

# happy endings



Anne and her family at Glacier National Park.

## Rediscovering America

With each passing mile, the landscape revealed its treasures

by Anne Cassidy

Last summer my husband, Tom, and I decided our daughters, 11, 8 and 5, were old enough for a cross-country trip from Washington, DC, to Washington state and back again. We wanted to show them how big this country is, to let them know their corner of the world is not the only corner there is. Or at least that was the plan.

At first, the idea terrified me. Before we had children, Tom and I loved to travel. In the past 10 years, however, my world had become confined to a home office, the laundry room and the supermarket.

Each evening after the kids were in bed, I'd take out the road atlas. America looked achingly big, like nobody in his right mind would drive across it. But both our parents had—with more kids and no air conditioning—so we took heart.

Money was tight. We would stay with family part of the time and in cheap motels the rest. Neighbors lent us their portable television for those long days on the prairie. And before I had time to absorb it, we were heading west.

At first, our kids—accustomed to being sardined into the backseat of a sedan—were entertained by the van we'd rented. Meanwhile, Tom and I caught up on years' worth of conversation. In those lovely lulls when the girls were quiet, I caught

myself pretending we were on one of our pre-child adventures.

It wasn't until the third day that we paid much attention to the scenery. As we reached the Texas panhandle, the land flattened out and opened up, the dry air had a tang to it, and the horizon went on forever.

I'd forgotten how much I missed open country. Our cocoon of green in suburban Virginia makes me focus on what's right in front of me. But the 50-mile views outside our van windows invited reflection. We talked about what courage it took for the pioneers to leave their old lives behind. I felt something loosen up inside me that I hadn't known was tight.

That night we stayed in a faded motel in Shamrock, Texas, and ate in a restaurant where ranchers wore their hats while they dined. The next day, in New Mexico, thunderheads engulfed us in torrential rain. We reached Arizona's Painted Desert at sunset, when its pinks and purples blazed in the light. At the Grand Canyon, we took an early morning hike along the rim. At Zion National Park, we watched climbers scale slick rock cliffs.

In Las Vegas, we dragged through

the glitzy hotel lobby carrying 10 days' worth of dirty laundry. In Cody, Wyoming, the girls chased calves at a rodeo. At Glacier National Park in Montana, we hiked to what seemed like the top of the world. Everywhere we went, our youngest kept asking, "Mommy, what country are we in?"

We covered anywhere from 50 to 500 miles a day, 8,500 miles in all, and never once turned on the portable TV. It was as if the vast spaces outside our car pushed us closer together. What I had worried about before the trip—lots of family togetherness—is what I've longed for most since we returned.

We told ourselves that the trip would teach our children this country is big. And it did. But it taught us many other things as well. The girls learned about people and places different from the ones they know, and that, I think, is the beginning of empathy. Tom learned that his family is much more mobile than he thought, and that is the beginning of gratitude.

As for me, I made deposits into a psychic bank account that had been empty for years. Whenever I start to feel hemmed in again, I look at our torn, dog-eared map and the yellow highlighted loop that marks our passage. I keep the map on the coffee table, because it reminds me of freedom.

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**And we all learned something new about one another as well.**