

National Parks via RV

How to travel through ten states to nine parks over thirteen days with a family of five in one motorhome towing one Jeep

Story by Stephanie Jarnagan
Photos by Stephanie and Tim Jarnagan

Six out of ten states included visits to National Parks and one Navajo Tribal Park. The trip also passed through Idaho, Nebraska, Colorado and Texas.

Extended RV road trips are not for the faint of heart nor the road weary. My family made this discovery on our inaugural summer RV trip last year, traversing 10 states and nine national parks, covering more than 3,300 miles in 13 days.

Growing up in an RV enthusiast family, my husband, Tim, has always wanted to give our three children—ages 12, 9 and 5 at the time—the same adventurous travel experiences he had in his youth. So last spring, we decided to take the plunge and purchase a 34-foot 2013 Coachmen Mirada powered by a V10 Ford Triton engine with only 10,000 miles on it.

We immediately set out to plan an epic summer road trip including three nights in West Yellowstone, Montana, followed by Fourth of July spent at Mt. Rushmore. The trip traced some of the destinations my husband visited as a youngster with his grandparents traveling in an RV from Minnesota to California.

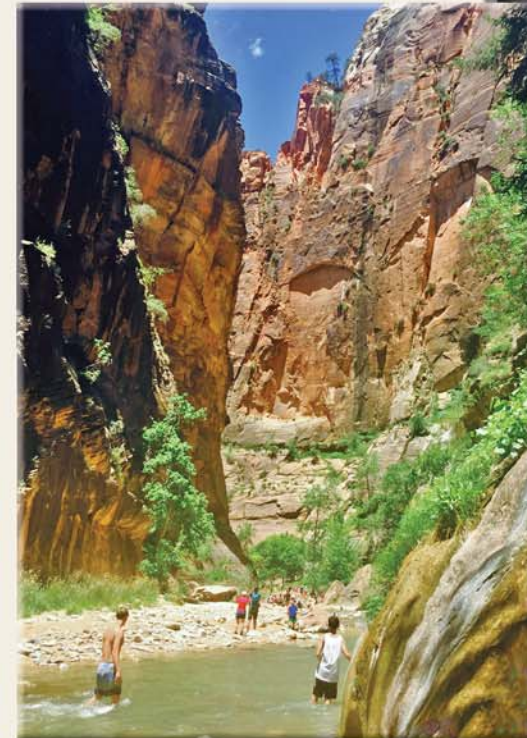
Highlights of our trip were plentiful, but I've pared it down to our top seven stops in the order that we visited them:

The Jarnagan family of five—six counting the Jeep. (Top to bottom, left to right): Jarnagan kids plus Aunt Bree Garrison at main entrance of Zion National Park; Jarnagan family at Owen Creek Campground in Wyoming; view of The Narrows in Zion National Park; Jarnagan family in Lower Antelope Canyon in northern Arizona; and view hiking up the 1.3-mile Navajo Trail at Bryce Canyon National Park.

LOWER ANTELOPE CANYON: Located just outside of Page, Arizona, this slot canyon had been on our must-see list for several years. After our tour was cancelled the prior fall due to rain, we were thrilled to experience it this time despite the heat and abundance of international tourists. The rock canyon walls and colors were stunning. Ken's Tours (lowerantelope.com) was the most competitively priced tour we found (\$20 for adults, \$12 for kids plus \$8 per person to enter Navajo property), and we stayed at Wahweap Campground in Lake Powell National Park, which offered sweeping views of the lake and surrounding rocky terrain.

ZION NATIONAL PARK: This park has limited RV sites, especially for those 30 feet or longer, so we ended up reserving a spot near the Virgin River and taking our 1999 Jeep Wrangler into the park. This proved to be a wise decision, given the popularity of the park over the summer and the fact that most of it is accessible by shuttle bus only.

We chose to spend our day hiking The Narrows. This gorge, with walls a thousand feet tall and the river sometimes just



20 to 30 feet wide, is one of the most popular areas in Zion. You can see The Narrows by hiking along a paved, riverside walk for one mile from the Temple of Sinawava. Most visitors choose to hike up the river and return the same way they came in, but there are more strenuous 10-plus-mile treks for hiking enthusiasts.

BRYCE CANYON NATIONAL PARK: We arrived to Ruby's Inn RV Park and Campground in the late afternoon, and the kids immediately found friends to play with and bike around the expansive grounds. The facility was well kept, and we would've liked to stay longer than one night.

The following morning, we tackled the moderate 1.3-mile Navajo Trail, which begins at Sunset Point and goes down into Bryce Amphitheater through a "slot" canyon where large Douglas Fir trees are stretching to reach sunlight high above. Coming back up the switchbacks in the summer heat was not an experience I want to do again; however, it was an unforgettable hike.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK: Since my dad spent several summers working in Yellowstone at Canyon Village, we came prepared with a lengthy list of must-sees. Our home base for three nights was locat-

ed outside the park at Mountainside KOA in West Yellowstone (note: getting a campsite inside the park for an RV over the summer is next to impossible unless you plan several months in advance). The Jeep also came in handy for traveling within the park, as we easily stopped at the numerous colorful hot springs, mudpots and geysers.

We spent 13 hours in one day exploring the Grand Loop in Yellowstone, traveling roughly 140 miles with too many destinations to count! Must-see stops on the Lower Loop included Grand Prismatic Springs, Old Faithful and the Lower Falls, also known as the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone. We enjoyed a scenic drive with fewer stops on the Upper Loop, but since we were driving in the evening, we witnessed more wildlife in this less congested portion of the park, including a black bear, bald eagle, coyote and plenty of bison, elk and deer.

BIGHORN NATIONAL FOREST: Our overnight stop at the tiny Owen Creek Campground in Wyoming's Bighorn National Forest was probably one of our favorite stops on the trip. The isolated, rugged forest location was a thrill, especially after spending three days in crowded

Yellowstone. Our RV site backed up to a fox den, and we spotted "Mrs. Fox" and her kit on several occasions during the short 18 hours we were there. We took the Jeep off-roading following a brief hailstorm and downpour, during which time we learned that it can slide sideways in mud. When we departed in the morning, we spotted a huge herd of elk, easily close to 200 of them, off the highway.

MOUNT RUSHMORE: What's a more American destination west of the Mississippi to spend the Fourth of July at than Mount Rushmore? Turns out the kids enjoyed KOA's Mount Rushmore Resort at Palmer Gulch more than the landmark it's named after. Nestled in the Black Hills of South Dakota, this "resort" truly has it all—including multiple pools; a fun zone for the kids; a splash park and water slide; a mini town with dining options, ice cream shop and laundromat; and even horseback riding stables. With more than 600 spots for "campers" (as well as a lodge and cabins), this is the second largest KOA in the country.

While impressive, the most interesting part of Mt. Rushmore was seeing the scale model of what it was supposed to look like (more than just faces) and reading about

(Top to bottom, left to right): Jarnagans at first gas station stop in Flagstaff, Arizona; muddy Jeeping in Owen Creek Campground in Bighorn National Forest, Wyoming; Grand Prismatic Springs in Yellowstone; stalagmites in Carlsbad Cavern; Jarnagan kids at Mount Rushmore on July 4, 2016; view of the Teton Range in Wyoming from a roadside stop.

all the challenges that sculptor and visionary Gutzon Borglum encountered during the building process.

CARLSBAD CAVERNS NATIONAL PARK: After visiting Kartchner Caverns in southern Arizona twice, we feared we'd be disappointed by Carlsbad. Fortunately, we were wrong! The sheer magnitude of this cave was awe-inspiring. We paid extra for the guided, 1.5-hour Kings Palace tour, and it was worth every penny. Did you know Amelia Earhart considered being an expedition leader here? We also stayed to witness the bat flight program at sunset, which is situated in an amphitheater near the cave opening (sit at top for best view). Approximately 400,000 bats steadily stream out of the cave each night to feed along nearby rivers.

As one might imagine, an RV trip covering 3,300 miles in 13 days with three kids was exhausting! But we're ready to do it again—the epic 2017 Jarnagan summer RV plans are already in the works. ■

STEPHANIE JARNAGAN is no stranger to automotive news; she works with the Ford Motor Company Fund in Phoenix on community outreach and media relations. She is a married mom of three kids who enjoy school, sports and travel—not necessarily in that order!



Crossing a bridge near the southern entrance of Yellowstone National Park by Moose Falls.

