

## Columnists

### Finding family road trips almost unbearable

By Esther Baird  
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BEVERLY, MASS. -

We are a family that takes road trips. And not just same-state trips to say, the Cape — we call that running an errand. No, our frequently traveled routes claim most of the eastern seaboard. We can drive over the Tappan Zee Bridge backwards and blindfolded. We can weigh the merits of the Merritt Parkway based on whether meals or speed are the priority. First American Naval Yard and hardest place to find coffee to go? Whitehall, N.Y. Cleanest bathroom in a gas station that also serves fabulous pizza? Woodstock, Vt. Worst highway when driving with an unhappy infant in pouring rain? I-95 between Philadelphia and Baltimore.

I'm just saying: We drive a lot.

Regular readers will know two things about our automotive experiences here in Bairdville. First, they take place in our average-sized car, not in a mini-van, so space is tight. Secondly, they do not include a portable DVD player to entertain our two, young, snack-obsessed, girls because I staunchly believe that car trips are Good For Their Imagination.

But no matter what I might envision, the reality is somewhat different.

On a recent jaunt over to the Adirondacks for the night, I spent most of my time facing backwards digging like an archeologist through the tell of car toys. If one daughter wanted Pink Bear, then the other daughter wanted Pink Bear. When they both had pink bears, they wanted each other's pink bear. Just when I thought they were looking at books, they wanted to draw. Just when they started to draw, they dropped their crayons and wanted stickers.

It was in a word, exhausting. I wanted to be let out on the side of the road so that I could wander off into the quiet, peaceful, New Hampshire woods and be eaten by a bear. Surely that would be a less trying way to spend my afternoon.

Instead I mused out loud to my husband as he drove: "Do you think in some alternate universe, if you'd married somebody else, and she suggested you get a portable DVD player, that you'd agree?"

I wanted to feel reassured that my hands-on driving approach was building character, imagination and happy family memories.

"Yes," he replied in under a billionth of a nanosecond. "Further, if my wife in *this* universe suggested it, I'd be more than happy to get one."

How reassuring.

I twisted around to help our younger daughter with the bottle she wanted, "opa, opa, OPA!"

"I just feel like they will learn to be creative. I mean, look at our older daughter," I whispered.

She was playing with her imaginary pig, cat and dog; giving them bites of her snack, and happily caught up in some world that only she could see. It was precisely my goal and I was momentarily victorious.

"Mmm-hmmm," he replied as our youngest daughter dribbled the remaining drops of water onto her shirt and promptly began to scream, "OH NO! WAWA! WAWA! SHIRT!"

That jarred my older daughter back to reality and her reality was that she wanted a snack.

Coincidentally, so did our youngest.

"Snack! Snack! Nak! Nak!" came the chant.

I scanned the trees for bears.

But after the snack, the ultimate road-trip miracle occurred. Both girls dozed off. At the same time. Bliss, bliss, bliss — toll. We had talked repeatedly for years — years I say! — about how ludicrous it was that we didn't have an E-ZPass. Tolls created a ripple, a blip, in the smooth car-trip continuum, and we knew this.

My husband did his best. He slowed down gradually and we crept up to the tollbooth where we quietly took the ticket. My husband then slowly accelerated and I chanced a look back. Both girls were awake.

No!!

It wasn't fair. I wanted to bring down the entire East Coast toll system. I wanted to find the toll master general and fling open his door at 3 a.m. and blow an air horn. I wanted to — my husband interrupted my fantasy tirade with reality-based coolness, "Open my laptop and register us for E-ZPass."

"It's too late, they're awake."

"I don't care. I want us signed up right now so that we never, ever, forget again."

And so right there, as we whizzed down the highway, I signed us up for E-ZPass.

Fat lot of good it did us that day. But perhaps it will make future road trips better — even if in one small way. Just until the girls realize how fun they are, or until they learn to love thoughtful car games, or, until I get eaten by a bear.

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