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BY ESTELLE LEE / TRAVEL / 6TH JULY 2012

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radio, and from where I'm sitting, high above the traffic in my camper van, I know this is going to be an adventure. It's our first trip as a family. My husband and I had hatched a simple plan: wait until our

son. Lennox, was six months old when we'd be less afraid to 'break' him, and set off to

We're driving into the sunset, on Sunset Boulevard, humming along to Gotye on the

California. The destination choice was motivated by the fact we speak the language, and that life there is designed to be 'easy' thus, we imagined, baby-friendly. In order not to upset Lennox's routine too much, we banned hotel hopping and rented a camper van to explore the parks in California. Having booked the largest van available, we find ourselves with a 35-foot giant. A bit of

baby to bed and enjoy evenings in the living area. Our first challenge, after navigating the heavy traffic to get out of LA, is getting food and supplies for a week. We stop en route and dash around a Walmart supermarket

a surprise, but size does matter. The van's bedroom can fit a cot so we adults can put

throwing what we hope is a week's worth of nappies, milk, baby food, chocolate, coffee, bread and other essentials into the mega-sized trolley. We do our best to think of all things practical - toilet paper, washing up liquid, bin bags - but I just know we're forgetting something crucial. Our first stop is supposed to be Sequoia Park, a day's drive up from LA, but with a blocked road we decide instead to head to Yosemite National Park. This means another

you know where to stop, sleep, 'hook up' (plugging in the van to hot water and electricity) and turn around. After cruising along Highway 5 for the better part of two days, we've seen a lot of California's dry hills, lush green fields and arid rocky slopes before hitting the much prettier Highway J59 with its rolling hills, forever wheat fields and the odd ranch. We

day's travel, but with a mansion on wheels you can afford to be spontaneous - as long as

We settle in at a campsite, unpack and play with the expanding walls on the van that make the bedroom and living room twice the size. Lennox giggles, finding it as amusing as we do. We're delighted to see the campsite has a petting zoo so we can introduce Lennox to goats, a Shetland pony and a fairly manky Ilama.

finally arrive in Groveland: the tiny, quaint gateway village to Yosemite.

That first evening we grill sausages on a borrowed grill from Chris and Mona from Georgia, who tell us they like an "adult beverage or two." They also share their ambitious travel plans - "just cruising up to Alaska" - and it's soon apparent the essential piece of kit we forgot back at Walmart: wine glasses. It's just not the same in a plastic mug.

Living in a van is fun, but it has its shortcomings – in addition to the missing wine glasses

- especially with baby on board. Without a highchair or space for a pram, we have to feed him on our laps - a dangerous activity if wearing white. I become adept at covering everything with towels and am now a dab hand at flicking the bib up at the first sign of full-mouth-raspberry-blowing.



box is nearly impossible - and emptying the toilet tank is a task that, as the Americans say, stinks. We also quickly find out that even if the temperatures are sizzling during the day, it's a different story in the wee hours when we are awoken by the cold. When the temperature dips to 13°C, we co-sleep for the first

Despite the challenges, we soon get into a routine and adapt to our environment. We give Lennox his bottle as he sits wedged between pillows on the bed, and we set up a

time ever, ready for anything to warm up the poor little mite.

change station on the top bunk in the corridor, which just happens to be at convenient standing height. Hiking in Yosemite is the highlight of the trip. We drive uphill on winding roads flanked by rich red earth and scrubland, and our jaws drop as the scenery unfolds. Around a

bend, with very little warning, we encounter a tunnel marked '11-foot clearance'. Holding our breaths, we look at each other, wondering just how high this van is, and then we duck and go for it. The van just makes it. To add to the thrills, the drops down the side of the road are terrifyingly steep, but the natural beauty of the park is breathtaking especially the Bride's Veil waterfall which seems to be pouring out of the sky. Lennox is cheerful as usual, although fairly oblivious to his surroundings and quite happy to snuggle up into Daddy's chest while we walk among the pines and redwoods. Another delightful day out is spent in Groveland, on the hunt for a farmers' market and a local brunch. Beyond the main street with its saloon (really), tiny souvenir shops and tea

"Ain't he a big boy" and "I'm going to report you to Social Services for not feeding that baby." There is also plenty of cooing from the local grannies who want to adopt him and soon invite us to the local church sing-along. But laundry beckons, so we stick around the campsite that Sunday. As I'm pushing the pram down the hill in the blazing sunshine, it's lovely to be almost alone - the smell of the pine trees, the sizzling heat on my skin, the cloud of ladybirds and the neon blue skies are a pleasure to wallow in. The laundry room less so, but luckily Lennox is

enthusiastic about the tumble dryer, squealing with delight as the clothes disco dance in the dryer window. On the way back from Yosemite to LA, Lennox sleeps well in his car seat as we rumble along the highway. Getting the hang of this mobile monster, we make pit stops for petrol and feeds, and I even manage one bottle on the go. It's been a steep learning curve handling the camping, the baby and the long drives - but the concept of a house on

wheels appeals. A familiar environment for baby is a good thing, and I can't wait to do it again when he is old enough to join me in singing 'The wheels on the bus go 'round and * For Rowena's travel tips, visit her blog Room For A Small One. Book a similar camper

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parlour, we find a café tucked away and stuffed with locals where we indulge in a mountain of eggs, bacon, hash browns and pancakes, with strawberry and rhubarb pie **FEATURES** for dessert. Lennox makes friends everywhere we go and elicits a lot of comments like, FOOD

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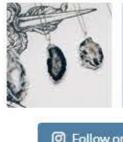
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