

## Columnists

### **Baird: The mini-van is how we roll now**

By Esther Baird

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BEVERLY, MASS. -

Here's the bottom line to this week's column: we bought a mini-van.

If you are a regular reader this may come as a shock. You may throw up your arms in disgust. If so, you are welcome to make your exit now. What's that? You can't open the door? Oh, I'm sooo sorry, but all doors and windows are controlled by my little computerized keychain and space-age console up here in the driver's seat. So choose from one of the multiple seat offerings and sit back and relax because baby, the mini-van is how we roll now at Casa Baird.

I know, I know. In fact here is a paragraph ripped from the pages of The Baird Facts circa 2007: "Minivans mean you are unlikely to be dining out in the city or going to the late movie very often, if ever. Minivans mean the music being played inside will involve puppets singing perky tunes that claw their way into your head and never, ever, ever stop. Minivans mean there is a bag of crushed goldfish or damp graham crackers in the side of your door that you will forget about until next Christmas, or worse, absentmindedly snack on. Minivans are the final, final step." To which I say, "Yep." And, "Want a goldfish?"

Our mini-van's name is The Giant Sparkle. Our older daughter named it, and I heartedly endorsed it because I knew how much my husband would enjoy having a mini-van with such a fabulous name.

"Don't you love it?" I asked.

"I'm not calling our minivan The Giant Sparkle." My husband responded flatly.

"But Daddy," our five year old said, "that's it's name."

"The Giant 'Parkle!!!" Our two year old cheered in her s-blend challenged way.

But even my husband is secretly happy with the family addition. For one, he can fit in the Sparkle. He's tall, but the mini-van is taller. Secondly it has a ton of gadgets; you can spy on small countries and command rocket missions to the moon simply by adjusting the front center cup holder. And lastly, road trips, once the source of family discord, can now almost pass for enjoyable.

In The Giant Sparkle the girls sit in the second row, each with their own personal pilot seat and about 15 different places to hide toys and snacks. Sure, we will be composting on the floor mats in no time, but it's all so far away from the front that who really cares? Compost away girls, Mommy is up front controlling the universe from her center console and playing Spa. The Giant Sparkle may be a mini-van to the casual observer, but it's an oasis of peace to me. In my leather seat with controls for the known universe, and the children safely buckled an acre or two behind me, I simply turn on the XM radio 'Spa' channel and relax. Errands are my new best friend.

In addition, we no longer have to traipse into rest stops during meal times on road trips. Before there was no way I could assist the girls with their food without constantly turning backwards in my seat and getting car sick as a result. Now, I can simply sit in the third row of The Giant Sparkle and lean forward to sort out fallen chicken nuggets and impenetrable drink boxes, or to open ketchup packets and caramel dipping sauces if a Happy Meal is involved (and let's be honest, a Happy Meal is always involved during road trips).

On our inaugural family road trip a week ago, after helping the girls with their various meal combinations, I realized that all the flotsam and jetsam of young children was with me in the third row. I was surrounded by blankets and pillows and teddy bears and stuffed cats. What's a mom to do?

I lay down on the seat and snuggled into the pile. Above and around me, through the gigantic windows, the fall foliage flew by in blurs of oranges and reds and yellows. I couldn't imagine how driving on the Mass pike had ever been stressful. I dozed among the teddy bears, and while I might have accidentally launched a fleet of submarines when my elbow bumped the back seat storage unit, I was content. The girls were content somewhere in the middle, and with all the peace going on, plus a play-by-play sports channel on XM, I knew my husband was content way up front.

So yeah, we are a suburban family. A suburban family with a mini-van. And so far, it's pretty sparklin' great.

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