



Trail riding at Spring Creek Ranch in Jackson, Wyoming.

PHOTO: JUSTIN MORRIS

The Great American Road Trip

A LAKE BARRINGTON MOM SHARES HER FAMILY'S SPONTANEOUS AND INSPIRING SUMMER ROAD TRIP OUT WEST

LIKE SO MANY, right now, we'd had enough of being stuck in the house. We figured, with no work, no school, nothing but time...why not show the kids something? It was a totally spontaneous, fly-by-the-seat-of-our-pants kind of trip, planned as we went. We were very cautious and took social distancing, mask wearing, and sanitizing very seriously. What better way to social distance than outdoors in wide-open national parks?!

When searching for a way to get away safely during a pandemic, we came across the "Every Kid Outdoors" program for 4th graders. So, we told our just-finished-4th-grader, Ethan, to pick a national park and we would go! He chose Yellowstone. We

gave the kids a Polaroid camera to use; it's always fun to see what they find interesting and choose to photograph.

SOUTH DAKOTA AND WYOMING

On Father's Day weekend, we rented a suburban, packed up the kids, Ethan's certified service dog Rufus, and hit the road. What began as a road trip to that one national park in Wyoming, snowballed into a one-way trip to the West. We figured, while we were out there, why not hit up South Dakota's Badlands, Wall Drug, and Mt. Rushmore, along the way? Amazing!

Once we made it to Wyoming, we thought, Why not keep going? Why not show the kids something?! We parked ourselves at a VRBO

property in Victor, Idaho, for several days, and explored nearby Jackson Hole, The Grand Tetons, and Yellowstone. We enjoyed mountain trail riding on horseback, did a fun Old Time Photo shoot and saw loads of wildlife in Yellowstone; bears, bison, elk, and moose. The kids loved Old Faithful and the hot springs were beautiful!

MONTANA

Then we headed up to Big Sky, Montana, for a few days, where we rented a house above the trees and experienced snow in June! Scarlett and I are horse-lovers and made sure to squeeze in a Mother-Daughter trail ride through Gallatin National Forest.

Where to next? Glacier National Park! We stayed in a historic, renovated barn in Kalispell, Montana, where it was fun to see our kids just being kids, running around outdoors, enjoying the resident animals on the ranch. We took a day trip to Whitefish and explored majestic Glacier NP. It was stunning, with forests of towering cedars, beautiful waterfalls, and the clearest, glass-like lakes you've ever seen.

UTAH AND COLORADO

We hit up Park City, Utah, next; a central spot where we could venture out to Robert Redford's Sundance for ski lift rides and lunch, then later in the day when the light (and heat) were lower, the Bonneville Salt Flats for miles of open salt crust.

Then we headed south to Moab. When we rolled into town, it was 106 degrees. What a change of scenery and climate from where we'd been! We visited Dead Horse Point State Park at sunset, with red cliffs and canyons above the Colorado River, and hiked through Arches National Park the next day. With more than 2,000 natural sandstone arches, the kids were counting how many arches they could spy with their little eyes.

On to Colorado, next, where we boarded a steam engine train on the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. This awesome two-hour ride took us through steep mountain canyons in the San Juan National Forest. We stayed a few days in Silverton and loved the Old West vibe of that little town. Took a day trip to Telluride through the Million Dollar Pass—not for the faint of heart!

We wanted to see Rocky Mountain National Park, so we headed north, with an overnight in



The Czerw Family in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Joe and Rebecca, Ethan, Scarlett, Liam, and family dog Rufus.



Ethan, Scarlett, and Liam Czerw at Mt. Rushmore in Keystone, South Dakota.



Grand Prismatic Spring, Yellowstone National Park, is the largest hot spring in the United States.



Czerw children at Moose Falls, Yellowstone National Park



Ethan's pass and maps of the National Parks the Czerw family visited.



The Czerw family aboard the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad steam engine train, Durango, Colorado.



The Czerw children and Rufus at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah.



The Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado.



Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park, Montana.



Liam and Scarlett look out over Canyonlands National Park from Dead Horse Point State Park, in Moab, Utah.


Winter Park; delightfully empty and quiet. Once we got up to RMNP, we drove Trail Ridge Road from west to east, stopping at every scenic overlook that suited us, crossing the continental divide, and even hiking up to over 12,000 feet above sea level! It was, quite literally, breathtaking.

We stopped and stayed at the historic Stanley Hotel in Estes Park; the inspiration for “The Shining” (Bucket List!) and hauntingly beautiful. While room 217 is the most popular, it is the 4th floor (allegedly) which experiences the most “activity”. We stayed on the 3rd floor.

After our sleepless night, the kids got lost in the front lawn hedge maze, and we decided it was time to think about heading home. By the time we rolled into Barrington, we’d been gone three weeks and one day, logging 6,500 miles.

Other than Yellowstone, we had no itinerary

on our Great Western Adventure. We planned as we went, Google in hand, atlas in lap. We found VRBOs along the way, and with the 4th-grade pass, we didn’t pay for a single national park. In the end, we visited six states, six national parks, two state parks, five off-season ski towns, a national monument, and one haunted hotel. I can’t think of a better way to take a socially-distanced trip—just us, in the car, out in nature, together. Looking back on it now, we saw and did so much, we don’t think of it as a vacation. We like to think of it as an education. And, of course, we quarantined when we got back.

The inspiration for our one-way trip to the west is the “Every Kid Outdoors” program: <https://everykidoutdoors.gov>. 

Author Rebecca Czerw was born and raised in

Chicagoland, including Marengo and Woodstock, and spent her entire youth figure skating in Barrington. Skating took her to Miami University where she skated on the Varsity Synchronized Skating Team, while earning a B.S. in Mass Communications. After college, she moved to Los Angeles and worked in television production where she met her husband, Joe (a New York native) in Hollywood, while working on a TV show together. They eventually moved back to Chicago, were married at Holy Name Cathedral, and when it was time to start a family, moved out of the city, landing in Barrington in 2015. They reside in Lake Barrington with their three kids, Ethan (10), Scarlett (8) and Liam (6) who attend Roslyn Road Elementary School. Husband Joe works on major motion pictures and television shows in Chicago.