

by Laura Sullivan

take to the road

A car trip. Yes, voluntarily confining yourself to a contained space with your kids for hours...days, even. There will be spilled drinks, crying, fighting, and at least one shower of cold french fries. But do it anyway. On a recent road trip to Vancouver, Sandra Fransen of Portland, OR, found herself asking "Are we there yet?" as often as kids do. But she'd definitely do it all over again. "It's about spending time with your family and having fun," she says. And with gas prices more reasonable, a road trip can be a truly memorable, budget-friendly vacation.

how to keep it fun:

do a little prep work

Most libraries allow you to download books for free off their websites.

Fill your iPod with kids' audiobooks, an imaginative way to pass the hours that, unlike DVDs, the driver can enjoy, too. Head to a dollar store to pick up lots of small, wacky gifts, then wrap them up. Dole them out as needed to circumvent whining. To get everyone in the mood, watch (or rewatch) the animated flick *Cars* before you go (or view it on the road, if you have a DVD player in the car); it's surprisingly insightful about American road-trip culture, says Jamie Jensen, a dad who wrote *Road Trip USA*. **unplug, at least part of the time** Passing the hours without being plugged in *is* a challenge, but it's worth it.

"My friends still think I'm crazy, but our best vacation was when our DVD player broke twenty minutes into the trip," says

bonus!

Go to Parenting.com/ car for a whole trip's worth of games and activities to keep kids occupied on the road.

Stephanie Vozza, a mom of two from Rochester Hills, MI. Fortunately, she had packed *KidChat*, a book filled with conversation starters like “What trait about yourself are you most proud of?” Vozza was surprised by some of her kids’ answers—and even more stunned at how much they learned about each other. “Car rides are one of the few chances you have to spend time together without distractions,” she says. “Take advantage of them!”

invite them to document the journey Give your kids disposable cameras and ask them to take photos of whatever catches their eye, then invent stories about the places or people. “The observations my children made were the highlight of the trip,” says Devra Renner, a mom of two from Centreville, VA. “My youngest saw a man with an eye patch and was sure he was a pirate on vacation!” Also, keep

a journal, with everyone adding entries as you go: thoughts, drawings, postcards, ticket stubs, even that pretty flower your daughter picked on the side of the road.

get out and stretch Take advantage of rest areas—and not just when someone needs a bathroom break. Bring a ball or Frisbee along to expend some energy. Many state rest areas have free coloring books and pamphlets for kids.

be curious When you stop at a gas station, ask people about the closest place to grab a good bite. Then trust them! “You have to be open to the idea that the place with the dingy outside really does have the best fries in town,” says Jensen. On a trip with her two sons, Eva Keiser of Minneapolis took a chance on country roads over the highway. They crossed the Mississippi River and drove up and down bluffs like roller coasters. “All of us were squealing with excitement,” she says.

five-day journeys worth taking

Highway I (San Diego or Los Angeles to San Francisco)

don't miss From the hilltop Hearst Castle, wander down to the water to see elephant seals with their drooping schnozes. The stunning vistas and lighthouses of the Big Sur river valley are iconic. Stop at some of the marked spots for amazing photo ops. **cool digs** Costanoa Resort is the most decadent campground around (how about a spa treatment before you retire to your tent?).

pull over for Ostrich Land, outside Santa Barbara, where hundreds of ostriches and emus roam. In downtown San Luis Obispo, there's an alley covered with ABC (Already Been Chewed) gum. Well, the kids will like it...

2 Route 66 (the leg from Chicago to Memphis)

don't miss Take a trip back in time at the '20s- and '30s-era filling stations along the way. Ask your kids to look out for classic cars from the same period (first to spot one gets a prize!).

cool digs In Memphis, you can stay in Elvis's own Heartbreak Hotel, across

the street from Graceland Mansion. **pull over for** The Ariston Café in Litchfield, IL, family-owned since 1924. Chat up the locals here, or in any of the other old-time diners you'll pass.

3 Rockies Romp (Denver to Vail to Glenwood Springs to Flaming Gorge to Salt Lake City)

don't miss Explore the quaint town of Breckenridge, CO. In Glenwood Springs, CO, you can wade waist-deep in a natural hot-springs pool. The nearly 150-million-year-old fossils of Dinosaur National Monument are a *T.-rex*-loving kid's dream come true. Steer north to Flaming Gorge, UT, where dramatic cliffs frame a serene reservoir.

cool digs For a super splurge, check out the posh Ritz-Carlton resort at Bachelor Gulch, CO, near Vail. A special summer package, which includes light meals and snacks, starts at \$399 per night for a spacious family suite. Your kids can borrow the resident Labrador retriever, Bachelor, and play fetch in the fresh mountain air.

pull over for Davies' Chuck Wagon Diner, near Denver. It offers serious

western eats (like “Chuck Wagon” chicken-fried steak with hash browns). Look for the giant horse on the roof.

4 Historic Northeast Trail (Richmond to Manassas to DC to Gettysburg to Philadelphia)

don't miss The charming old neighborhoods of Richmond, VA; the enthusiastic reenactments of the Civil War at Manassas, VA; DC's museums (the 16 Smithsonian museums and the zoo are all free, all the time); and Philly's Society Hill (the area bounded by Walnut, Lombard, Front, and 8th streets), with its quaint cobbled roads. **cool digs** The Historic Best Western Gettysburg Hotel dates to 1797. Abe Lincoln honed the Gettysburg Address at the Wills House, steps away. **pull over for** Stonewall Jackson's left arm. Robert E. Lee's sidekick lost it in a battle in Fredericksburg, VA, south of DC. It has its own grave there.

For more information on the highlights of all these fabulous, five-day road trips, go to Parenting.com/roadtrip.