

Simple is best

and other lessons from a road trip with kids



Jonathan Elderfield via AP

In this August 2016 photo, a two-lane road rises up toward trees somewhere between Pittsburgh and Gettysburg, Penn.

A 10-day road trip with a 14-year-old and 10-year-old — Philly to Canada and back

By JONATHAN ELDERFIELD
Associated Press

GETTYSBURG, Pa. — Road trip season is around the corner. Does that fill you with memories of painful car trips stuck between siblings in the backseat? Or do you relish the idea of hitting the road, maybe with your own kids?

I took a 10-day road trip last summer with my sons Max and Henry, then 14 and 10. There were ups and downs as we headed from the Philadelphia suburbs through western New York to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, then back home through Ohio. Overall we had fun but some stops were more enjoyable than others. Here are some takeaways.

Sometimes simple is best

The highlight of the trip might just have been one of our first stops: the Circle Drive-In movie theater in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where we watched a double feature from the station wagon while eating candy and drinking soda.

From there, we had a rainy visit to a state park in Watkins Glen, New York, and lunch in nearby Ithaca with a friend.

Next was a biggie: Niagara Falls. But it turned out to be a bit of a letdown. The falls impressed, but the street photographer in me cared more about the crowds oohing and aahing at the sights. My kids just weren't that interested. I guess video games can take the wow out of the natural world.

Later in the trip, we visited Pittsburgh, where I'd gone to college. The Duquesne Incline, an old-fashioned riverfront funicular, and the sandwiches at Primanti Bros., which have French fries and coleslaw between the bread, were bigger hits with the boys than the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

Takeaways: Don't feel obliged to see touristy places and museums if the kids don't care. Look for unique sites and shorter excursions.

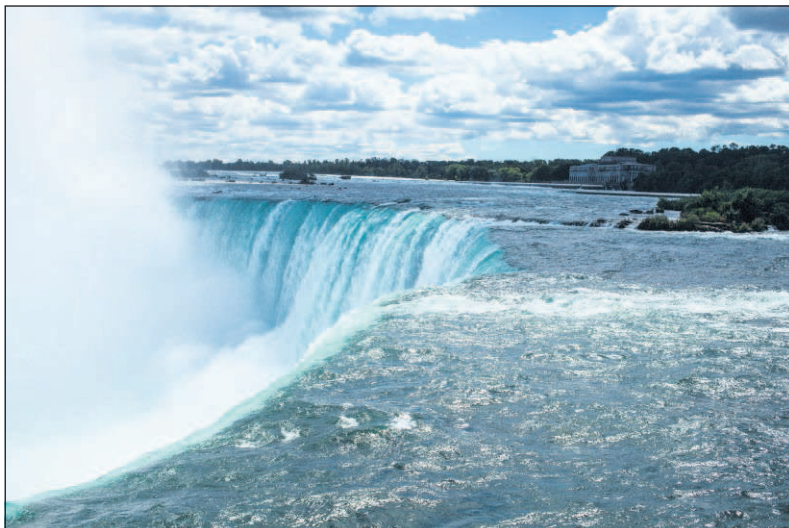
Food, lodging and serendipity

I had my first taste of poutine, the Quebecois dish of French fries, cheese curds and gravy, in Canada. But most area restaurants we saw were chains, which I try to avoid. On the spur of the moment we



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In this August 2016 photo, a hungry traveller eats a sandwich filled with french fries and cole slaw at Primati Bros. Restaurant and Bar, in Pittsburgh, Penn. The original location in Pittsburgh's Strip District opened in 1933.



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In this August 2016 photo, a plume of mist rises as water plummets over Niagara Falls, as seen from the Canadian side, in Niagara Falls, Canada. More than 700,000 gallons of water go over the falls per second.

drove to Niagara-on-the-Lake, a picturesque town filled with coffee shops, galleries and real restaurants, for a stroll and genuine meal.

Some of our stops were planned, including tickets for a Columbus Crew soccer match, but I also relied on serendipity and web searches for things to do on the fly. Sophia's, in Buffalo, New York, was an impromptu find for a hearty breakfast on the day of our longest drive from Canada to Ohio.

I limited the kids' screen time on

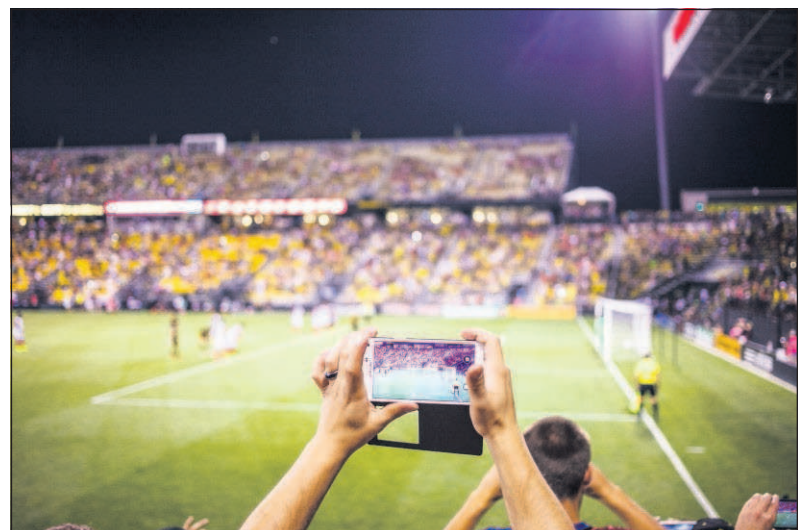
each leg to encourage sightseeing out the window, but I also had some meditative driving time to myself with music cranked as Max and Henry kept their heads bowed to the almighty small screen.

As sole driver, though, I didn't want to spend every minute behind the wheel. This was my vacation, too. So I built in a respite from the road at an Airbnb cottage in Vermillion, Ohio, on the south shore of Lake Erie. We swam, explored small lakeshore towns, and checked



Jonathan Elderfield via AP

In this August 2016 photo, a Bubble Soccer player runs for the ball on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Penn., during the 2016 Pitt Bubble Soccer Tournament.



Jonathan Elderfield via AP

In this August 2016 photo, a fan takes a picture during a match between Columbus Crew SC and San Jose Earthquakes in Columbus, Ohio. Columbus won 2-0.

off some classic pastimes: soft-serve ice cream from a roadside stand, flattening pennies on freight train tracks and a barbecue.

Driving through farmland and fields, we stopped for lunch in Oberlin, Ohio, and ended up in Columbus for two nights with a friend and his family. The planned soccer game, a few meals out and a trip to the amazing and immense Book Loft book store in German Village and we were ready to head back to Pennsylvania.

I love Gettysburg. The history of the battlefields and the majestic landscape is something I can't get enough of. One kid helped me re-enact a famous Civil War photograph at Devil's Den; the photograph itself was a set-up by Alexander Gardner so it was only

fitting that I did the same. We drove and walked at sunset and dawn, enjoying the best light and avoiding midday heat before starting for home.

Takeaways: Don't eat every meal in a restaurant and don't spend every night in a hotel. Find opportunities for fresh food, whether picnics or home cooking. Aim for a few nights in a vacation rental or with friends or family along the way. But bring a blow-up mattress and bedding in case fold-out beds or other makeshift accommodations aren't up to snuff.

The balancing act

We had our ups and downs on the trip, the boys and me.

I felt like I was constantly asking them to pay attention to the world around them and get off their screens. On the other hand, I was also glad they had a distraction when I lacked plans for dinner.

Simple things were often the best, like the drive-in or the Pittsburgh incline rather than museums or touristy Niagara Falls. Another big hit: the motel pool. It's a great way to refresh after hours of driving, and you won't have to drag your children off their devices if there's a pool to play in.

A few other pointers: Bring some balls or games. We kicked the soccer ball during a few highway stops. And break up the trip. Instead of highways, take smaller roads, like the one where we saw a covered bridge. Buy tickets and plan for important events, but be spontaneous too. Everyone in the car will be happier if they feel their opinion is being heard.



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In this August 2016 photo, cars are lined up as customers watch the film "Kubo and the Two Strings" at the Circle Drive-In Theatre in Scranton, Penn.



Jonathan Elderfield via AP

In this August 2016 photo, the late afternoon sun passes between trees at Gettysburg National Military Park in Gettysburg, Penn. The battle of Gettysburg was fought in 1863.