

Traveling with children

By Alice Hohl

Illustration by Mario Noche

The conversation always starts the same: "How was your maternity leave?" When I answer, people look at me in disbelief. No doubt, some folks must think I'm nuts.

I spent half of my leave on a road trip in a motor home. We took six weeks to travel 6,000 miles, passing through 16 states and getting as far west as Warm Springs, Nevada. The "we" would be my husband, David; our newborn son, Michael; our daughter, Nora (a few months shy of her second birthday) and our two German shepherds, each weighing nearly 100 pounds.

That's two adults, two kids in diapers and two big dogs in a vehicle the size of some people's walk-in closets. We left just five weeks after I gave birth.

But it went well. Really it did.

When the dogs weren't busy getting underfoot, they guarded our campsites and sometimes enjoyed the great outdoors with us on our hikes. After stopping to

rest, we'd put them outside, tying them to the vehicle. Not once did we drive off while they were still attached to the RV.

I learned lots of things about traveling with children. For instance, it's cheaper to go on vacation when they're young. They were included free on our national parks pass, at the campgrounds, on the tour of Graceland and on the amphibious bus in Hot Springs, Arkansas. And there is no stronger incentive to avoid pricey restaurants than a toddler who can't be trusted with sharp utensils, especially around her baby brother.

I also realized that the pacifying effect of highway driving on an infant wears off after about 3,500 miles. During the first half of the trip, Michael remained quiet in his car seat and eventually would fall into a deep sleep. But somewhere in New Mexico, he started to cry as soon as he was buckled in—and kept crying until he angrily surrendered to

exhaustion. Once asleep, he would stay that way only if we drove at 55 mph or faster. When we slowed, his eyelids would flutter open. Intermittent whining ensued. Coming to a complete stop caused wailing. So we tried hard to keep going, feeling as if we were in the movie *Speed*. You may think driving past multiple gas stations with the needle approaching the "E" is a bad idea. If so, perhaps you haven't spent enough time in a vehicle with a crying baby.

Michael's big sister also developed a disdain for long drives. Besides not wanting to get buckled into her car seat, she would inform us anytime we had to slow down for, say, a red light: "Nice ride. I get out."

I also learned something about myself and my festering need for recognition on our otherwise happy cross-country adventure. The problem would start when we were out of the vehicle sightseeing. Nora rode in the backpack with her head resting on my husband's neck, and Michael was situated in my front carrier, snoring audibly while his limp arms and legs dangled out the sides. (Unlike their time in the RV, our kids slept soundly as we walked around such national treasures as Mount Rushmore and Carlsbad Caverns.) Nora's high perch and blond curls attracted attention. Her presence was so engaging, people just didn't notice Michael. I was OK with it for a while. After all, he was so small his head didn't clear the top of the navy blue carrier.

Then I started to wonder exactly what folks thought I had strapped to my chest. Some new fashion accessory, perhaps? It became really important, for some reason, that people acknowledge I was hiking Yellowstone with a baby on my front and supplies on my back—six weeks after giving birth. But the few who noticed little Michael usually just gave me a hard time about getting to carry the lighter child. One group of women, however, understood. They went straight into their RV and made me a stiff drink.

We did meet one other couple who turned their maternity leave into a vacation opportunity. They, too, had children strapped to themselves. They had three kids, though, so they were forced to let one of their sons walk by himself along the edge of the Grand Canyon. Much



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bickering ensued over which parent was in charge of keeping the boy from falling to his death.

At that moment, a family of four seemed like just the right size. ■

Alice Hohl is an associate editor for Columbus Monthly.