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How to do a summer road trip around the US with kids



The road trip, which covered 4,790km over the course of three weeks, was an adventure that offered education and travel. PHOTO: AP



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My daughters Happy and Bee have grown up in Asia. Since we left New York City for Singapore 12 years ago when Happy was four, and Bee was born here, both girls know little of their homeland. The moment Happy suggested driving across the United States for her 16th birthday, my husband Jim and I exclaimed, almost in chorus: "Let's go!"

This adventure would offer both education and travel - the two best investments in our minds.

Admittedly, Jim and I have a passion for the road, learning with our feet on the ground, and immersing in the place of the moment, demonstrated by our Guinness World Record for circumnavigating the globe over three years, visiting a total of 116 countries in a car, from 1999 to 2001. Happiest in exploration mode, we certainly hope to pass this healthy addiction on to our children. Once curiosity is piqued, one is always a wanderer.

From the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, I drove the journey over the course of three weeks, covering 4,790km. Losing my patience more times than I am proud of with the girls' constant squabbles over minutiae, we travelled together in a small space, albeit in a massive gas-guzzling SUV (less footprint than air travel), for longer than ever before.

Our learning moments were acute from demographics to displacement, coupled with heart-to-hearts and sing-a-longs of classic rock 'n' roll on small-town radio stations. And yes, far too much fast food (Shake Shack burgers were everyone's top pick!) devoured during fuelling at mostly battered truck stops, where gas prices fluctuated from a low of US\$2.19 per gallon, or 3.785 litres, in Texas up to a whopping US\$3.89 in Los Angeles.

While we did indulge in museums and delectable meals in New York, Atlanta, Mobile, Dallas, and Los Angeles, for the most part, we were laid-back, driving, absorbing, adventuring, and learning. When our family spent time exploring the grounds of the Alabama State Capitol, we discussed the Civil War, since this was the first Capitol of the Confederacy back in 1861. We spoke of the Selma to Montgomery 1965 Voting Rights March that ended in front of the said Capitol. Each of the three marches covered 87km along the highway, and ultimately led to the passing of the Voting Rights Act confirming African-American citizens their constitutional right to vote. At

the nearby Rosa Parks Museum, we found historic markers designating the spot where the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement" boarded a public bus, refused to give up her seat to a white man, and thus, was arrested.

"Mummy, remember when I did a Chinese speech on Rosa Parks? Now we know where she took her stand although she did it by sitting!" Bee, smiling broadly, shared. "Rosa Parks sparked the boycotting of public buses for 370 days. Finally, the Supreme Court ruled that Alabama segregation laws were not constitutional," I added, as we walked hand-in-hand.



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In Jackson, Mississippi, Happy was surprised, even disappointed, to find a rather lacklustre capital city, where my children stayed in their first bed-and-breakfast hotel. In Dallas, at Bird Bakery, they decreed it the finest spot for cupcakes in the world (do try the yellow cake and chocolate icing mini-ones when you visit!).

Travelling as a family meant seeing life through my daughters' eyes. At a posh hotel, Happy pointed out, "There are only Caucasians staying here. No Asians, no African Americans, no Hispanics. It's just plain odd." I was ashamed I had not even noticed.

While dining later at Italian restaurant Fachini, when an Irish waiter spoke fluent Mandarin with Happy and Bee, before continuing in Spanish with Bee, I was floored.

In Texas, Jim arranged for all of us to meet T. Boone Pickens, the last living old-school oil tycoon, who made his fortune being a "wildcatter", hunting for oil in unproven soil and he charmed us like his life depended on it. Mr Pickens, 91, started working in 1948 at age 20 for the oil company Phillips, making US\$300 a month. He became a billionaire decades later from his energy investments and much talked-about hostile takeovers, including his attempt on his first employer Phillips, of which he failed to gain control.

Spry, engaging, and engaged, he entertained us for nearly two hours with stories of his illustrious life. After he described an oil deal, Bee, 11, asked: "Mr. Pickens, is that an example of arbitrage?" Jaws dropped around the boardroom table. "Yes, you smart girl," he praised, as Jim and I beamed.

When Happy asked if energy might play in her future, Mr Pickens advised: "You will not make your fortune in oil, like I did. Use your Mandarin to take over the world."

Driving to Amarillo from Dallas, speed limit 80 miles an hour (about 130 km), the endless prairie offered a range of sameness, save ageing oil wells, a few plateaus, and towering white windmills churning to power Americans' lives. Then hills and more winding roads after entering New Mexico, and a spotting of the famous, albeit battered Route 66.

In Santa Fe, another slow-moving capital city, Happy decreed: "I cannot wrap my mind around officials not allowing any kind of development or updates in the building of their city. The architectural style must be preserved in the three ancient ways, and while this certainly encourages great tourism, it stunts the growth of the city." Truth is, the height restrictions - locals say nothing can be taller than the unfinished bell towers of the downtown cathedral - and enforced similarity of architecture styles, territorial (think Gothic and Greek), pueblo (rounded corners and flat roofs), and Spanish revival (plaster walls and clay tile roofs), have made Santa Fe a bona fide destination city, one combining tradition with the contemporary, where tourists flock for food, folk art, and excellent weather. My daughters left with cowboy boots.

A bumpy flight, in a six-seater with only one pilot, over the Grand Canyon, with a depth of 1.6km and average width of 16km, offered all of us a chance to appreciate a real wonder of our world. "We are smaller than ants in comparison," Bee offered. "I don't know what to feel. It's not a butterfly in the stomach moment; it's more like being overwhelmed by the enormity," Happy said.

"Each time I've done this, I get chills," came from Jim. Me? Thrilled to see the turquoise Little Colorado River, which remains mostly dry three-quarters of the year, I felt gratitude for my 50 years on earth, love for our planet and grateful for our mad, yet meaningful adventure.

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And just like that, our journey - and the long drives - wrapped way too quickly, although not before we faced wicked winds in the Mojave Desert on twisting roads, some claiming a six-degree gradient, littered on either side with stumpy, spiny cacti. Then, a last stop at the ubiquitous Target store to pick up cheap, but chic sweatshirts (our anticipated warm American summer unrealised), before our GPS directed us right into LA's West Hollywood. I drove directly to the rental car drop off, enormously indebted to the beast of a machine that had delivered us safely from one side of the United States to the other, and proud of myself for driving carefully, with intent, and reaching LA in time for our Universal Studios reservation!

The City of Angels (in Spanish, Los Angeles means "the angels") thrilled everyone: dinner at Spago in Rodeo Drive, Harry Potter World, Pinkberry frozen yogurt, the impressive eco-friendly 1 Hotel West Hollywood, and a major league baseball game with the Los Angeles Dodgers winning 5 to 4 over the Colorado Rockies, after a home run at the bottom of the eleventh inning. "Baseball gets no better!" I yelled to my girls over the celebratory crowd.

As we travelled, my daughters kept daily journals (my mandate!) and served as my eyes and ears, even recording my thoughts as I drove. I can only hope the cross-country experience will be a testament to the diversity of America, which is what makes it great.

I loved seeing Bee's proud moment when she stood where Rosa Park refused to give up her seat. Then Happy saying one day she may write her thesis on the economic tensions that led to America's Civil War. And what a kick to have Happy insist on pumping the fuel at every truck stop, and Bee struggling to explain green tea ice cream (her father's go-to; thus a staple in our Singapore home) to a grocery store clerk in my little hometown back in North Carolina. And of course, Jim teaching our girls "three strikes you're out" in baseball - a moment where we both pondered if we have done the right thing for our American daughters, who are so far removed from their culture that even baseball, the most American sport, is foreign to them.

Fortunately, we understand the world and even ourselves a little better after we have seen more - gaining a broader perspective. Our time driving across the US, where infrastructure is ailing, politics are uncertain, race relations are not improving, and an increasing number of homeless are sleeping in tents, had all of us giddy upon boarding our Singapore Airlines flight back to our chosen home.

Life is richer when we travel: I like to think the places we touch on the road become a part of us.

To travel is to live.

TIPS FOR A FAMILY ROAD TRIP

1. Let the children lead the way - Happy planned our route and hotels; both girls took turns in the passenger seat, helping with navigation via WAZE once we reached large cities.

2. Do not overschedule nor over-drive. The cardinal rule for Happy as she planned was for me to drive no more than 6.5 hours in one day, with time to unwind and explore in a few cities along the way.
3. Jim and I have differing views on this, but since I was the driver and Happy the planner, he had to roll with us: I reserved all hotels in advance (it was summer, high season when we travelled), except for one night, when we left it to chance on where we would sleep.
4. Use truck stops as often as possible. They have everything one can possibly need and more, but most importantly, you will experience the whole gamut of life.
5. You cannot prepare enough. Things will go wrong. That's the adventure. Although I am cautious on the road, twice the fuel tank was dangerously low, out in the barren West. Of course, I did not tell the children, and we made it to truck stops each time.
6. H2O! Have plenty of water in the car. Hydration is key to good health, especially in the dry West. Because I'm a bit of a control freak, I didn't allow food in the car, which meant it stayed clean and didn't stink.
7. Last but not least: Even if you don't need to use the loo at any stop, go anyway!

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