

# ROAD TRIP!

FROM HUGGING HIPPIES TO MEETING ONE OF ALCATRAZ'S LAST SURVIVING INMATES, **OLIVIA FALCON** AND HER FAMILY ENJOY AN ACTION-PACKED ADVENTURE UP CALIFORNIA'S STATE ROUTE 1

**S**o we're off on a road trip with friends. Five kids, four adults, two cars, 10 days, and about 555 miles of road that will take us from the princesses of Disneyland to the mist-shrouded skyscrapers of San Francisco and beyond. On departure, people chide, "Small kids and long car trips don't mix!" But I'm channeling the eternal optimism of Clark Griswold from classic road-trip caper *National Lampoon's Vacation*: "You're gonna have fun, and I'm gonna have fun... We're all gonna have so much fun we're gonna need plastic surgery to remove our goddamn smiles!" I say. The kids look at me blankly. They clearly think I'm mad. I probably am.

The first rule of a successful road trip is to travel in a pack. The more adults/hand holders/pack mules the merrier, and travelling in convoy with our friends, the Barnetts, proves invaluable, as the grown-ups come to the rescue with extra Calpol and beach towels, while their three children, Tanner, 11, Madison, nine, and Hannah, two, prove to be the perfect playmates for our girls Grace, five, and Georgia-Mae, four.

The journey begins with collective hysteria at Disneyland and a couple of nights at Disney's Grand Californian Hotel & Spa, which is conveniently situated between the two parks. A Goliath of a hotel, its décor is tired and we feel rather ant-like checking into our family room (with two double beds and a view of the car park), but this place has the bonus of a pool with water slide and offers early entry into the parks so you can hit the rides at 8am, an hour before the crowds arrive. We don't bother with expensive private guides, but we do decide to spend money upgrading to the less-frenetic executive rooms on the top floor, which have great views of the nightly fireworks and a 24-hour complimentary food lounge where you can fill your boots with croissants, crudité and, rather essentially for frazzled grown-ups, a selection of Californian wine.

The next morning we pack up our roomy Ford Edge SUV for the first leg of our trip; a three-hour hop up the coast to the seaside town of Santa Barbara. We break up the drive with a

walk on Venice Beach to the Santa Monica Pier (more fun-fair rides), do a spot of shopping on Abbot Kinney Boulevard, and eat ice cream at Salt & Straw. To counteract the kid's fruit and veg deficit from Disneyland, I drag everyone around the corner to Gwyneth's favourite spot, Moon Juice, and load up on cold-pressed, probiotic-infused juices.

We arrive at The Fess Parker Hotel in Santa Barbara and head straight to the beach for some boogie boarding. This town is so family friendly it really deserves a longer stay. There is a brilliant zoo, playgrounds on every corner and all kinds of bike rental options. The real treat comes the next morning when we alight on a professional hippy – Brother One Feather, a bearded Jesus lookalike who has turned his camper van into a piece of art adorned with 5,000 plastic action figures, which he permanently displays by the sea front. One Feather has driven up and down Highway One about 25 times so he tells us tales of golden eagles, dolphins and Big Sur's mystic woods – "Don't close your eyes, kids, there's a lot to see out there."

We hop back in the car for the longest leg of our trip, a five-hour marathon to the charming coastal town of Carmel. One Feather's advice is heeded, the iPads are firmly face down and the kids are glued to the window. Unfurling views of vineyards, wildflower meadows and a pack of crazy bikers who delight us all with some highly illegal wheelies keep us entertained until we pull over for lunch at the halfway point at Hearst Castle in San Simeon. Built in 1919 by publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, the girls pronounce this castle supremely more impressive than Aurora's one at Disneyland. They are fascinated by the Grecian-style swimming pool, the enclosures where Hearst used to keep polar bears, and there are fits of giggles when we head down to the beach to view the colony of flatulent elephant seals who entertain tourists with a chorus of farting.

At dusk, we arrive at Carmel Valley Ranch, a stunning hotel about six miles inland from the coast, tucked away in

Feeling the love at Brother one Feather's incredible van in Santa Barbara





The kids enjoy their first taste of s'mores by the fire in Carmel Valley Ranch



the lush Santa Lucia mountains. The hotel has its own hiking trails, and the brilliant Ranch Hands Kids Camp offers all the usual painting and exploring with quirkier options such as honey gathering at the hotel's beehives. After dinner, we uncurl en famille around the poolside fire pit where the children have their first s'mores. It's a nightly ritual here, and everyone is sad to say goodbye to when it's time to hit the road again.

Packing ourselves back into the car, a two-hour drive north takes us to San Francisco. Our home for the night is the new Loews Regency, a skyscraper hotel in the centre of town that has interconnecting family rooms with heart-stopping views over the city. The staff here are a triumph and cannot be more welcoming. Each child gets their own backpack with colouring books and binoculars, and the turndown service includes miniature bathrobes and a batch of warm cookies. The concierge organises tours of the city and we take his tips – eating dumplings in Chinatown, chasing the children up the vertiginous curves of Lombard Street (the world's bendiest road), and taking a ferry to Alcatraz, where coincidentally they are celebrating the prison's 81st anniversary. A highlight is an impromptu history lesson with 80-year-old former prisoner William Baker, who is signing copies of his book, *Alcatraz #1259*. "You seem nice for a baddie," muses Gracie. "What did you do?"

"I escaped from pretty much every prison they put me into, so they banged me up in here where I couldn't escape, so I learnt how to become one of the world's best counterfeit check cashiers," he chuckles. "But I'm retired now, honey."

For the grand finale, we drive across the Golden Gate Bridge and through the vineyards of Napa Valley to recharge at Calistoga Ranch, which has cabin-style rooms set in the woods, outdoor power showers, fireplaces and hot tubs (all thoroughly childproofed).



Squaring up to former Alcatraz inmate, William Baker

Our lodge is next to a creek and has a private deck for some front-row nature watching. We spot deer and hummingbirds, listen to woodpeckers and then pile into our hot tub to ogle the stars at night. Although the hotel has an action-packed schedule of things to do: hot air ballooning, cooking and painting classes, and nature explorations, it's hard to drag the children away from the most luxurious kids' pool I've ever seen. Planted with lavender and fennel, it smells like a spa and is stocked with every type of inflatable. Meanwhile, my husband – our battered designated driver – heads to the spa for a deep-tissue massage and returns about two inches taller.

Heading back to San Francisco to catch the flight home, I quiz the children on their highlights. "The bikes in Santa Barbara," says the 11 year old; "The s'mores," says the five year old. "Our hot tub in the woods," says the four year old.

"What about Disneyland?" I ask. "Oh yes," they chorus. "We loved that. Can we drive back there now please and do it all again?"

## ROAD-TRAVEL TIPS

- US car hire companies usually charge around \$17 a day for a child's car seat. Visit Target to buy your own boosters for \$14.95 each (target.com).

- Boots' Travel Bands (£7.99, boots.com) are great for car sickness. Also book a vehicle with low back seat windows, as it helps if kids can see where they are going.

- Avoid sugary petrol station snacks and stock up on healthier granola bites, fruit pots and veg crisps from Trader Joes (traderjoes.com).

- Fill your phone with useful apps. We used Waze to dodge traffic, OpenTable for restaurant bookings and Storynory for kids' audio books.

- When travelling with little ones, slow the pace of your trip by staying for two nights in each place, rather than one. Keep in mind that most check-in times are usually 4pm.

- To avoid rummaging through cases every day, we packed swimsuits, sunscreens and two outfits per person into a more portable bag and had a car activity bag filled with iPads, disposable cameras, games and books.

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