

# 20 Family Road Trip Tips to Save Your Sanity

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20 Family Road Trip Tips to Save Your Sanity by [Amy Paturel](#) Last Updated: May 16, 2022



I'm one of those people who's always been wary of family road trips. We have trouble wrangling our three sons on our home turf, never mind trotting across state lines. But my husband and I also agree that parenting is about creating memories for our children and taking advantage of teachable moments, and the open road allows for both. So, the day after school got out, we embarked on a 12-day adventure with our three sons, ages 9, 9 and 7. Here are 20 road-trip lessons we learned from experience... and will definitely keep in mind for the next time. (Spoiler Alert: there *will* be a next time. We had a great time.)

## 1) Hit the library before you go.

My 9-year-old twins selected 15 to 20 books (each!) to stash in a cubby in the backseat. I selected five for my youngest who was reluctant at first, but grateful once we were en route. They read nonstop during our long drives — and we didn't have to pay a dime. And yes, I realize I'm extraordinarily lucky that my kids (and me!) are able to read on the road without getting carsick.

## 2) Give the kids jobs.

We gave each kid a task on the road. Not only did it give them a sense of agency (kids love to be boss), but it freed us up, too. One kid was charged with navigation, another took on the

task of communicating with Airbnb hosts (we had to apologize for excess emojis) and the third snapped photos. To prevent sibling squabbles, we rotated roles during different legs of our trip. Oh, and of course playlist-duty was another coveted job.

### **3) Pack light on clothes to make space for gear.**

Most Airbnbs, hotels and even some camping spots have laundry facilities, so save yourself the heavy lifting and pack light when it comes to clothes. Your kids can carry their own bags, and, most importantly, you'll have more space for important cargo like flashlights, safety gear and entertaining activities.

### **4) Give each kid an overnight backpack.**

When you're road-tripping with multiple stops, packing a small backpack for each kid with just the overnight essentials — underwear, swimsuits, toothpaste/toothbrush, Avon Skin So Soft bug repellent/sunscreen, and a change of clothes — can help you avoid unpacking and repacking an overloaded van.

### **5) Use a communal toiletry tote.**

We carried a separate structured shopping tote — for the whole family to share — with things like shampoo, soap, facial cleanser and sunscreen. That way, we could reduce duplicates and reduce packaging — plus it was easy access and saved people from having to root around for these things.

### **6) Get road trip gifts and dole them out at strategic times.**

Before our trip, my husband and I hit the Dollar Store (and Amazon) for cheap and entertaining gifts – things like mad libs, puzzle books, and origami paper sets. One way to do it is to give each kid a travel activity box at the start of the trip, but we had success wrapping each gift and presenting one to each kid at the start of each long drive.

### **7) Bring wipes. Then bring more wipes.**

We loaded up on both baby wipes and the flushable type. The former work in a pinch for everything from sticky hands and ice-cream-covered faces to scrapes and messy car seats. The latter, well, they're especially good in the woods (if they're biodegradable).

### **8) Space out driving days.**

You wouldn't want to go on a cruise with seven straight sea days, so don't subject yourself or your kids to back-to-back driving days. We planned three long-drive days (about seven hours each) alternating with a couple of days with only three to five hours of drive time. The sweet spot for us was about three hours. That way, once we arrived at our destination we had ample time to play and explore before dinner and bed.

### **9) Bring fuel.**

Instead of stopping at every roadside convenience store or fast food joint, we packed bread, peanut butter and jelly, whole fruit, nuts and seeds for seamless snacking (baseball caps make great snack bowls!). We packed a cooler with snack foods in the center of the van

within arm's reach of each kid for easy access. Our Hydroflasks were key; we refilled them daily with cold water, which saved us during the mid-June heatwave across Nevada and Utah.

#### **10) Vary your accommodations along the way.**

We hopped around to seven hotels/Airbnbs during our trip and each place was a different adventure for our kids, complete with new sleeping arrangements, new board games and new outdoor areas to explore. Most Airbnbs we visited didn't have a minimum stay, particularly during the week. Weekend days can be more difficult to negotiate. Admittedly, moving around is more work and money (thanks to cleaning fees), but it also provided built-in entertainment for our kiddos.

#### **11) Get creative with first aid.**

In addition to a [tick removal tool](#), clippers, scissors, wound care and over-the-counter pain reliever, feminine hygiene products deserve some real estate in any well-stocked first-aid kit — and not just for periods. Tampons can double as handy cotton devices to stop nosebleeds (a common experience in a dry desert or high altitude). And small pads can play a key role in wound healing. Just place it over scraped-up skin and wrap it with gauze or secure it with Band-Aids.

#### **12) Plan stops at oddball landmarks.**

Even just using Google Maps, you can easily find fun landmarks your kids will love. We stopped at the [Seven Magic Mountains](#) on the way to Valley of the Fire State Park and hit a very creepy [Thunder Mountain Monument](#) in the-middle-of-nowhere-Nevada on the way back to California. Sprinkled in between, we visited a hot springs resort (with alligators), fish farms and at least half a dozen rock stores.

#### **13) Take care of the driver.**

After driving from Nevada to Idaho my neck was stiff and my back sore. Our Airbnb in Buhl happened to have a geothermal hot tub on the property. I took a soak and felt the knots in my muscles dissolve. But a stop at a spa is also a nice way to treat the driver (or both adults). Each of my boys also gave me a 5- to 10-minute nightly neck massage.

#### **14) Use rest stops to not-rest.**

Instead of using rest stops for picnics or bathroom breaks, we pulled over and got the kids out of the car for 10- to 15-minutes of calisthenics – jumping jacks, lunges, impromptu obstacle courses. There's usually plenty of space, so it's a great way to get those wiggles out.

#### **15) Use screen time strategically.**

We brought a tablet with us, as well as a portable DVD player and some movies. But we saved both devices for our longest drive days. On shorter drives, we played road trip games

like “I Spy” and logged license plates from different states. We also bought a “Would You Rather” book that sparked some hilarious debates.

**16) Embrace cheap souvenirs, so long as they’ll get you some (literal) mileage.**

We purchased three bags of high-powered magnets totaling \$10 that kept our kids happy as clams on the road and during restaurant mealtimes. In Zion, we bought dig-your-own fossil dinosaurs. When we reached our glamping resort, our boys dug out their glow-in-the-dark dinosaurs while I sipped Chardonnay and my husband tended to the grill.

**17) Step outside of your comfort zone.**

Research suggests that heightened emotions and adrenaline can draw family members closer together. We went white water rafting, ziplining and rode in high-powered UTVs for a canyoneering adventure that included a 30-foot rappel. A bonus: The stories you share later deepen family connections.

**18) Never underestimate the power of a port-a-potty.**

Even if your kids are well past the age of potty training, a foldable potty can be a lifesaver when you’re on a long stretch of road. It may not be pretty — hear me out here— but it can help in a traffic-y pinch, and you can toss the bag in an empty coffee or oatmeal canister until you get to the next stop. Better yet, bring along a portable toilet. Gross, I know, but it works when you’re desperate.

**19) Share highlights daily.**

Each night over dinner, we asked the boys to share their “high” moment of the day. Studies suggest that recounting your best adventures helps those memories stick.

**20) Throw expectations out the window.**

Disrupted schedules, wonky diets and lack of sleep can overtax kids and adults alike — and my carefully-laid plans sometimes unraveled before my eyes. I tried (and often succeeded) to ride out tough situations — the rain storm while grilling at a campsite, my son’s epic meltdown while touring Bryce Canyon, and the freezing cold temps on our early morning UTV ride. But we also relaxed our usual screen time and junk food “rules.” The kids had more McDonald’s, for example, over the 12-day trip than they’ve had in three years (and that’s not an exaggeration!). As best you can, don’t sweat the changes to the family’s routines and rules. You’ll have plenty of time to get back to “real life” later. In the meantime, you’ll be making memories that will last a lifetime.

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