

A solitary motorhome winds its way up and down steep hills and around sharp curves as it makes its way toward green, flat land. The sun goes down in red and orange flames behind rugged peaks as five weary, but fulfilled travelers head east and say goodbye to the Rocky Mountains.

After months of traveling through America, these adventurers anticipate this road with mixed emotions – it's the one that leads toward home.

Many of us dream of such moments, of seeing beautiful places while touring and learning about our incredible country with family or loved ones. America's roads are dotted with travelers who share a spirit of adventure, a quest for knowledge and experience, or the dream of seeing their country.

Our family, husband and wife of 17 years with a 14-year-old son and 12-year-old twin daughters, had a version of that dream and made it a reality for eight monumental months. Incorporated in our adventure was recent computer technology that included a family website on the Internet and e-mail that allowed our children to attend school while traveling.

The commitment to make our dream come true turned out to be easy compared to what followed. Choosing the right transportation with no previous knowledge of recreational vehicles was difficult and time-consuming.

During the research process, we were overwhelmed with information and a new vocabulary. Terms like Class C, Class A, tandem axle, fifth-wheel, generator capacity, holding tanks, engine size, tow dollies and gross vehicle weight turned in our heads like the wheels on which we yearned to travel.

Touring the country, going to school, and installing a desktop computer in our traveling home became defining guidelines for our search. We decided on a Class A motorhome. The minimum required length increased from 28 to 34 feet by unanimous agreement after we spent a few minutes in a couple of shorter coaches. The interior configuration was important for sleeping arrangements, some sense of privacy, and work requirements.

After acquiring the necessary knowledge, finding the right coach on our limited budget was challenging. In addition, since both adults in our family are mechanically challenged, we had to find a used vehicle in great shape.

We looked for weeks, shopping at RV lots, watching newspaper ads, searching the Internet, reading trade magazines, and talking to RV owners. Our hard work was rewarded when we finally found a well-cared-for 1989, 34-foot coach with only 11,000 miles of previous wear and tear.

Then our grand adventure presented another problem: what to do with our pets. We found a temporary home for our two cats, but finding one for our 18-month-old golden retriever was more difficult. Ultimately, he went with us, and that decision involved compromises and rewards.

For the most part, Buddy added to our adventure with minimal adjustments on our part. He was not allowed in the motorhome, so our towed minivan became his home. Some people said Buddy had "the finest doghouse in the world." At times it was not really fit for human use, but we vacuumed and hopped in, anyway. Buddy was our watchdog and friend, the center of jokes and a source of good times. He has a special page on our website.

Our adventure incorporated a unique and marvelous educational opportunity. Prior to finalizing plans for the trip, Donald, Kelly and Stacy were enrolled in Northwest Academy, a new charter school in Northern Michigan. It is a science and technology-based public academy for grades six through 12. School board and staff members liked our plan to use the Internet in a 'school on the road' concept, and the board's decision to work with us displayed an open and positive attitude. Our creative adventure and the school's philosophy were a perfect match.

Armed with a laptop computer and a digital camera on loan from Northwest, we began to plan how this technology-based travel school would work. The website would be designed so students anywhere could share our experiences. Our children took the books and curriculum Northwest had chosen for sixth and ninth grades, and we tailored the 'courses' to fit our tour of the United States.

On September 30, 1996, we left our home in Boyne City, Michigan. That day was filled with an amazing mixture of emotions. Months of thought, preparation, anticipation and doubt had funneled into this moment. It was literally a crossroads in our lives.

What might be the world's largest field trip and hands-on learning experience to date began in Cleveland, Ohio, with science, rock and roll, and natural history. It progressed to marine life in Maine, the story of independence and immigration in New England, history and heroics in Philadelphia. It then intensified during our two-week stay in Washington, D.C., and never ended.

Southern coastal areas generated discussions about slavery and the Civil War. Florida and Louisiana were natural classrooms for study and discussion on ocean life, Spanish explorers, cultural diversity and environmental issues. New Orleans was a topic to itself.

Our incredible weeklong stay at Big Bend National Park in Southwest Texas illustrates the educational adventure that characterized our journey. Canyons carved over millions of years, the majestic Sierra del Carmen, the Chisos Mountains, the Chihuahua Desert, and the Rio Grande provided endless opportunities for discovery and understanding.

Mountain lions, javelinas, deer, coyotes, fascinating plants and trees, geology and natural history are all part of Big Bend. We learned lessons from ranger-led programs at Big Bend that helped us throughout our journey.

Our pride in our country grew as we visited national parks and monuments, but they were not the only places offering great experiences. New York, Boston, San Diego, San Francisco and Seattle are a few of the major cities we were able to explore from nearby campsites in our satellite vehicle.

We found ourselves in New York City for the Yankees' ticker-tape parade and the marathon, Boston during record-setting rains and flooding, Washington, D.C. for Veteran's Day, and New Orleans when an out-of-control barge rammed the shopping dock.

Our modus operandi was to stop at the visitor's center in each city to focus our visit. Not having a set schedule allowed us to be spontaneous. In Santa Fe, for example, we extended our stay to visit a local pueblo for a late-night feast dance that brought us closer to the enduring American Indian culture.

While big cities provided us with museums, libraries, parks, and other places in which to play and learn, the time we spent in our less than 200 square feet of living space was a serious challenge. Schoolbooks, notebooks and paper, computer stuff, a printer, associated software and hardware, not to mention food and clothes, had to be accessible daily.

We tried to stick to a schedule and stay organized but were constantly distracted and derailed by the demands of our travels, including sightseeing, navigating, locating camping places, buying groceries, doing laundry, cleaning and cooking in ever-changing locations.

For example, we camped in Reston, Virginia, near Washington D.C. and drove into the city daily for two weeks. We started early to beat the rush-hour traffic and after the museums closed at 5 p.m., we would wait to make our way back after traffic had subsided.

Traditional schoolwork took a back seat to several Smithsonian museums, the White House, Capitol Hill, Arlington Cemetery, national monuments, Harper's Ferry, and all the wonders of the area. During the next couple of weeks, school involved catching up and working from those experiences.

Our children might have preferred sleeping arrangements other than what they had for our extended trip. Two slept on the foldout couch and one on the fold-down dinette, while mom and dad enjoyed the queen size bed, which created some jealousy. Showers, cooking, dishes, sleeping, studying, reading, school and computer work were all done in an area smaller than a large bedroom. Yet somehow it all worked.

Continually waking up in new locations caused us all to ask what day it was and where we were many times. We traveled more than 15,000 miles in our motorhome and about 6,000 in our van.

Learning to use travel time wisely was important. Reading, computer time, website building, e-mail, math, saxophone playing, and major discussions filled the travel hours.

Our pace varied. Staying in one place for 2-3 days was typical. Inevitably, by the time we found a Laundromat, post office, grocery store, and other essential facilities, it was time to move on. It seemed as though we were constantly lost. Eventually, we got used to it and accepted it as normal.

Using the Internet to communicate and build our website resulted in opportunities to meet interesting people. We connected daily for e-mail in places like libraries, mailbox-type stores, 7-11's, gas stations, Internet or computer businesses, colleges, Radio Shacks, museums, motels, campgrounds and even Laundromats. Our requests to use a phone jack were sometimes met with skepticism, but for the most part people were receptive, helpful, and curious.

These interactions and the educational nature of our project provided countless opportunities to explain our adventure and led to great conversations. Another benefit of our school-on-the-road concept was that many organizations supported our Internet educational efforts with free admission. We developed a "Thank You" page on our website to acknowledge their contributions.

Limited finances meant we could not afford a campground every night. That resulted in frustrating time spent searching for safe, authorized places to park our RV and sleep.

We took pride in some of our unique camping places. The JFK library parking lot overlooking the Boston skyline and the Lyndon Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, were two favorites. We spent nights at the University of Maine, in the parking lot for the USS North Carolina Battleship Museum, and the Cleveland Museum of Natural History.

Various dry-dock campsites for us included K-Marts, Wal-Marts, grocery stores, shopping centers and marinas.

After three days of dry-docking we would long for a real campsite with electricity and big showers. We joked that electricity was like a god, and it was a luxury for us. Several campgrounds stand out as favorites, and one of them was James Island County Park near Charlestown, South Carolina. In November, this park had an outdoor ice rink that attracted huge crowds in 70-degree weather and an extravagant Christmas light show at night.

As we look back on our magical adventure, several thoughts and lessons are foremost in our minds. We hope we have taught our children to live their dreams, that there are options in life

and if they want to do something badly enough, they can find a way. We tried to instill the concept that life is a treasured gift you can mold into what you want it to be.

As parents, we were constantly reminded how quickly children grow up, and we can't enjoy or learn from them enough. Time with them is priceless, and the lessons learned by all are forever.

We're convinced that on highways and back roads, in cities, small towns and wilderness areas of America, the people we met and the learning we enjoyed are worth the risks we took to live the dream of such an adventure.

Mark and Betsy Blondin