

Clockwise from this picture: a road sign, USA-style; planning the trip with the girls and the Brown + Hudson team; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; the route; the main street in Philipsburg, Montana; a Yellowstone number plate; a wagon at Paws Up; a buffalo in Yellowstone



WE HEARD THE RV before we saw it. There was a kind of heightening screech, the sound of the chassis hitting the deck, two further heavy thuds, the traction of the tyres on the road, and a crescendoing roar as it spun around the corner and into our vision. It crossed our path, listing first left and then right, and bounced to a rough and jagged halt before the cabin door flew open, whacking the side of the van, and my husband leapt out, storming towards us. 'I'm done,' he yelled at his eager waiting committee as he marched straight past.

The two little ones and I gingerly moved over to see what had become of their elder sister. We peeked in the side door of the carriage and there she was standing amid a mass of broken plates and cups, surrounded by forks and spilled boxes of cereal and leaking cleaning fluids pooling towards her feet. 'We hit a pothole,' she said, sadly. 'I think Pops has had enough.'

But had he though? Had he really? Sure, we'd had moments. The usual: sticking the wrong code into the satnav and wheeling straight through the entirety of Oregon when we wanted to still be in Washington; the biscuits

I'd hidden in the picnic basket for a late-night pick-me-up when everyone knows bears love biscuits, and biscuit-loving bears had indeed sniffed around the tent all night thus precluding sleep; the time when I thought the five-year-old was with my husband and he thought the five-year-old was with me, but in fact she'd walked off two miles in her own direction after seeing 'a snake in the grass! All orange and white! Zigzaggy!'

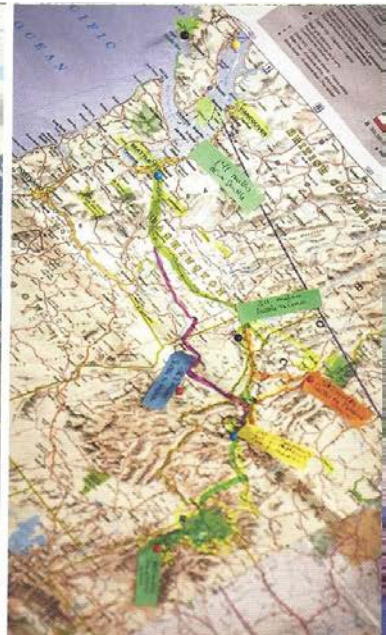
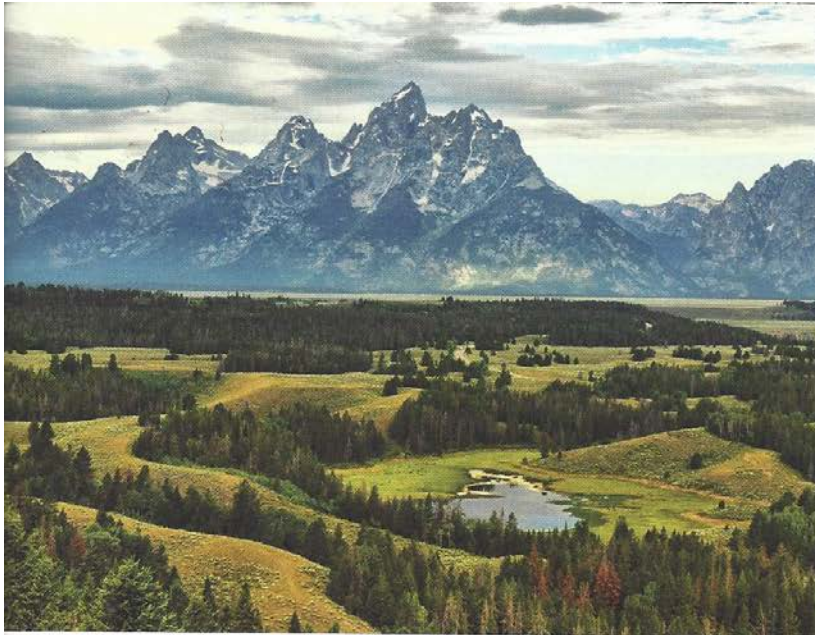
But, of course, we would all do it again in a finger-click. One month-

We ran through Montana's summer-coloured grasses, we laughed at the Grand Teton as its spine punched up among the yellow poppies

long road trip starting in the verdant mists of Seattle and ending on the boardwalks of Jackson Hole. Oh, how addicted we got to each other! All five of us living in an ever-moving space, referring to no one but this crew, these people here, knowing every nuance of each other's faces and the exactitudes of their mood by a curling wisp of an eyebrow. No TV, no computer games, and instead of 'legs hurting'

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALUN CALLENDER; JEFF CLOW; INTERSECTION WYOMING; TOM TAYE





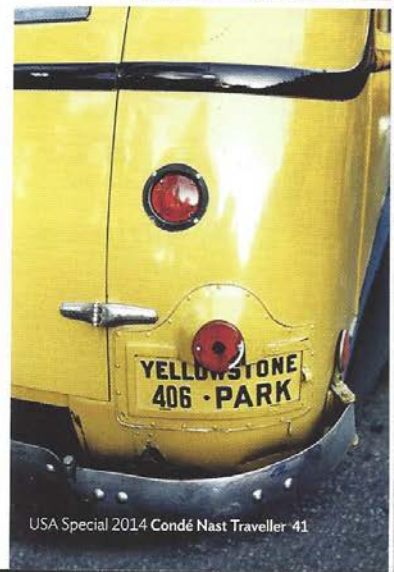
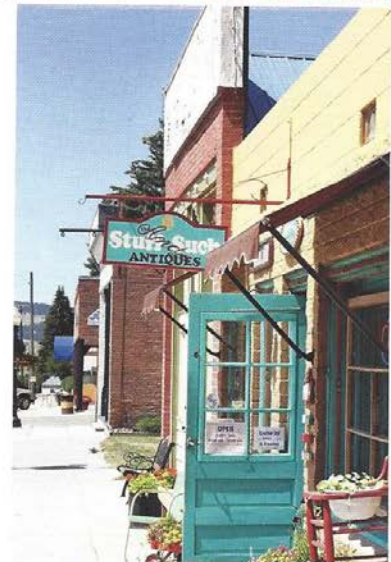
or 'more Peppa Pig', this, for example, as I carried my three-year-old in my arms, my feet echoing on the slats of a wooden bridge in Montana on a crisp blue-sky day, the river rushing beneath us, around us a herd of horses with their palomino hides, and then, an almost imperceptible wind, which lifted her light squall of hair, and her small voice whispering in my ear: 'Storm coming Mama, storm coming.'

And she'd been right. I don't know if I'd resisted America for so long because one of my earliest memories was of my brother doing exactly this, travelling across the States. Before he left, he stuck a map of it on the wall of my bedroom, and then wherever he went he'd send me a postcard, which I'd then join to the relevant geographical spot with a piece of string and a drawing pin. Except he'd fallen for it, fallen for the whole continent hook, line and sinker, and he never came back.

And now, here we were running through Montana's summer-coloured grasses, and watching the mud sparrows flurry in the cool caves of the Blackfoot River, laughing at the presumptuously wondrous Grand Teton as its spine suddenly punched up among the yellow poppies of



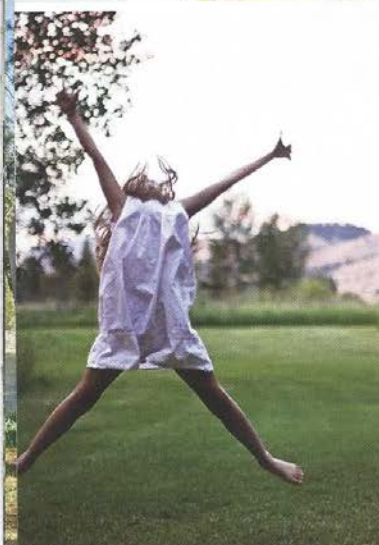
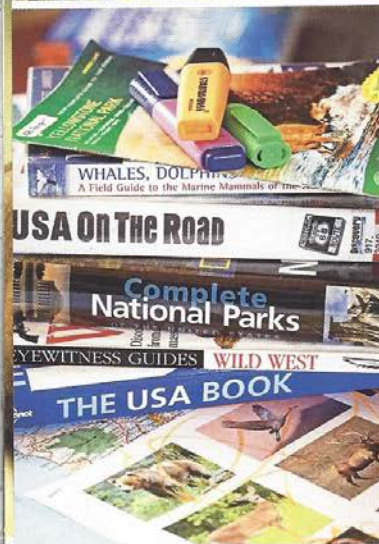
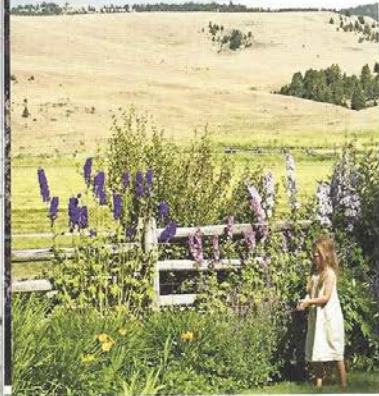
Why don't more smart tour operators work in the USA? It's baffling. If you are looking for a seriously bespoke trip, with an astonishing amount of personal attention, added adventures and exceptional contacts thrown in, then **Brown + Hudson** is unsurpassable. On this trip, for example, the company organised: the fit-out of the RV; all stays in the best lodges; a birthday party on the move; meeting a lauded local chef who came and taught the children how to whip up pancakes with the huckleberries they had collected in the woods; a kayaking adventure; a quick-fix diversion to the state's best water park; for raptor experts to bring falcons and owls and hawks to a chosen spot; and specialist guides all along the way to show the girls how to wrangle cattle, make fire and spot eagles. The team was on personal call at every part of the journey if we wanted anything arranged or rearranged, and provided the most beautiful hand-bound diaries and cameras for everyone. Headed up by Philippe Brown, the team at B+H are perfectionists with proper pedigree in the travel business who create high-end itineraries all over the world. Brown + Hudson ([www.brownaandhudson.com](http://www.brownaandhudson.com)) creates three-week experiences for families from £15,000 per person.



BLACKFOOT  
RIVER  
Montana

GARNET  
GHOST  
TOWN  
Montana

Clockwise from this picture: catching butterflies in the lodge garden at The Ranch at Rock Creek; on the road in the Rockies; a tent at Paws Up; an evening barbecue at The Ranch at Rock Creek; road-trip happiness; USA reading material



Wyoming's plains. And what was this? An elk with fuzzy chandelier horns on its head; a baby grizzly bear, like a ham-fisted detective, picking up and examining clues with its vast paw, investigating its way through the wood. But nothing as absurd as a buffalo – a woolly mammoth at this time of year, fur half-on, half-off – a kind of gargantuan Cruella de Vil on the most foolish of pig's trotters.

We became feral, primitive even, very quickly. Yellowstone itself may be astonishingly grand in its scale, in its proportion, the way the river is so silken and smooth and courses through the landscape like a well-ordered army, but arrive at its campsites and you are surrounded by dirt-covered kids with no shoes, their hair upstanding like sticky beehives, their nighties, which they'd obviously worn all day, shrouded in dust. In other words, just like us.

At one point, we had to brake quickly to avoid a headlong collision when parking in one of the camps, and the (cold) coffee perculator had tipped all over the baby. Covered in brown goo and granules, she didn't make a squeak. We climbed out of the RV, vaguely disorientated, and straight into the arms of a lovely Mormon. He made us all hamburgers

on an open fire before going back to his RV to check on his wife and new baby. Their 12th.

Days passed in open-air simplicity. We rode horses, beautiful Apache Indian horses with the raised plane of their noses like plinths; we herded cattle; we drove quad bikes alongside

My eldest liked to sit around the fire at night and squeeze bulbous marshmallows between biscuits to roast on the flames as s'mores

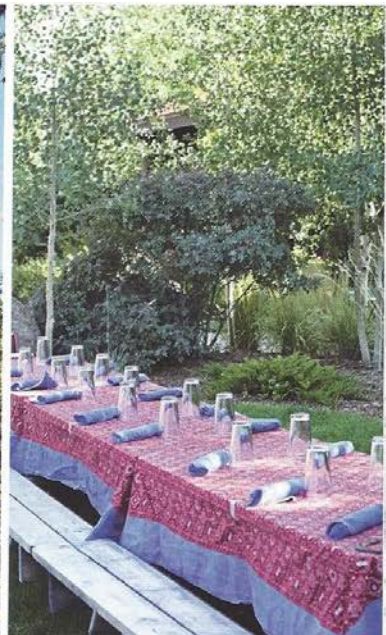
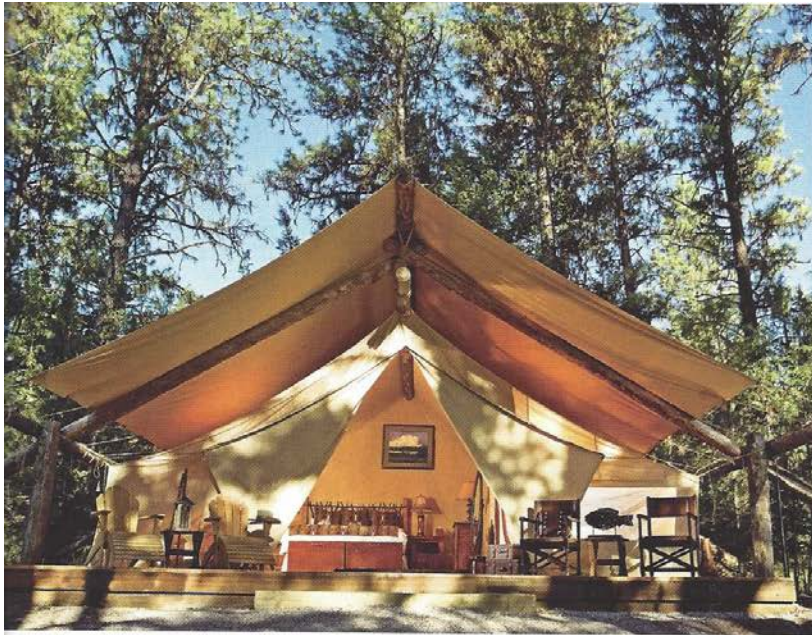
rushing rapids so furious that we laughed in the way people laugh when they feel they're going to die. The five-year-old spent an entire day catching cabbage whites in a garden full of delphiniums; the nine-year-old liked to sit around the fire at night with other tentative friends and squeeze bulbous marshmallows between thick biscuits to roast on the flames as s'mores; and the baby wandered through the grasses cupping her hands for crickets and housing her bounty under a special rock.

One dusk, the girls and I sat on the porch (I was in a rocking chair – I'm not even joking) by a river watching

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALUN CALLENDAR; DAVID EMANUEL PHOTOGRAPHY

ROCK CREEK  
Montana

YELLOWSTONE  
Wyoming



a family of partridges flicking dust on themselves and laying in the shade of a pine. Suddenly, a hummingbird – tiny as a pebble, its chest a kind of neon yellow – whizzed past being chased by another fellow. And then, out of the darkness – fireflies! ‘Fireflies,’ I shouted at my husband. ‘Hurry! Just when you thought it couldn’t get any better!’ He rushed out and paused. ‘Nope, actually those are just flies. Which happen to be in front of a fire.’

The north-west USA is so dazzling we were in an endless state of heightened excitement. When we drove on our long journeys, the girls lying on the bed in the back of the RV playing with little wooden coyotes and wolves we’d picked up at a roadside store, I would watch the window of America move past, the landscape weaving like a thousand coloured threads of a song which would suddenly knot itself into a different tune. How quiet it seemed. How unexpectedly empty. How you wanted to run, and then keep on running.

We’ve talked about wanting to do another road trip. We’ve mentioned Chile, or perhaps Vietnam. There’s so much of the world to see. But to be honest, in our heart of hearts, I think all of us want to go back to America. 📍

GRAND TETON  
Wyoming

JACKSON  
HOLE  
Wyoming

#### PAWS UP

A huge working Montana ranch that is a bit like *Little House on the Prairie* via Ralph Lauren in action-packed Jean-Claude Van Damme mode. The white-water rafting here is great, as is riding among the herd of black

Angus cattle, like wonderful shining pebbles against the grass as far as the eye can see. But there is also supreme fishing, clay-pigeon shooting and quad-biking through clouds of chocolate-coloured butterflies. The private lodges are extraordinarily high-end, with a mass of space between them so it’s like having your own ranch; some come with hot tubs and tents if you feel like sleeping out. The massages are great, the dry Martinis even better. Paws Up wants to deliver the full Wild West deal, so there are barbecues down by the river with wagons and old dudes playing the banjo, but there’s also enough room to keep very quiet and watch the wind whistle through the corn. Look out for Cowboy Max and his crazy dog Lady, who likes to kill gophers by wringing their necks like a flannel. Also, the horse painting. Literally covering a horse in paint. This place has old ranch values with a 21st-century head on its shoulders. [www.pawsup.com](http://www.pawsup.com)

#### THE RANCH AT ROCK CREEK

A prettier spot would be hard to find than this one in Montana. It’s like a little riverside settlement built by funky pioneers. The houses are proper dwellings where you could easily live till your beard caught on fire, with heavenly beds and full-throttle kitchens. They are full of books and red

#### TOP STOP-OFFS

sheepskins thrown over the backs of checkered chairs. The ranch is surrounded by yellow hills that melt away from one

another; its gorgeous gardens are filled with flowers and bees and babbling brooks and cool-green lawns for frolicking.

Activities are well organised: whether you’re mountain biking or horseback riding, you will often be in a group on a set trail. At Little Grizzlies Kids Club young ones colour in cowboy boots and collect tadpoles. There is a pool – rare in these parts and delicious for a lazy afternoon wallowing out of the heat. The Silver Dollar Saloon is a hoot for bowling and drinking bourbon on a barstool made out of a saddle. [www.theranchatrockcreek.com](http://www.theranchatrockcreek.com)

#### AMANGANI

In winter, this is one of my favourite hotels in the world. In summer, it loses something of its secret-lair-style cosiness and staff seem more like college kids with holiday jobs rather than slick operators.

That said, the food is a revelation after you’ve eaten more mac and cheese than Wallace and Gromit could take. As are the incredible therapists in the spa: book in for as many hours as possible of the weird, wondrous body-twisting fandangoes they do so well here. Beds are seemingly made for bears seeking hibernation; the mattresses swallow you up in a way that magically equals the best sleep you’ve ever had. And the hotel looms gloriously over Jackson Hole, one of the USA’s most fun towns, with serious cowboy-kit shopping, supreme restaurants and a frontier groove that is difficult to find elsewhere. [www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com)