

FAMILY — LONG-TERM TRAVEL

When actress Emma Thompson suggested she was planning to take her daughter out of school for a gap year travelling last year, it provoked much criticism. Whether you consider it irresponsible or inspirational, the move highlighted a growing trend. We talk to families who've chosen a non-conventional path to travel and education. **Words & photographs by Alice Griffin**

A different kind of education

An orange glow filtered through the wagon and draped itself across my reclining face. As I turned towards the open window, an endless landscape of Spanish olive groves unfurled like braided hair. I remember thinking how great it was to not be going home, to not know when the end of this adventure might come. This was what we had been waiting for, that beautiful feeling called freedom.

It had been more than a year earlier when, in our local Spanish-themed restaurant in England, my husband and I concocted a plan to indulge our free-spirited selves on a road trip adventure with no known end. Granted, it had always

been a dream of my hopelessly romantic self to slowly drive the back roads of new countries, all the while truly savouring sights, sounds and smells, imagining myself as a modern-day Laurie Lee. But there had always been the pressure of a schedule, a deadline, a forced end to any trip, and we wanted more.

More time to explore and more space to think about how we wanted to live. Life had become an endless cycle of working to pay the mortgage, soul-sapping TV and a few intermittent short-term adventures that only momentarily quenched our joint thirst for travel. That day, we concluded our hunger for a longer adventure



From top: Milla enjoying the view from the car; Alice with her family



had a need to be satisfied more instantaneously than perhaps our future retirement in 30-plus years' time might allow.

"But there's just one problem," I replied to my husband's thoughts of heading off into the sunset. "I'm heavily pregnant with our first child! Isn't this the time of our life when we should be putting down solid roots and thinking about school and everything else that goes with having children?"

A year after that conversation, we had decided that far from suppressing our true selves in our new roles as parents, we would instead integrate our then year-old daughter into a life filled with travelling adventure, hoping she wouldn't hate us for it down the line. We had sold our house, banked the profit and purchased a camper, and in May 2008, we drove towards France — complete with the family dog — on a one-way ticket and a loose plan to see France, Spain and Portugal... slowly.

Although at the time I was aware many people did choose to travel with their children, I had not met those doing it long-term or with school-age kids. However, as our trip unfolded, I quickly became aware of a growing number with the same hunger for longer-term adventures as a family.

Just last year, the actress Emma Thompson talked of her desire to take her 10-year-old daughter out of the education system for a gap year. But in my experience most travelling families are just everyday people, on a budget and armed with simple desires — to get out, live in the moment, see the world and share all its beauty together. The King-Markhams, from Florida,

USA, are one such family and they are currently on an open-ended road trip through Europe. It is a journey extremely reminiscent of my own and although the reasons behind their epiphany are deeper, the outcome is the same.

Mum Leah told me: "My dad passed away when he was 46 and on my 36th birthday, I had a huge sense of how short life was. I decided there was no time to lose and that we just had to get out there and follow our dreams."

Leah is on this journey of discovery with husband Nathan and their two children, Elias (7) and Mylos (2), which means they have the added consideration that I didn't — schooling on the road.

When we embarked on our own trip, we thought it was the best time to go because we didn't need to worry about school for a few years, but since our trip I have realised the world offers amazing opportunities to educate our children ourselves, and that many of us can indeed do so legally.

Positive impact

Angela Rehm is currently on an American road trip in a VW camper with her husband Jason and their five-year-old son, Bode. Similar to our experience, their original plan was to travel for one year, but 16 months in and with Bode now at school age, they have decided to stay on the road anyway.

"Before the trip I really don't think I would have ever considered keeping him out of school, but now we see the positive impact travelling has had on him. Every day is a new adventure and he is surrounded by interesting new stimuli all the time," says Angela.



CASE STUDY: SOUTH AFRICA

Kyle Watkins (43), a freelance software developer, his wife Tanya Whitehead-Watkins (40) and their children Savannah (10) and Ayla (8) left their home country of South Africa because of rising crime and a desire to give their girls a different future. "We decided to go on a year's sabbatical around Thailand and Malaysia and find utopia." One year turned into two and they are currently attempting to root themselves to a simpler way of life in New Zealand. "One of the most important things we have learnt is that travelling with kids is a passport to so many amazing opportunities and that we love being together. When I see how the girls respond to certain situations, I understand what a profound and wonderful impact travel has had on their lives." Follow their travels here: www.savayla.wordpress.com

I have to say that I agree wholeheartedly. In my opinion, there is no reason why, with at least one interested and committed parent, children should not benefit from a year or two out of conventional education to see the world and experience history, geography, art and languages.

Zac Sutcliffe, 10, can certainly vouch for that. He is having a great time travelling the world with mum Theodora and told me about the best part of his trip so far. "Bali, and the rest of Indonesia. I liked seeing the cremation of the Raja of Peliatan. I'd never have thought they'd make a sarcophagus out of a sacred cow complete with testicles. Waterbom waterpark was quite a lot of fun and Bali Treetops was good, but scary. And I really enjoyed >>



Left: Author Alice and her daughter in Portugal

“Learning is just a natural part of our lives and it isn’t something that we ‘force’ upon the boys. They see us learning right along with them, and they see that education is for everyone and that learning is fun and exciting. Maths is the only subject they can’t get from our journey, so the boys steadily work through books on this subject.”

silversmithing in Ubud and diving the wreck of the *Liberty* in Amed.”

Theodora explained the schooling approach she takes with Zac. “We use a philosophy called unschooling, which is largely child-led learning, but with the proviso that he has to do some writing. He does the odd bit of maths to keep his hand in, too.”

Though they do not envisage a return to the UK education system, Theodora does monitor his performance on conventional grounds, checking Zac’s SAT performance periodically, and he is up to speed. She says: “There’s an unschooling maxim which says ‘let go of learning, it happens anyway’ and this combination of self-led learning, the challenge, the one-to-one attention, works well for Zac. He spent a lot of time at school glazed with boredom, so he does prefer the unschooling approach academically and it does deliver.”

The big adventure

But what if you want to take longer than a year out, what if you have dreams of doing something bigger and even more adventurous... with twin 10-year-old boys? The Vogels, a family of four, set out in June 2008

for a two-and-a-half-year bicycle trip traversing the Pan-American Highway from Alaska to Argentina. This was certainly no ordinary bike ride, but schooling their boys, Davy and Daryl, along the way was not as daunting as you might imagine.

Mum Nancy told me: “Learning is just a natural part of our lives and it isn’t something that we ‘force’ upon the boys. They see us learning right along with them, and they see that education is for everyone and that learning is fun and exciting. Because the real life learning is so natural, it’s more meaningful. Maths is really the only subject they can’t get from our journey, so the boys steadily work through books on this subject.”

Although the Vogels are teachers by profession, Nancy believes this has given them the knowledge to trust their kids, as well as know what they should be able to do and when, and she is keen to point out most parents have the ability. “Put them in stimulating environments and they will learn,” she says.

During their adventure, Davy and Daryl are most certainly learning. Nancy told me: “In society, we are often told that with motivation, determination and perseverance, >>



CASE STUDY: FAMILY ON BIKES

Nancy Sathre-Vogel (50) and husband John Vogel (56) were both teachers in Idaho, USA, before embarking on their current two-and-a-half-year cycling adventure from Alaska to Argentina with their twin sons Davy and Daryl (13). “We spent more time with other people’s kids than with our own and Davy and Daryl were growing so quickly that we came to the realisation that if we didn’t grab the opportunity now to spend time with them, we would lose the chance.” The trip has certainly provided challenges for the Vogels, but undoubtedly it has been life-changing. “Our sons’ lives will, no doubt, be enormously impacted by this trip. They’ve learned and seen more than most people do in a lifetime.” The family are currently 2,000 miles from completion. Follow their life and travels here: www.familyonbikes.org



CASE STUDY: BODE’S WELL

Jason Rehm (40), a former scientist, his wife Angela (40), a photographer and writer, and their son Bode (5) are 16 months into a trip through North, Central and South America in a 1971 VW Camper that should have lasted only 12 months. “We discovered that you just can’t go too slow. Now we have no idea when we will be finished. Our goal is to reach Tierra del Fuego, the end of the road.” Angela says that they embarked on this journey from their home in California because “we realised we would never get to do all the things we dreamed about unless we just took off and did them”. They are currently in Ecuador, with no immediate plans to return. “We wanted to deliberately force a change in our lives when we left on the trip. I can’t imagine returning to the same old routines.” Follow their life and travels here: www.bodeswell.com

we can succeed. Our sons have learned the benefits of all these things. They have crested the tops of passes and seen the enormous valley spread out before them. They have made it through rain and windstorms and seen the rainbow on the other side. They have been through some tough days and have forged ahead anyway — knowing full well that's the only way they'll reach their dream."

It goes without saying they have learned a lot about the world and its inhabitants. Nancy says: "As I walked through a market in Ecuador with Davy one day, he said: 'Mom, why are so many people afraid to travel? They think people in the world are bad and scary and will kill them, but people are so nice!' Everywhere we've been, people have been kind to us."

Undoubtedly, many people fear different cultures, languages and landscapes, and yet it is often within these environments we can learn so much. Heading out on the road with no time limit, I quickly

began to understand the necessity of venturing out of our comfort zones, meeting people, being exposed to new environments and feeling the tangible security of our own family unit.

I also now realise sharing this travel passion with my daughter should not be seen as a negative, but instead a plus, and agree when Nancy Vogel says: "The hardest part is making the decision. Once you've decided to go against everything society has raised you to want and need, the rest falls into place. But making the decision to march to your own drummer is not easy!"

One couple who know all about this are Tanya and Kyle Whitehead-Watkins, who on and off have always travelled with their daughters (now 8 and 10), homeschooling along the way. For the last two years, they have been travelling in Malaysia, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand.

Mum Tanya told me: "I feel parents need to understand that taking their kids out of school does

not damage them. Exposing them to different cultures and religions teaches them about humanity, geography, history and art."

Although after 15 months we finally returned from our road trip in favour of a slightly more static lifestyle on a narrowboat in the UK, I often wonder how long it will be before we take off again. Whether the possibility of a permanent nomadic existence is at all possible or even desirable for my family is still unknown. But I do know there is not a single part of me that would disregard an opportunity to take my daughter on a travel adventure for the sake of conventional schooling, because I now have faith in the rich opportunities the world offers for education.

For me this is not about traditional schooling being wrong and schooling on the road being right. This is about acknowledging that it's OK to think outside the box and dare to live our own travel dreams, in our own way, as a family.



CASE STUDY: TOUR OF EUROPE

Leah King-Markham (37), a homeschooling Montessori teacher, her husband Nathan (35), an artist and educator, and their children Elias (7) and Mylos (2), from Florida, USA, are currently on an open-ended tour of Europe. "The main reason for this trip was to spend a crazy amount of time with our kids and have tons of memories saved up like camels for the days when they are off at college and we miss them!" Having successfully — but not after some drama — purchased a car and caravan in a new country, they now plan to travel for as long as their savings allow.



CASE STUDY: MOTHER AND SON

Theodora Sutcliffe (36) is a journalist from London who is currently travelling the world with her 10-year-old son Zac. "I hit a point in my life where it became clear that the old life I'd lived was no longer sustainable and I couldn't carry on working long hours chasing money to, basically, survive. This was the trigger to do something I'd always dreamed of doing and that Zac and I had discussed for a long time." A year in and their trip has so far taken them to Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia. Follow them at — Theodora: www.travelswithaninyearold.com
Zac: www.smartass300.wordpress.com

essentials THE DETAILS

THE LAW

» All children of compulsory school age (5 to 16) must receive a suitable full-time education. As a parent, you have a legal responsibility to make sure this happens, either by registering your child at a school or by making other arrangements to give them a full-time education.

It is worth noting the following:

- » You don't have to be a qualified teacher to educate your child at home.
- » You are not obliged to follow the National Curriculum or take national tests, but as a parent you are required by law to ensure your child receives full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude; any special educational needs your child may have must be recognised. www.direct.gov.uk

INFORMATION ON HOME SCHOOLS

- » Education Otherwise is a charity and membership-based organisation providing support and information for families whose children are being educated outside school. www.education-otherwise.org
- » Montessori Education (UK), is a registered charity that was founded in 1993 and focuses on creating an environment for self-directed learning activity. It is mostly focused on three- to six-year-olds, but can be utilised for children up to 18. www.montessorieducationuk.org

HOW TO DO IT

- » Organise your gap year: www.roundtheworldexperts.co.uk
T: 0800 707 6010
www.gapadvice.org
T: 01494 673448
www.gapyearforgrownups.co.uk
T: 01892 701881

- » Books to read:
Read more about Alice's road trip in her book: *Tales from a Travelling Mum*, *Navigating Europe with a Babe in Arms*, by Alice Griffin. RRP £9.99.
As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning, by Laurie Lee. RRP £8.99.
Lonely Planet: How to Travel with Children. RRP £12.99. □