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TRAVEL

RV road trip: After a few mistakes, a family revels in the freedom of the road

By **Heather Greenwood Davis** Special to the Star

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SEATTLE—"Turn, Turn, Turn!" I'm yelling at my husband, Ish, as we approach the intersection.

"I'm trying!" he's yelling back as the motorhome takes a hard right.

I meant "left," but it's too late. The engine is roaring as we try to mount the hill in front of us. It sounds like a motorcycle gang is in hot pursuit. Dishes crash in the cupboards behind us. A box of Ritz crackers flies off the counter and smacks into the back of my head. The children are silent. Wide-eyed and slack-jawed, they're scrambling to stop the cards from the game of UNO they were playing from sliding onto the floor.

This is not a scene out of an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie; this is the scene inside our 24-foot rented motorhome. There are clear similarities, however: in both, the level of chaos is epic.

Mere moments earlier, things might have been described as serene.

We'd been first in line for the ferry from Bainbridge Island to Seattle. On the 35-minute ride across, we'd parked it, sauntered up to the top deck, and snapped photos of the boys in front of the Seattle skyline.

Then we arrived and it all went to hell.

A key difference between driving a 24-foot RV and driving a big rig is that you need a special licence to drive a rig; anyone can drive this RV.

"Take the next left!" I'm shouting from behind piles of maps and brochures as Ish tries to manoeuvre our elephant through a sea of mice.

"Which left?!" he shouts back as we pass the street.

And on it goes.

When I describe the circumstances later to a friend who RVs all the time, she calls it a “rookie mistake.”

We should have parked the RV on the other side, walked onto the ferry and explored the city and its hilly one-way streets by foot, I’m told.

“You don’t have to take it everywhere!” is only one of many lessons we learned over the course of our six-day journey.

Other lessons included: “That’s why the toilet smells!” “Gas costs *how much?*” and “Do not wrestle your brother on the table/bed!”

The things we learned kept us on our toes. Our love of the RV life grew in spite of them.

The RV offers our road trip-loving family something no other vehicle has: complete freedom.

While airlines are telling you to take less, cramped cars require you to repack, and even trains and buses place limits on your bags, the RV says sweetly: “Bring it all!”

It’s the only mode of travel where you’re expected to bring the kitchen sink.

We picked up our “sleeps-four-comfortably” rental from Fraserway RV just outside Vancouver, and, after a quick introduction to its knobs and gadgets (from which the only thing I remembered was that we’d pay a fortune if we turned on the generator), we bee-lined for the border.

The itinerary was loose, but the goals were clear. We wanted to visit Seattle and Portland, two cities we’d heard great things about. And we wanted to spend some time exploring America’s national parks and the Pacific Northwest food scene.

Despite its size, the RV added to the trip more than it took away. No schlepping bags in and out of the car, worrying about how you’ll get sleeping bodies up to hotel beds, or even whether restaurants will be open when you arrive at your destination.

The winding, narrow, single-lane mountain drives made for white knuckles at times, but the views were worth it.

Despite wanting to “make good time,” we quickly realized that we lacked the willpower to drive past breathtaking scenes. We stopped to explore Deception Pass on our way south. And, the next morning, when we set out from our Port Angeles campsite for Seattle, we headed west instead of east, because we couldn’t bear to skip Lake Crescent after Twitter friends shared a description. Our intended quick stops quickly became longer ones as the boys instinctively found rocks to skip or sticks to poke along the rocky perimeters.

We took the long route everywhere, winding along coastal route 101 from Astoria to Portland, skipping the interstate whenever we could and wandering way off track to North Cascades Institute learning centre on our way home again. Each turn tempted us with another, each hike led to another and our only regret throughout the trip was that we’d budgeted six days, not 16.

In Astoria, we didn’t have time to take a picture in front of the *Goonies* house or climb the Astoria Column and join the tradition of throwing paper airplanes from the top. And we only got to peek at Mt. Rainier from afar, not drive in for a closer look because we were short on time.

In Portland, we discovered more food trucks than we could conquer in an afternoon, indulged in Voodoo doughnuts and longed for time to test out the competition. The consensus was that we also could’ve happily spent another day in the Alberta Arts district, where we’d dined on truffle fries, and, once full, forced in Salt & Straw’s famous ice-cream one taster-spoon at a time.

Through it all, we got better at the RV part, too.

We learned that navigators may need to repeat themselves in a calm voice and that drivers may need to listen more carefully. We learned that playing UNO in a moving vehicle is always a risk and that, sometimes, it’s better to pay for two parking spots, not try to squeeze into one.

We found our groove over those six days, and, in the end, what I’ll miss most are those simplest of moments when we were just a family, hanging out together, retelling the day’s stories around a campfire and staring at the stars.

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Reach her at heather@globetrottingmama.com. Her RV experience was subsidized in part by Go RVing Canada (www.GoRVing.ca) and KOA Campgrounds (www.koa.com). For more Toronto Star RV coverage, see today's Wheels section and visit thestar.com/rvtravel.

Lessons for the RV newbie

New to the world of motorhomes? Following these tips will help you avoid the bumps of your first experience.

Parking: A 24-foot RV is likely too tall for most underground lots and will be a tight squeeze in a parking space. Cough up the cash for two spots or risk a ticket.

Book campsites early: The more a site offers (drive-through parking, water and electricity connections, close to amenities) the more likely it is to fill up fast. Pick your campground carefully and don't pay for things you won't need.

Choose the right site: Not all campsites are created equal. They range from no frills to luxurious, and prices aren't always the way to tell them apart. KOA for example offers three different types of sites: Journey, Holiday or Resort. The prices aren't miles apart and if you're going to use the amenities of a "resort" site, it could be the smarter way to go. On our trip, it meant that extras like a free ice-cream social in Port Angeles, a free pancake breakfast in Astoria and minigolf was often available steps from our assigned spot.

Budget for the extra costs: Like a rental car, the cost of the RV rental is only the beginning. Ours came with 1,000 km included. We drove 2,400 km (an extra \$500 cost on return.) Know roughly how many miles you'll need at the outset, how much you'll pay for extra miles, and plan accordingly. Other costs that can sneak up on you: gas. If you're heading to the States, costs will be less, but we spent close to \$100 (U.S.) per day.

Pick the right RV: We loved having a slide-out (basically a side of the RV that when parked extended from the side to give us more space inside). The more of them you have the more space you'll have in the interior. We opted for a motorhome over a pop-up trailer but under different circumstances you might want a different option.

Don't overpack your schedule: The gas costs will be lower and you'll be able to relax more if you keep to only a few things per trip. We completely underestimated the amount there would be to do at each of our planned stops and the campsites themselves. Like any other road trip, keeping the days light and easy will keep everyone's stress levels down.

Get an early start: We tried. We really tried. But most days we weren't on the road until 9 or 10. That was too late. Things take more time to repack than you'd expect. Start early, get a full day in and be prepared to pack it in a little earlier at night.

Get to know your RV neighbours: If we'd asked before setting out for Seattle, we would've known better than to drive into the city. The RV community is a welcoming one and happy to help. Chat with them and talk about your travel plans and they may have some insight to share.

National Park Visitor Centres are treasure troves: Stop! And spend some time. A casual chat will help you suss out the spots where locals dine, the shortcut they take to the ferry or some other gem. Most of the ones we stopped at had a ranger out front ready to share some interesting artifact with the kids. It's a learning opportunity before you even begin exploring.

Be a good neighbour: That half bottle of dish soap or half canister of sea salt will be appreciated by someone starting out when you're finishing up. Pass it on, along with any tips you picked up when you return your vehicle.

Just the facts

The costs: Our 24-foot rental would cost you about \$2,200 from Fraserway RV. Gas costs came in at about \$100 per day. 1,000 km were included in the rental, the extra 1,400 we drove cost an additional \$500. We spent roughly \$200 on groceries and ate about two meals per day from our shopping. When we did eat out, we were able to store leftovers in our fridge and warm in our microwave or on the stove the next day.

The campsites: We overnighted at three KOA campsites along our route. The Olympic Peninsula/Port Angeles KOA was a great spot from which to explore the national park. I'd describe it as a smaller property and it suited us well. Our second stop was at the Astoria/Warrenton/Seaside KOA. This was more of a luxury property with plenty of family programming included in your stay. We spent one night out of the RV at the North Cascades Education Centre in Washington and loved it; dorm style rooms, incredible farm-to-table meals and plenty of offerings plus great information to help you explore the park. Our last night was spent at the Lynden/Bellingham KOA. Right on the B.C. border, it's a popular first or last stop with Canadians. Watch for their themed nights during the summer.

The route: We started with a paper map, which gave us a big picture of where we were headed, and then programmed each day's route into our GPS. When we hit dead zones or the GPS failed, we still knew where to turn. And it also meant we knew approximately how many kilometres our route would be from the outset.

The eats: Pike Place Market in Seattle didn't disappoint but it was in Portland that we found the best eats. Food trucks are located in several spots around town (don't miss Nong's Khao Man Gai and The People's Pig). Voodoo Doughnut and its competitor Blue Star Donuts are worth sampling. And don't miss a trip out to the Alberta Arts district for Salt & Straw and Little Big Burger.

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