make a great team. Laura was more than happy to always be the copilot and take charge of the kids, if Lynn



Kentucky's famous Churchill Downs

handled the driving. I guess they had to draw straws for dumping the septic tank.

Another friend of mine (and her husband and kids) caravanned with another family. Again, this is a great idea. The kids have playmates, the adults have grown-up interaction, everyone can share meals and cooking—and each family can retreat to its own space as well as choose different sites to see. On our trip, we met many caravanning families on the road. It can offer the best of both worlds—privacy and company, whenever

you want either. Should you decide to travel with a friend or another family, sit down first for some honest conversations to assess goals and compatibility:

- Are you early risers or night owls? Are your kids on similar schedules with theirs?
- Do you need to be in charge, or can you let others take the lead? Are your skills and preferences complimentary?
- Do you prefer to stick with a plan or play it by ear?
- How old are your kids? How old are the kids who might be joining you?
- Do the kids get along? Do they cooperate or compete with each other?
- What kind of food do you each eat and cook? Do you plan meals, wing it, or eat out?
- Do you and your kids tend more toward eating junk food or nutritious food? Are there allergies or strong preferences to consider? Do your kids drink water or soft drinks? Are differences in all of this OK?
- Are the kids on similar plans regarding TV, music, and video games? If not, can you agree on a compromise that works for everyone?
- Are the parents OK with other adults managing (and disciplining) their kids?
- What kind of sightseeing does each family want to do?
- If you're homeschooling, review expectations and curriculum. Will you have kids in the same grade? Who will teach what subjects? How will you divide the work?

- Do you like actually driving the RV? Are you good with directions?
- How much time can you take for the trip? Is it the same length of time for all involved?
- Do you share similar budgetary concerns?

Clearly, joining forces requires careful consideration, but having the opportunity to share the work—and the joy—is wonderful. The hardest part of our trip was not having my husband with us to share what the kids learned and how each place brought us a new experience. If you do find a friend, relative, or second family to travel with you, it will be even more memorable, and I hope they will be good memories. (You don't want to test the maxim that after three days, house guests and fish stink.) With carefully chosen company, an RV adventure opens the door to a world of growth—but it can also confine a difficult relationship in a tiny space. Make sure you've thoroughly road-tested your compatibility.

Friends and Family Along the Way

One of the best parts of our trip was meeting up with people as we traveled. Before we left, someone asked me, “Why take an RV? Why don't you just drive a car and stay with people along the way?” For starters, I only knew people in Las Vegas, Denver, and Bozeman, and we wanted to see more than that. Moreover, camping in the RV was part of the whole experience. We've all taken road trips, but an RV offered a completely different experience for all of us.

I mapped out our route, alerted my friends that we were coming, and then set up rendezvous points with family and friends along the way. I was very deliberate about deciding who would join us—and when. I discouraged visitors early in the trip so we could establish our routine before throwing more people into the mix. That was a great move on my part, as by the time we had company, the kids and I all knew what we were doing. I was also careful not to let a slew of back-to-back visitors disrupt our schoolwork routine.

I gave careful thought to when I might most need adult support and companionship. It was a huge boost to have not only my husband, but also my sisters, some dear friends, and both sets of grandparents fly in to meet us at different



points along the way. These visits were so fun for all of us. The kids and I got to share our life in the RV, and at the same time, our friends and family really saw what our experience was about in a way no e-mail or photo could convey. These visitors gave me a much-needed break from being the lone adult in charge of everyone, everything, and every decision. I even got a chance to ride in the passenger seat! Sharing—or just talking—with another adult was a great help emotionally, and it was a blast: We all saw new places together and bonded over candlelit campground dinners and s'mores.

We were all very excited when a good friend and her three kids—the same ages as my kids—met us in Memphis for a long weekend. She spoiled us rotten by treating us to a very posh hotel. Our friends toured with us for a few days, which was a wonderful infusion of energy and fun for all of us. There's no question: No matter how long you plan to be out, meeting with family and friends makes the journey all the sweeter. And whether your RV is fancy or basic, it feels pleasantly decadent on a long trip to rejuvenate every now and then with a night at a hotel—indulging in a relaxing, hot bath and a comfortable bed.

Keep the Home Fires Burning

If, like me, you're married but traveling on your own, it's important to find ways to stay connected with your partner or spouse, especially during a long absence. Mike and I decided that it wasn't just a great adventure for the kids, but also an opportunity for us to create a different kind of connection with each other. We knew the kids and I would miss him, and vice versa, and that was all part of the adventure.

To make things more interesting, my husband and I historically haven't done well on the phone when we're apart. Either he's busy when the kids and I call, or I'm busy when



he calls. The conversations are short and unfulfilling, often frustrating, and certainly not something that makes us feel close and connected. To combat our old pattern, we picked a time to call every day so that we would each be available, emotionally and physically. With a designated daily check-in, both my husband and I were *present*, which made a world of difference in maintaining our long-distance connection.

I'd almost always let the kids talk to their dad first, letting them have the

joy of telling him about our day's adventures. Once they all had a turn, I'd take the phone and often walk a few laps around the campground to gain some peace and quiet. I always had this vision of him standing in his office, looking at the U.S. map on the back of his door, and tracing our route. We'd go over the day's events, the plan for the following day, and any changes in our schedule. He always knew where we were headed (except for one disastrous day—more on that later) and our ETA for that night's campsite. Beyond sharing our days, these nightly calls formed the core of our safety plan.

Mike also gave me great backup assistance from home. There were times, for example, when I didn't have a campsite reserved and was just winging it. I'd call Mike and ask if he could find us a campground. He'd Google the area, and sure enough, I'd get a call back with our destination and a reservation.

My husband was also an emotional rock for me. Out on the road, traveling with kids, a lone adult can start to feel a bit disconnected. His unfailing sense of humor and kindness kept me grounded and connected to home while simultaneously giving me the freedom to roam, like a kite on an endless string. The kids weren't homesick, and neither was I, but some days I did feel detached from my life at home. Having Mike champion my dream—not just tolerate it—meant the world to me and to our marriage: There's no question our trip was a success because of the encouragement I received from my husband.

Before I left, I got some telling comments from other women. One remark made me sad: "Oh, my husband would never let me go. He said if I left, he'd change all the locks." I heard more than once, "What's *wrong*, are you and Mike OK?" And the all-time classic, "What's Mike going to *eat* while you're away?" Well, one thing was for sure, he wasn't going to miss my cooking that much—and he knows his way around Trader Joe's as well as I do!

Some men weren't quite so sure what to think either. One said, "I give her two days and she comes home." When Mike heard this, he said, "You're wrong—there is no doubt she will do this." Then he turned and walked away. On day two of our trip, when the RV broke down, Mike ran into a friend of ours at the grocery store. After hearing about the breakdown, he asked, "Is she coming home?" I loved Mike's reply: "No, she's not coming home! She's getting it fixed and going back on the road!"

It was so fun when Mike flew out to meet us. The kids would swarm around him, fighting over who got to do what with Dad first. One time, we were in Arkansas and Mike had just flown in for the weekend. We drove to a cabin on a lake that a friend had offered to us. The kids and I explored the bed-rooms, all of us giddy to be sleeping in

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My husband always knew where we were headed and what our ETA was for that night's campsite. Our nightly calls formed the core of our safety plan.



real beds. One room had built-in twin bunks. Sam, age five, walked right in and declared with great certainty, “Well, I’m sleeping wit’ Dad,” pointing to the top bunk. My husband and I smiled at each other, and I bent down and whispered to Sam, “Honey, you’ll have better luck if you pick a bigger bed.” Next thing I knew she had found the room with the king bed—and I was content to sleep alone. He and I would have the next night together...and not in the twin bunk!

While having Mike or other relatives come visit was wonderful, saying good-bye again was always difficult. With time and miles, though, we would recover, happy to resume our life on the open road.

What to Bring and How to Pack It

In this section I list all the different things you may need by category, then explain how to fit it all into the RV. There is, of course, more room for more stuff in a bigger rig—but the following offers basic organizational ideas that you can adapt to your own situation.

Clothing

When and where you’ll be traveling largely determines the clothes you’ll take. We left San Diego the first week of September and returned home after Thanksgiving, avoiding any early winter snowstorms. We traveled light and kept possessions to a minimum: Each child was allowed one pair of jeans, two pairs of shorts, five shirts, socks and underwear (seven each), one set of jammies, one extra pair of long pants (sweats or leggings), a jacket, a bathing suit, and a hat. We each had a towel, minimal toiletries, a pair of tennis shoes, flip-flops (a must for campground showers), and one extra pair of shoes. The kids brought goggles for swimming.

How much clothing you bring doesn’t really change in relation to how long you’ll be gone. When you have children, especially younger ones, you know how it goes: You pack for a weekend just like you’d pack for a week. So whether your trip lasts a week, a month, or three months, you’re likely to need about the same amount of clothing. We were out long enough to experience significant changes in the weather, so we planned for that. When my husband flew out to meet us, he brought winter clothes that we swapped for our summery clothes—another pair of jeans, for example, to replace shorts.

The Digital Divide: Plugged In or Not?

It's normal in many families for kids to play video games or watch TV when they're bored, and one can argue the pros and cons for turning to these options on a road trip. Clearly, some screen time (as my family calls it) buys the driver a bit of much-needed peace and quiet. But I noticed that without TV or video games (my kids didn't have phones then and hadn't started texting), they found other things to do. We didn't even bring DS games or the like. Just imagine what it was like to no longer have any arguing over whose turn it was or how long someone had already played. The kids' behavior improved too, and there was less fighting. We all enjoyed listening to lots of audio-books together. Each kid had his or her own iPod headset for some musical downtime.

The absence of these digital distractions left room for conversations to happen. We talked with each other, played games, daydreamed—and yes, occasionally argued. Personally, I can't stand the constant noise a TV or handheld game makes. I loved having my kids plugged into the *trip* and not into a show, a video game, or their friends by phone. I know some families navigate the digital divide by designating specific times when games and TV are OK. These are clearly very personal choices, and I can only speak to what worked for us.

Since we took our trip, technology has leaped ahead. We only had one iPod with us, which worked well, as my kids weren't old enough to want their own music. We each had our own playlist, and we each had what became our “theme song” for the trip. We played our theme songs, for example, as friends and family left us, to recapture our trip energy. These days, each child might have his or her own iPod—in that case, parents would have to discuss limits and sharing.

Personally, I'd still shy away from video games or other screen time. My experience has been that unless each child has his or her own device, they fight about it constantly. If each kid does have their own, though, they remain plugged into that world and miss what's going on around them. We took lots of books, travel and board games, craft kits like knitting and friendship bracelets, and art supplies (pens, paper, crayons, paints, glue, tape, and scissors). We had a portable DVD player (strategically stowed in a hard-to-reach place) and one iPod. I kept it simple, and it worked.

School Supplies

Packing their homeschool materials was quite a task. Since I never intended to use the RV's shower, it was the perfect spot for our homeschool storage closet. Each child had

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Put movies on the map!

The few times we did watch a movie, it was such a treat that the novelty paid off in spades. I specifically chose movies that coincided with our trip. For example, we saw *Apollo 13* in Texas, and while crossing South Dakota, we watched *Dances with Wolves*.



a clear plastic tub, stored in a stack, in which he or she put schoolwork. The downside was if I needed the bottom tub, I had to move the others. A better solution would be to get one of those units with clear plastic drawers from The Container Store (or any other storage store). That way the kids can just pull out a drawer and get what they need.

Before I packed all the school materials, I spread everything out in my living room. That way I had a clear picture of what I was taking, what I would leave behind, and what my husband would trade out with us at a later date. I took a picture of what made the final cut for later reference.

Tools and Equipment

One bin held all the basic junk-drawer staples including duct tape, masking tape, transparent tape, scissors, safety pins, candles, matches, flashlights, batteries, a needle and thread, a plastic tablecloth and weights to hold it down, and hanging lights (to suspend on the RV for easy nighttime identification, or to hang around your campsite or in the trees for additional light when you're sitting under the stars). The toolbox held screwdrivers, wrenches, extra fuses, jumper cables, an extension cord, work gloves, bungee cords, plastic fasteners, a staple gun, a glue gun, small one-inch nails, tacks, pliers, hammer, and twine or some kind of string (great for a laundry line). We also had clothespins and a laundry bag.

We took camp chairs and a table, a plastic tarp, an extra camp pad, sleeping bags, and pillows. The kids had comforters for the beginning of the trip, and sleeping bags for when it got colder at night.

I took my laptop and charger, two cameras, and a Flip video camera. We had an iPod loaded with a variety of playlists and books. I used an adapter that plugged into the RV's auxiliary port, so we could play our music through its speakers (check that your RV has a port to plug into).

For the kitchen, I brought one stockpot, one saucepan, one frying pan, and an electric griddle. I had a small toaster oven and a four-cup coffee pot. We used plastic plates, paper plates, and plastic utensils, as well as a few really good knives, "real" spoons (or serving utensils), and one real coffee mug. I brought a can opener, bottle opener, corkscrew, spatula, lighter, and tongs. Paper towels and paper napkins were always on hand, as well as boxes of tissue.

How to Pack the RV

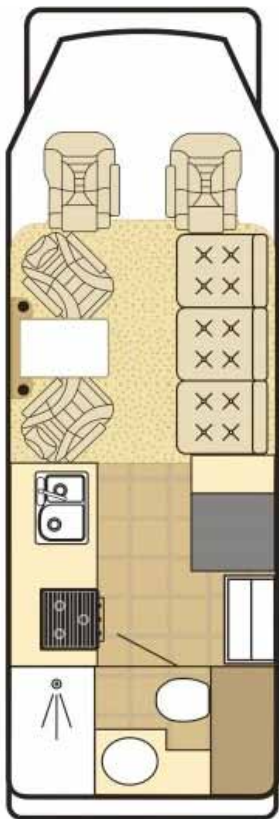
Before I began the actual task of fitting everything into the RV, I again laid it all out in my living room. This is definitely not the time to overpack, so edit carefully. Take out what you don't absolutely need and set it aside. Then imagine there's not enough room for what's left, and cull the pile again.

In the RV's one closet, I put four labeled, clear drawers. Each kid had only one drawer for clothes. (Since adults have bigger clothes, they may need more space.) I put our youngest child's drawer on the bottom so she could reach it easily. Our jackets hung in the shower, above the tubs of school supplies. Shoes also went in the RV closet, along with a few hooks for a baseball hat or sweater, and two sleeping bags.

In the bathroom, I hung a clear, over-the-door, plastic shoe holder for soap, shampoo, toothbrushes, hairbrushes, clips, and any other bathroom items. The bathroom cupboard held a first aid kit, medications, extra toilet paper, and my secret extra key stash.

I put all the pots and pans in the cupboard below the kitchen sink, along with the electric griddle (great for making grilled-cheese sandwiches or pancakes outside on the picnic table). I kept a piece of no-slip rubber mat on the sink counter so the coffee maker and toaster oven could stay there while I was driving.





A typical floor plan for a 24' RV

Magnetic hooks on the stovetop gave me a place to hang a hot pad or dish towel. I stored produce in a three-tiered wire mesh fruit basket hanging from a cupboard hook, leaving a bit more room in the tiny fridge. (I had to secure the hanging basket with a small wire twist tie so it wouldn't bang around while we were moving.) I used clear plastic tubs for food, labeled on the outside, and kept the most-used items up front. We kept the snack tub handy so the kids could grab a bite while I was driving.

The queen bunk over the cab of our Class C RV was the perfect place to store all the bedding. Alongside the bed area upstairs, four little book tubs held the kids' reading and miscellaneous school supplies. In an ideal world, each tub would hold one child's belongings, but the tubs quickly become a mosh pit of everyone's stuff. I also had little book lights for late-night reading.

Underneath the dining table, the benches doubled as storage lockers big enough to fit all our sports equipment. We took tennis gear, scooters, helmets, a soccer ball, a jump rope, and a football. I also had room to fit a small, very basic printer (to print online ticket confirmations), umbrellas, and a portable DVD player. All four bikes and Jackson's fishing pole were tied to the back of the RV, and his tackle box fit in the trunk.

In the RV's central cupboards, I packed food on one side, and toys, games, and art supplies on the other. The kids had a clear plastic tub to put treasures and wallets in. I attached a long, hanging magazine rack from Ikea on a rear wall to keep schoolwork handy. It was really important to make journals accessible, since the kids were required to write in them every day. Of course, we had to do periodic purges to organize our tiny space, which served as bedroom, study, play area, and kitchen for four people.

Anyplace I could hang a hook, I did—over the bathroom door, on the shower rod, on a wall. Hooks help tremendously when kids are trying to put things away.

Food and Food Storage

I don't enjoy cooking to begin with, so keeping things simple on the road was essential. I looked through



cookbooks and sources like *Real Simple* magazine, which features basic meals. I emailed my chef friends and asked for their favorite quick menu ideas. I met a few RVers who kept a small crock pot in their rig for non-travel days. Making a crock pot meal takes a little planning ahead, but the payoff is unbeatable when a hot meal is ready just when everyone's hungry.

Our 22-foot RV had good fridge and freezer space and adequate cupboards, so I was able to store food fairly efficiently. One cupboard was strictly for plates, cups, utensils, and napkins. The other two, along with clear, plastic storage tubs, held dry goods, cans, and jars. My staples included canned soups, pasta, rice, olive oil, coffee, vegetable oil, peanut butter, jelly, bread, cereal, trail mix, graham crackers, and granola bars, and any fruits and veggies that kept well for a few days, like apples, oranges, and carrots. The usual perishables went in the fridge: eggs, milk, cheese, butter, sandwich meats, juice, produce, and tortillas. During the day, I moved the bread into the microwave to save room in the fridge. When I remembered, I'd freeze half a loaf of bread to save room and to keep the rest fresh.

Pancakes, cereal, oatmeal, toast, and eggs were our typical

TIPS & TRICKS

Stay Cool

It's a good idea to bring an extra cooler in case your fridge goes out (mine did) or you end up at a campsite with no hookups. I found that after just one night without a hookup, our perishables suffered. Keep a large, refreezable ice pack in the freezer and transfer it to the cooler if you lose power—you might be able to save your perishables until you get power again.

breakfast options, with sandwiches and quesadillas the lunchtime favorites. Our food wasn't fancy, and we all liked deli turkey, peanut butter and jelly, tuna, canned soups, milk, cheese and crackers, mac and cheese, and hot dogs. I had easy-to-prepare fruits and veggies on hand, such as baby carrots, snap peas, grape tomatoes, broccoli, grapes, apples, and berries (if they weren't too expensive). Pasta was a quick and tasty dinner, and my kids loved it no matter how often I made it. I'd throw in frozen peas or steamed broccoli, sprinkle a bit of Parmesan on top, and warm up a baguette or a loaf of French bread in the oven. The kids never got tired of s'mores—stock up on chocolate bars and graham crackers!

It's a good idea to cook large portions of dishes like lasagna and freeze leftovers for another day. I'm rarely this clever myself, but I can certainly appreciate the economy of effort. I mostly flew by the seat of my pants, eating either what was in the fridge or what we could get close by. There are more efficient ways to operate, but that's how I roll, at home and on the road.

We found easy and satisfying ways to eat healthily, even if we



The perfect place for fruit and snacks! Be sure to anchor it so contents don't become projectiles on the road.

were short on time or advanced planning. The one time I hit my food plan out of the ballpark was at Thanksgiving. Three days earlier, we'd stayed in a condo for two nights (thanks to my parents). I took advantage of the larger kitchen to precook the turkey and most of our side dishes, and then stored them in the RV's freezer. It worked like a charm, and we had an easy (for the cook), delicious, and gratitude-filled Thanksgiving dinner.

More Cooking Tips

One thing you'll learn about RVing is that the vehicle needs to be fairly level in order for the refrigerator to function. Some rigs seem to be more sensitive to this issue than others. I found the ground in most campgrounds pretty even, so this wasn't a big problem. Ask the rental agency or seller how sensitive your RV is.



The truth is, cooking just about anything over an open fire (or an RV stove) is fun and yields delicious results. You'll feel wildly accomplished, especially when you see what a great time your kids are having. Remember these tips and you won't go wrong:

- Ask friends and family for favorite dishes that have five ingredients or less.
- Cook large portions and freeze half for another day.
- Keep a ready supply of carrots, snap peas, grape tomatoes, and hummus for kids to grab when hungry. Stock bananas, apples, pears, grapes, and berries.
- Dress up pasta with broccoli and frozen peas for an easy veggie addition.
- Keep a jar of "Better Than Bouillon" in the fridge for an easy soup starter that uses up far less room than boxes of stock.
- Avoid sandwich boredom by rotating in quesadillas.

Life on the Road

This section has tips and strategies to make your time on the road as successful and satisfying as possible.



Places to Go, People to See

Before we arrived at a national park, historical landmark, or point of interest, I would double-check entry times and fees, restrictions, RV parking instructions, and other necessary general information. Doing this ahead of time allowed our time at the stop to be relaxing, interesting, and fun.

Taking Pictures

You'll want to document your adventure, and there are many ways to do so. Let the kids take a major role in telling the story of your trip, and give them plenty of freedom in how they do it. In other words, back off and let them surprise you! (I promise they will.) Kids love to make movies, and the Flip video camera (www.theflip.com) is fabulous, inexpensive, and easy for everyone to use. The great thing about The Flip is that it plugs right into the USB port on your laptop so you can download and e-mail your videos.

If you have a Macintosh, you also have iMovie, and with very little instruction, your kids can turn the footage they shoot into a great little movie. Children can use an inexpensive application called StopMotion (www.stopmotionworks.com) to make a Claymation video (a la *Wallace & Gromit*). You can create stop motion with more than clay—Legos, rocks, and even oranges can come to life. With a laptop and a webcam, your little darlings can create a masterpiece while you're driving. Your trip to the Grand Canyon may be revealed in a whole new light in a movie featuring a rock, three pinecones, and your bathing suit top.

I also brought my big SLR camera (with a great zoom lens) and a compact digital camera with built-in video. The little camera was perfect to throw into my backpack, letting me catch all kinds of great shots on the fly, and easy for the kids to use. My big camera was awesome in the national parks. Give kids over age four or five their own camera (if they don't have a phone with a camera on it) to experiment with. Bring extra cards for your camera if you don't have a laptop on which to download your photos. For fun, you can also purchase disposable cameras. That way younger kids can take pictures as they see fit, and you don't have to be concerned about possible damage to your own coveted camera.

TIPS & TRICKS

Some well-known sites have podcasts on their websites that you can download ahead of time and listen to with your kids on the way to your destination.

Camping

I bought a KOA membership (www.KOA.com), which gave me a 10 percent discount at each campground. KOAs are family owned and typically operated by a husband-and-wife team. I found them to be predictable, always equipped with laundry facilities, a playground, bike rentals, and usually a pool (depending on the time of year). We also stayed at many national park campgrounds and privately



owned campgrounds. You'll notice quite a range of cleanliness. Listen to your gut feeling about a campground's safety, and if you're at all doubtful, take a drive through before making or confirming your reservation. One time, I walked into the camp office, made a reservation (even though I had that creepy feeling), got to my campsite, and knew I couldn't stay. I went back to the office, asked for a refund, and left. You'll know when it's not right. It could be the place, the other people there—or just something that feels wrong.

Camping itself was easy. The kids helped with the hookup, both electrical and water. Most of the time we used the camp bathrooms to keep things as simple as possible for me. Hooking up the sewer hose was easy, but the less I had to do, the better. Overall I found the camp managers not only a great resource but also more than happy to help with anything. Washing machines were always available for use—and doing the laundry became a good job for the kids while I got dinner under way.

Campground stores stock the basics and have just about any kind of small emergency items you may need, including some RV parts and accessories, as well as compact food supplies.

Most campgrounds suggest that you make reservations, but if you're traveling during the off-season, many times you can research a campground online that day, and then arrive later that afternoon without a problem. Sometimes we arrived in town, saw a sign on the road, and just pulled into the site. Visitor centers are another great campground resource.

TIPS & TRICKS

Women Traveling Alone

Don't override your gut instincts or let embarrassment or inconvenience keep you from changing your mind and leaving. There was only once, when I had no other camping options, that I stayed in a campground that felt uncomfortable. I kept the kids with me the whole time we were there, slept badly, and left very early the next morning.

Living in a Fishbowl

There's no getting around the fact that traveling in an RV is like living on a sailboat. You and yours are stuck in a tiny space, with very little privacy or ability to get away from each other. Chatterboxes and quiet thinkers, early birds and night owls, whistlers and bubble gum blowers—our differences can cause crankiness and frustration to quickly build up and boil over, especially when you can't close a door to get away.

When the kids were starting to get on each other's nerves (or on mine), I'd find a place to stop so they could get out, run around, and blow off some steam. There's nothing like a roaring river or towering sand dune (or gift shop—my older daughter's holy grail) to bring people back—adults included. A little exercise goes a long way toward shaking off irritability. And if I needed to keep driving, listening to one of our stories (available at your library or www.audible.com) offered a peaceful mental break for everyone.

As you might expect, there were times when frustration and fatigue got to me. Ironically, Walmart became a refuge where I could create alone time. The kids took one walkie-talkie and I took the other. Off we'd go in opposite directions. I'd check in on them:

"Kids, I'm on aisle 22, food, where are you? Over." "Mom, we are in the toy section, meet you in five minutes, aisle 25. Over." They loved the freedom, and I savored the break. Walmart was so satisfying for all of us that it became our inside joke. We'd drive by a store and the kids would all shout excitedly, "Look, Mom! Walmart!"

Homeschooling

If you choose to homeschool along the way, schoolwork will be a big part of the trip, as it was on ours. I was lucky to have a good friend who was a homeschool coordinator and gave me great leads and tips. Even so, finding the right program was a giant task: There are many, many homeschool programs, and it's crucial to choose one that fits your style and your kids' needs. One place to start looking is www.homeschool.org. Many schools affiliated with homeschool programs require in-person weekly check-ins, so make sure the program you want accepts online or phone meetings.

Ask your school district's main office if the school has what's commonly known as an alternative education program. These can be designed as traditional and homeschool hybrids, offering classroom assistance at the school as well as support for telecommuting students. When you're doing your research, make sure that the programs you're interested in are accredited either nationally or by your state. Follow up by phone to



verify their credentials and requirements. Many online resources are not what they appear to be, and you can easily find yourself enrolled in a bogus program.

If you're traveling for a relatively short time during the school year, set up a contract with your child's school. Contracts are structured so that your children complete work in tandem with their class's curriculum. They can incorporate some of that work with their homeschooling and easily transition back into regular class on their return.

Hooking Up: The Ins (and Outs) of Power, Water, and Sewer Lines

Hooking up the RV was a piece of cake. In fact, it was one of my kids' chosen jobs. The electrical hookup is very straightforward. Our rig had a 30-amp hookup. Some of the bigger rigs use 50 amps. (Check your vehicle's guide before plugging in your RV.) Your rig will also have hookups for two water tanks: One is for storing water, and the other is to use while the RV is hooked up at a campground. For example, I would hook up the white freshwater hose and turn on the valve at the source, and then I could use the RV's sink. This allows you to use water inside the RV without filling and hauling a container of water. It's a good idea to have some bottled water on board in case you're in an area with no hookups.

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Hooking up your RV is not nearly as difficult as you might think—and it's only a little gross.

Emptying the septic tank isn't necessarily one of life's *Dirty Jobs*. The RV septic hose (if you don't have one, you can pick one up at an RV supply store) attaches to the holding tank at one end and drops into the campground's dumping valve at the other. I brought a box of plastic gloves for my own peace of mind, but emptying the tank isn't so bad. You'll want to flush the black water (toilet) first, then rinse with gray water (from the sink or dishwasher). I stowed the sewer hose in a plastic garbage bag in my trunk.

For those of you towing a trailer, I can only offer links since that was not my experience. Check out www.rvliving.net and www.rvadvice.com/TV.htm. I didn't carry a leveling kit, but you certainly could. Find more information at www.rvlifemag.com.

Mileage and Driving

The hours you spend behind the wheel will vary. Some days will be long driving days, and others will be short. Try to keep long days between six to eight hours (or less). As the only driver, I tried to follow a long day with a short one, if back-to-back driving days were necessary. Factor in time for stops along the way. For a five-hour driving day, I would budget seven hours, allowing for stops, visiting points of interest, and



gas breaks. You may end up with long driving days back-to-back sometimes, but avoid it as much as possible—everyone gets twitchy when they’ve been sitting too long.

At the beginning of our trip, I scheduled quite a few one-night stays. I soon learned that it’s really tough to move that fast in an RV with kids. You’ll discover that once you get to a certain destination, you and the kids will want more time there than you scheduled, or less. I’d suggest a minimum of two to three nights per destination spot. Being flexible and tinkering with “the plan” is part of the joy of RVing. Relax and go with it.

Estimating Time and Distance

When I was planning our route, I carefully plotted all our sites on a map. Then I went to Google Maps and wrote down the number of miles between each stop. From there, I estimated our driving time between these stops, giving me an idea of not only how many nights we should plan on staying in each location, but how I should structure my driving days. I also took into consideration the kind of roads we’d be driving on. For example, 60 miles on the map doesn’t necessarily equal one hour of RV driving time. Going up mountain passes, I’d average 35 to 40 miles per hour. On the downhills and flats, I’d go 65 to 70, tops. Bad weather and high winds will slow you down—remember, it’s all part of the adventure!

Again, I tried to budget two to four nights per location, depending on what there was to do or see. I cushioned our schedule with built-in flexibility so we could adapt to whatever situation came up. Most of the time my “time budget” worked, except when we broke down in Denver and stayed six nights instead of three. The kids and I were sad to have to drive right through Steamboat Springs, Colorado, rather than camp for the two nights we’d planned.



When in Doubt, Do Less

My family was on the road for quite a long time. No matter how long your trip will be, I suggest that you map out the sites you'd like to see, calculate the distance between those points, and, given how much overall time you have, figure out how fast you have to move from one place to the next. If I had only one week, I'd schedule no more than three major points of interest. It's up to you how many miles you plan to drive in total, but if you're out with kids (especially if they are on the younger side), I wouldn't push too hard. Whenever possible, space it out. Overplanning has an enormous potential to backfire.

Insider Tips

I picked up many little tricks and tips not only from direct experience, but also from the very friendly and helpful RVers I talked to. My trial camping runs and Internet research were also very helpful. The most useful information came from actually being on the road.

- In the campground, sprinkle Ajax around your tires to keep the ants away. Avoid parking where your RV or trailer touches a tree or branches. The ants will come down and find their way into your rig.
- Bring a small duffle bag. This is very helpful for those nights you stay in a hotel and would rather not pack your things in a grocery bag.
- Carry spare fuses.
- Put a hide-a-key on your rig. I did not hide the ignition key. If we were locked out, it was not the ignition key I needed—it was our door key, which was different from our ignition key. I had an extra full set hidden in the bathroom cupboard.

The best tip was to be prepared and be flexible. Always plan for the unexpected and allow extra time in new places to either get lost—or just go slower.

Safety

How to stay safe is an important element to plan for on an RV trip, especially if you are a woman traveling alone with young children. Men simply don't face the same risks that

women do. Consider likely scenarios, and formulate a plan that will keep you safe. My brother-in-law, who has served for years on snow search-and-rescue teams, is fond of saying “people respond at the level of their training,” so practice your emergency plans with the kids, and do it more than once. Consider taking a self-defense class yourself, or take one with the kids to build knowledge, confidence, and strategic thinking. Ask your local Y for information on classes or go online to sites such as www.kidpower.org.

Before leaving, Mike and I talked with the kids and rehearsed what kind of code we would use if I needed to alert them to danger. We discussed two possible scenarios.

There’s the “Run and get help, I’m hurt!” situation, and there’s the “This is a bad guy, act cool, but we need to get away from here *now*” situation. The first one was straightforward. We talked about trying to remain calm, I wrote down emergency instructions, and we practiced what role each child would need to take. The second dangerous situation required more creativity and subtlety—not easy for a child. Since we were traveling without Mike, “Dad” became our code word. For example, if either the kids or I had sensed that a person near us was not safe or trustworthy, one of us would say, “I’m going to see if Dad needs any help at the RV” or “Kids, can you ask Dad to buy some milk at the store for me?” Any time we used “Dad”

in a sentence (outside normal conversation), that would be our signal to calmly leave. Kids are very acute at picking up bad vibes. They can sense right away when there’s something wrong with a person or situation.

TIPS & TRICKS

Armed and dangerous?

I know some people carry firearms—I do not. With children in the RV, it was a huge risk I wasn’t willing to take.

Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!

Certain wild animals pose risks, and bears are common in many mountain areas. Check with your park ranger on food storage requirements or suggestions in campgrounds known to have bear activity. Depending on the level and intensity of bear activity, in some parks you may be required to keep your food in a bear box (provided at your campsite in most cases). You may also be traveling through the habitats of mountain lions, wild bison, or even wolves. Get more information from the rangers.



Just your average, run of the mill, Yellowstone visitors.

Pepper Spray Cautions

If you're thinking of carrying mace—aka pepper spray—be aware that it's illegal in many states. Where it is legal, you may be required to receive training and certification. You can purchase bear mace (very different than human mace) at stores such as REI. Do the research to understand the dangers, particularly to your children, who risk accidentally getting pepper spray in their sensitive eyes. The best solution, of course, is to be very cautious in animals' natural habitats. Avoid confronting bears and any wild animals, even those that seem comfortable hanging out near human beings. Use your common sense—in other words, don't be like the guy we saw in Yellowstone who stopped his car and leaned out to try to touch the fluffy buffalo (weighs two tons and charges at up to 35 miles per hour—read the signs!).

I carried a fully stocked toolkit and supplies for all minor repairs. These items included, but were not limited to, duct tape, fuses, nails, screws, screwdrivers, hammers, pliers, safety pins, scissors, flashlight, batteries, gloves, bungee cords, matches, and jumper cables.

My first aid kit was fairly simple and included bug spray, basic medicines, bandages, a thermometer, antiseptic, Neosporin, and tweezers. Check online at the Red Cross and other sites such as www.lifelinefirstaid.com for more suggestions and guidelines.

Can You Hear Me Now? Staying in Touch

I brought two cell phones: my own, and a backup phone with a different number and a different carrier, should I reach an area with limited coverage. My hope was if one carrier didn't work, the other one might. I also wanted to have an extra phone on hand in case the kids and I got separated and they needed to reach me.

Staying on the route you've mapped out is very important, since you will have told someone where you'll be going, and they'll know where to look if something happens. Every night at 6 p.m. PST, we made our routine check-in call with my husband. It was not only the kids' daily talk with Dad and an opportunity to fill him in on our day, but also our safety call. Mike and I would review our plans for the following day, where I planned on going, the roads we'd be taking, and our estimated time of arrival. He'd track us on his map and follow our path, especially if it was a driving day. It was simple: If we didn't call, he'd know something was wrong.

This plan was most important on travel days, since not only is that the most likely time for the RV to break down, but that's when spotty cell reception can be problematic. Since texts often go through even when calls don't, texting is a good backup—at least you can alert your partner that you won't be able to call. If you're in an area with zero cell-phone coverage, find a pay phone. If you're a single parent, designate a friend,

grandparent, or other relative to be your call-in contact. You absolutely want someone to know where you are every day.

The single scariest day of our trip was the day I went off route (taking a suggested short cut), lost cell coverage, lost GPS coverage, and almost ran out of gas. No one knew where I was, I couldn't tell how far I had to go, and we were close to three hours late making our nightly call. I was terrified and so was my husband. Always alert someone when you make a route change and make a call before you lose coverage.

Blogging

Writing a trip blog is a great way of keeping friends and family informed on a daily basis. It serves as a wonderful journal to keep your trip memories alive. We opened a blog account through Gmail (www.blogspot.com), but there are many free options in the blogosphere. You can restrict who can read your blog by making it public or private, a particular concern for parents who don't want photos of their children available on the Internet. If yours is a private blog, your followers will need login and password information. The kids enjoyed blogging, and our followers loved reading about the trip experience from their perspective. Posting pictures really brings the trip home.



Where the Rubber Meets the Road— How Much Does It Cost?

Cost is a key issue, and one that depends on so many different factors. Renting an RV is not an inexpensive way to vacation. When I was doing my initial research, I called almost a dozen companies to get a realistic price range. Sites I looked at included www.cruiseamerica.com, www.elmonterv.com and www.usarvrentals.com. Campgrounds run about \$20 to \$90 a night, depending on whether they are privately owned, a chain (KOA, for example), or part of a state or national park. Fees also depend on the campground's facilities: Are there water, electric, and sewer hookups at each site? If you only need water and electric, that can be cheaper than all three. At one campground, the owner charged \$30 for full hookup, and \$10 for the site alone. I made a "cash deal" and gave him \$20 for a site with just electricity. Also, the bigger the RV, the more you'll pay, since your site and amp use will both be bigger. Some campgrounds charge more for premium spots; ask when you check in. Our average monthly cost for accommodations was about \$850, which included a few nights in hotels.

Fuel: We traveled when gas prices hovered around \$3 a gallon. With the RV averaging eight to ten miles per gallon, gas was absolutely my biggest cost.

The RV: We bought our rig knowing that we would use it after the trip and sell it eventually, recouping some of our investment from reselling. An RV costs anywhere from \$8,000 on the low end to \$100,000 and above.

Food: Your food budget, both groceries and eating out, is a big component of the overall budget. Either you're buying food at home or you're buying it on the road, depending on your preference and budget. We did both, but after reviewing our trip costs, our food budget really wasn't much different than if we had been at home. Our dining-out line item increased since my husband doesn't like to cook and chose to eat out more often while we were gone. I found that we spent almost the same on actual groceries on the road as we did at home.

Admission Fees: Every parent is familiar with the “kid costs” associated with dance class, soccer, baseball, field trips, music lessons, art classes, and so on. I looked at kid costs as a trip trade; I wasn't spending money on soccer or music or baseball, but I was on museums and sightseeing tours and trip activities. The tours we took were amazing learning experiences, and made our adventure that much richer for us all.

Daddy: Part of our trip budget included the cost to fly Mike out to meet us on the road. He came three times, to Denver, Chicago, and Arkansas, and each time it was priceless. Check out flights and itineraries ahead of time.

Raising Money, Saving Money: Before leaving home, the kids and I did a variety of fundraising activities. We always took in our recycling for cash; we kept a jar on the kitchen counter where we put any and all spare change; we held bake sales. We were also very lucky to have good friends who give us gas cards as going-away gifts. I'm not saying the trip was a break-even—clearly there were added expenses, primarily the rig itself and gas. But in the long run, it was still a great way to travel as a family.

Spending Money: Mike and I devised a strategy for the kids' spending money. The night



before the trip, we took them to our neighborhood lake for an RV picnic dinner. There, we presented each child with a hundred-dollar bill. We thought if the kids had their own money to spend, they'd be more careful about where and how they spent it. We also gave them their spending money in that form because we thought they would not break it lightly—after all, how many kids get to have a hundred-dollar bill? I did not want to feel nicked and dimed to death by all the normal kid requests for junk on the trip. This strategy worked; those hundred-dollar bills really helped them think about



what they wanted to spend their money on. The girls used theirs at the American Girl store in Chicago. Jackson picked out various Western and outdoor items.



Timeline: How and When to Get Ready

Here's a suggested timeline of how (and when) to prepare and plan for your trip. When I decided to take the leap, it was mid-April. I planned to leave in September, giving me just four months to pack, prepare, and ready the troops. I enjoy planning by nature so four months time was sufficient to organize our trip. However, it's probably wise to give yourself six months to best plan and prepare, especially for a longer trips.

Six Months Out

- Get a rough idea of what your route will be.
- Start researching vehicle options. Decide if you're going to be a renter or a buyer. Visit online RV sites and start talking to people who drive the rig you're interested in.
- If you're a buyer, start looking for your RV.
- Make your national park reservations as soon as possible, especially if your trip will take place in the summer.
- Confirm all your other known campground reservations, if you're certain you'll keep the scheduled dates. Ask about cancellation policies. If you cancel within 24 hours of your reservation, most places will only give you a partial refund, if any.
- If you're homeschooling, research credentialed programs and register your children.
- Begin researching tourist spots and stops.
- Sign up for safety classes at places such as www.kidpower.org, your local YMCA, etc.).
- Locate and sign up for RV-driving classes.

Four Months Out

- Continue researching places to see and things to do. I recommend the books *National Parks with Kids* and *Things to See and Do with Your Kids 12 and Under*.
- Contact friends and family along your route to make sure staying with them is an option (and to ask how long you can stay).
- Make reservations for desired attractions that may be very popular. For example, we booked a reservation at the Denver Mint way in advance. I also bought tickets to see *Wicked* and Tina Turner in concert along the way.
- Make any necessary dental and/or doctor's appointments for you and your children.
- If you'll be renting your RV, start investigating companies, prices, and vehicles prior to making your reservation.

Two Months Out

- Complete making any reservations at museums, special events, or other local attractions.
- Begin to collect items for school curriculum; get your kids' essential academic materials in order.
- Start thinking about how you're going to organize your RV. For example, I knew we were not going to use our shower for showering. I bought large, clear plastic storage tubs and made the shower our school closet.
- Go for a test trip and try out your rig if you have it already.

One Month Out

- Finalize all reservations and confirmations and put them in your trip binder.
- Confirm your roadside assistance program and double-check insurance coverage.
- Review your final packing list and purchase, borrow or create in any missing items.
- Pay off the major credit card you'll be taking (or pay it significantly down)
- Discuss and begin implementing your safety plan.

One Week Out

- Lay out all items to pack (I used my living room floor).
- Make final arrangements to pick up your rental RV. If you've purchased one, begin the packing process.
- Begin the process of actually loading the RV with all your dry goods, nonperishables, bedding, clothing, tools, school supplies, art and game supplies, first aid kit, repair kit, and so on.
- In a separate binder, put your RV insurance and AAA coverage, copies of passports (for any ID requirements for the kids), and any other important paperwork and documentation. Kids' medical and shot records are good to have in case of an emergency. You might also carry a copy of your contacts, if you don't have a list in your phone, and some stamps for mailing cards home.
- Have your vehicle tuned up (if you own it) and thoroughly checked over.

Two Days Out

- Finish packing.
- Gas up the RV.
- Grocery shop for your first week out on the road.
- Plug in the RV so the fridge gets cold, in preparation for loading food.
- Double-check your packing list.
- Take your spouse or partner out (or in) for a hot date.

One Day Out

- Find a safe, convenient place near the driver's seat to keep your trip binder, stamps, self-addressed envelopes, your laptop, and all must-have documents.
- Get some exercise—but don't overdue it.
- Make sure you're hydrated and go to bed early!

Homecoming

An incredible road trip leaves lasting memories long after the adventure ends. I hope this eBook has provided valuable, useful and practical information for your own adventure.

Before our trip, I would have never considered myself an RVer. Now, I can't bring myself to sell the thing, which sits parked in front of our house. It's constant reminder of our wonderful adventure, always ready for the next one—which happens more often than I ever would have thought!



Thanks again for visiting us at www.RoadScholarz.com. I wish you joy on the journey. Send an email and tell me all about it, or post your comments in our [forum](#).

Happy trails!

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