

Summer in the National Parks

BY LAURA CARLSON

Picture it:

Your family gazes on crisp blue skies, sitting quietly below the tall, snowcapped peaks of the majestic Grand Teton Mountain Range. The beautiful Jackson Lake lies below. Wisps of transparent clouds drift across the vista. Evergreen-scented air (is that the same smell as your essential oils?) fills your lungs. The children sit eagerly at the feet of a uniformed park ranger. All those gentle reminders to the kids to 'be respectful' have paid off! The ranger gratefully nods to you, and then begins the educational lesson on wildlife and hiking.

This is the trip of a lifetime, two weeks traveling the Yellowstone and Teton National Parks with your children. A trip like this is the result of a hundred hours dreaming, planning, and packing. Binders and books fill a huge plastic container just waiting for the long drive to begin. Oh, yes, this mom has planned everything down to the last detail for over 18 months. It is a celebration filled with smiles and balloons. As homeschoolers, we enjoy freedom to take our school on the road and experience different learning opportunities.

The first balloon pops while packing the vehicle the morning of departure. It isn't all quite fitting into the vehicle. "Maybe we don't really need so many blankets," I proclaim, as we sweat in the Iowa heat. "That crisp mountain air will feel great after this heat in Iowa," I decide, as I remove the extra blankets. (We'll return to that decision later while in the Tetons).


1) Plan

Planning this learning adventure can be a wonderful part of the experience. Discuss the trip with your family, set a budget together, then assign your students different parks to research. This can provide you more insight into what interests your children. Our family has "school-traveled" through Williamsburg and Jamestown, VA.; Washington D.C.; and St. Augustine, FL, over ten years of homeschooling. Our son, who enjoys maps and geography, has mapped all the trips. Find what sparks interest for each child and involve them in the planning.

National parks have simple websites to navigate. You can also order brochures, but allow extra time for those to arrive (up to three weeks). Put a map on the wall and highlight your plans. Connect the big screen to a computer and invite the entire family to participate in the research.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of planning the trip. Our plans began with a phone conversation in January of 2017 for a scheduled June 2018 trip. Booking ahead for your camping spot or cabin is vital. There will be absolutely nothing available if you try to book same night accommodations in Yellowstone. I watched a grown man panic in Yellowstone's Mammoth Hot Springs lobby as the reservations attendant repeated, "Sorry. We have no openings tonight."

Neighbors shared stories of an impromptu trip through Yellowstone. The family slept in their vehicle because there was literally no room at the inn. The children learned a valuable lesson: bears will do anything to eat a snack. Evidentially, a sow (female bear) broke open the truck passenger window to grab the crack-



You know that all the hours planning, researching, saving money was worth it when your teenager steps out, hikes up, and has a quiet moment with his Creator.