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At Last, A Trip That Didn't Fall Flat

A lengthy road trip seemed almost impossible for this family. But now we know we can do anything.

By Lisa Bendall

If someone had told me last year that I would be embarking on a 16-day road trip to eastern Canada this summer with my husband and child – and enjoying it – I would have suspected them of inhaling deeply from a few too many freshly printed travel guides. I had my hands full – hands, arms, feet, shoulders, in fact, any part of me that could carry a diaper bag or tote groceries – and I was not actively seeking more chores.

With an energetic toddler and a husband who is quadriplegic, I couldn't even organize a trip to the zoo last summer, let alone a destination thousands of miles from home. Our one attempt at a relaxing vacation – we rented a bayside cottage forty minutes from the city – was so stressful, what with unseasonably cool weather and a tantrumy two-year-old who missed her toys and her routine and had a permanent armhold on mommy's leg, that I convinced my husband we should leave early. At least we could put our daughter back in daycare while we caught up on our rest!

This year was different. Somehow, in the transition from ages two to three, our daughter has begun to put a little less energy into hissy fits and a little more into trying to be like us. At age three, sometimes we can *explain* to her the reason why she shouldn't jump on our bed in her mud-covered rain boots, and sometimes she will actually listen. She is just as active, but these days she is running towards us more often than running away.

With diapers and bottles a thing of the barely-remembered past (in the blur of sleep deprivation, the formation of long-term memories does seem to suffer), and at a time when Emily's luggage is finally less than ours as opposed to requiring its own tractor-trailer, we thought this summer might be a fitting time to travel as a family.

It was still a daunting idea. At home, we have personal attendants to help my husband Ian with his needs, and our wheelchair-accessible house allows him to do many things independently. Away from home, we would be away from our regular helpers – although I did consider different ways of tying one or two of them to the roof rack.

And as for Emily, she may be old enough to get excited about a trip to the ocean with her mom and dad, but she is still young enough to insist on crawling onto my lap in restaurants, to need to be lifted up to the sink to wash her hands, to refuse to listen, to get bored on long car rides, to smear tomato sauce on her T-shirt, to fuss when she's tired. Could my family and I manage 16 days on the road without a breakdown?

We thought we could. It would take precise planning, plotting our destinations and making our bookings with care. The hotels and attractions we selected would need to be wheelchair accessible, child friendly and of interest to three generations. (Three, because we had, in a fit of sensibility, added a safety net: we'd invited my mom to fly in and join us partway through the trip. She can wipe noses and bottoms with the best of 'em.) We would need to fill the car with storybooks, colouring books, sticker books. Our van would need a tune-up, just a little extra check to ensure that the 4,700 kilometres my

husband would log on the odometer, driving with his hand controls, would not be an unreasonable request of old Bessie. Bessie is actually fairly new. But when you use a power wheelchair and can't just hop into any old rented car, you treat all your sets of wheels with respect.

It took weeks of phone calls and plans. We had meetings in the dining room after Emily was in bed, the table strewn with maps and tourism brochures as we made notes and chose our itinerary. We asked colleagues their advice, especially those who also use wheelchairs. And then we called friends on the east coast, set dates to see them. We made hotel reservations. We booked ferry tickets. We had cold feet, then we convinced ourselves again that we could do it – and that it was entirely possible our marriage would survive, to boot.

At last, Day One arrived. Heaps of luggage piled into the back of the van, check. Emily buckled into her car seat, check. Ian at the wheel, check. Navigator (A.K.A. wife and mom) riding shotgun, check. Seat reserved for Grandma, check. Sharon, Lois and Bram tape cassettes and an enormous mother-of-all-snack bags, check. "Goodbye, house!" We all chimed in unison.

And guess what? Our family trip was a success. We spent time in four eastern Canadian provinces, visiting gracious national parks and idyllic sandy beaches, tracing the roots of Canada through its architectural and natural histories. We ate more drive-through hamburgers than we care to admit, but more fresh lobster than we'd dreamed of.

Struck by the awesome power of nature and the enduring beauty of Canada, we captured enough photographic images to fill seven rolls of film. And experienced enough memories to fill us for life. Far from feeling torn apart by the stresses of extra demands, our family felt closer than ever before. Every day Emily told us she loved us. She clambered onto her daddy's lap as we walked on trails. She held my hand. She loved the fact that, as we travelled so far from home, every day was a "stay-home day." Because we got to be together.

Sure, we had some bumpy spots, like when we tried to check into a hotel in Charlottetown, PEI, only to find that the wheelchair-accessible room we'd requested had been given away to other travellers. We scrambled to find another accessible hotel on short notice, and in the same evening, for extra bonus points, got through the most horrific two-hour rainstorm any of the islanders could remember. The carpet in our new motel room was damp for two days.

But we survived. We thrived. This trip has given us a new confidence in ourselves, both as individuals and as a family.

We can't wait until our next trip. Who knows where it will be? But one thing is certain: I no longer have anything against anyone who inhales the ink fumes of fresh travel guides.

In fact, move over.

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