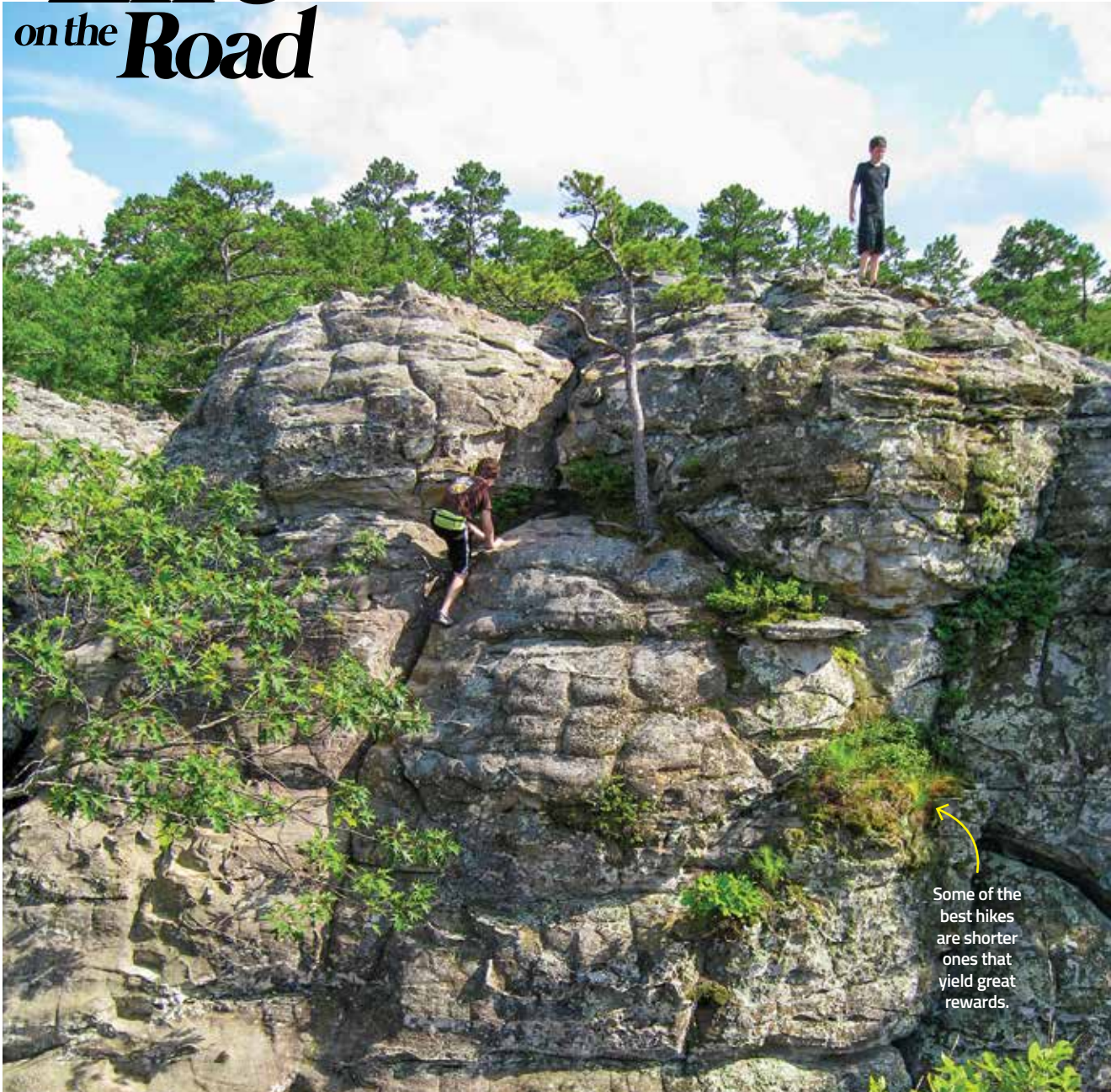


Life on the Road

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Some of the best hikes are shorter ones that yield great rewards.

ADVENTURE TIME

Take a Hike!

Hitting the trails with children is sometimes challenging but always fun—plus, it gives kids a lifetime of love of the outdoors.

BY SUZAN L. JACKSON



SPENDING TIME OUTDOORS

and exploring new places is one of the best parts of RVing, and hiking is a great way to do both. Each of our sons went on his first hike at about six weeks old. They didn't actually hike at that tender age, but they were outdoors with us, enjoying the fresh air and new surroundings. We continued hiking with our children as they grew from infants to toddlers to teens and beyond. There have been a few bumps in the trail, but those hikes when things go wrong make the best stories! Now in their 20s, our sons still enjoy hiking.

The Early Bird Loves to Hike

Take children on hikes when they're infants, and enjoying the outdoors together becomes a natural part of family life. Besides, hiking with infants is about as easy as it gets. Their needs are simple, and they can be carried easily.

Some basic equipment (save money by buying used) will make your hiking experiences comfortable and enjoyable. From birth through much of the first year, babies can ride comfortably in a soft front carrier; the best ones can be worn with the baby facing in or out. Our younger son loved facing out in the front carrier when he was 3–10 months old. He'd hang there waving his arms and legs and grinning at everyone. I once had a park ranger laugh while

▲ Hikes are about so much more than the trail. The natural setting lends itself to some off-the-beaten path exploring (where permitted, of course).



Bear Cave Trail at Petit Jean State Park in Arkansas is an easy ¼-mile day hike where you can walk around, under, and over sandstone boulders, which form a number of rock shelters.



CAVE OF WONDERS



Rather than setting time and distance goals, live in the moment and enjoy your surroundings. You'll find that the hikes are so much more fulfilling this way.

telling me there were no campsites available because she couldn't resist his smiling face!

Once the baby is able to sit up on her own and hold up her head, she can ride in a baby backpack. Look for one that is substantial, with a wide hip belt and ample, padded shoulder straps. Kids can ride this way for years (check the weight limit). Throughout this stage, you can hike as you would

without children—keeping up a comfortable pace and covering varied terrain.

Once your child begins to walk, your hikes change. Some toddlers are content to sit in a carrier, but most new walkers don't like to be confined for long. Toddlers often cover more ground from side to side on the trail than they do moving forward. The whole family will enjoy hiking more if you just accept that it will be different for a few years. Continue to bring the backpack because your toddler will likely tire out.



“Take children on hikes when they're infants, and enjoying the outdoors becomes a natural part of family life.”

SONGS AND GAMES

When the going gets tough, the tough ... sing a song! Fun songs and games help when a hike goes too long. I reached back to my own childhood and Girl Scout days. And ask your kids to teach you songs!

SONGS

The Ants Go Marching

Calamine Lotion

I'm Happy When I'm Hiking

John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt

If You're Happy and You Know It

There Was an Old Lady

The Other Day I Met a Bear

GAMES

20 Questions
(We love “Guess My Animal”)

I Spy

Going on a Lion Hunt

I'm Going on a Trip
(ABC memory game)

Scavenger hunt
(Planned ahead or on the fly)

Great Expectations

When your child is ready to hike on his own, adjust your expectations, especially if you've hiked B.C. (Before Children). As with many aspects of family life, hiking with young kids is different, but it's just another kind of fun.

Forget about time, distance, and goals. You'll only frustrate your children and set yourself up for disappointment. Instead of covering a certain number of miles, learn to live in the moment and enjoy the journey. Not sure how to do this? Watch your kids! You'll be amazed at what you see through their eyes. While my husband and I were looking ahead at the trail, our sons noticed rocks, sticks, and bugs. Does it take longer to hike this way? Absolutely! But nothing compares to experiencing the delight of a child discovering the world around him.

Our sons rarely rode in the backpack carrier after age two, preferring to walk (or run) and having enough stamina for a real hike. I remember the first time our oldest son hiked a 1½-mile trail without being carried. As he was climbing up a large rock, a teen boy went

by and yelled, "Hey, big guy! You rock climbing?" Our son was so proud as he replied, "Yeah!"

A rough rule of thumb is that a child is capable of hiking as many miles as his age. Of course, all children are different, and some just naturally enjoy longer hikes and have more stamina than others of the same age.

This guideline was generally true for us, but take into account the type of terrain you'll be hiking, the time of day, and the conditions. Our younger son, at 2 years old, could easily hike 1–2 miles of fairly level land, but if he was hungry or tired, he wouldn't make it 100 yards without complaining. It's better to plan a shorter hike, with kids begging for more, than to push them beyond their limits.

Engage Kids

Choose a hike with a point of interest to inspire your kids. Hiking to a waterfall, cave, lake, or pond, or to the top of a hill will give them something to look forward to and a goal to meet. Hikes with interesting features along the way help to encourage kids, too. Our sons loved any hike with large rocks



to climb.

Celebrating your kids' hiking milestones (without pressure) is a great motivator! At Acadia National Park when our older son was 4 years old, he did his first "peak hike," without being carried, to the top of a (small) mountain. He was so thrilled at making it to the top of South Bubble Mountain, a 1.4-mile loop, that he chose an 8-by-10-inch postcard of the mountain in the gift shop that I framed and hung in his bedroom.

Kids love to be in charge. Let your child lead the hike, following the trail markers and/or map and telling you which way to go. Who knows? Maybe taking charge on the trail will get some of that toddler bossiness or teen silence out of his system!

When the Going Gets Tough

Hiking is just like life: Stuff happens. You can ward off disaster with preparation and a few tips.

Start with sturdy footwear. Although you can hike in sneakers, it is more enjoyable for all with more substantial shoes. Hiking shoes or boots have rugged, grippy soles that prevent you from slipping on slopes and provide traction when it's wet or muddy. Outer coverings made of heavy-duty cloth and/or leather protect your

▲ Top: Don't be afraid to bring along your infant. Front-facing carriers allow you both to enjoy the scenery. Above: Beginning hiking during their younger years has given the author's sons a lifetime of outdoor memories.

feet against sharp sticks and rocks.

We bought our oldest son his first pair of boots for hiking when he was 2 years old and noticed a significant difference. In sneakers, he'd slip and slide down even minor inclines. The boots gave him firmer footing, which is important for a toddler who isn't all that stable anyway! He loved having boots like Mom and Dad. Those first boots weren't actually hiking boots but just inexpensive children's boots with solid soles (like tiny work boots) from Walmart. Check discount stores, garage sales, hand-me-downs, and sales or outlets of outdoor stores. Older kids may like lightweight trail shoes that feel like sneakers but still have those grippy soles.

When energy begins to flag on the trail, taking a break for water and snacks can do wonders. Watch your child bounce back with an apple or granola bar. Encourage your kids to drink water throughout the hike to prevent dehydration.

Sometimes, things go wrong, and distraction is your last resort! In Shenandoah National Park, when our sons were 5 and 1½, we hiked to a waterfall and cave (fun points of interest, remember?). The guidebook



listed the hike as 2½ miles round-trip when it was actually 2½ miles each way.

Our younger son got into the backpack carrier when he wore out, but our older son was tiring on the long hike back up the hill from the falls. We sang silly songs and played games to pass the time, making a potential disaster into a fun memory. When we got back to the car, our son was elated to have achieved a new personal best: hiking 5 miles at 5 years old!

Hiking as a family has been immensely satisfying for all of us. Our sons gained an appreciation for the natural world and a sense of confidence. My husband and I were able to continue an activity we loved. Hiking has been an essential part of our lives for many years, and we're better for it. ■

WHERE TO FIND HIKES

Pick a trail that's right for your kids' ages, abilities, and interests. Three sources:

Hiking Guidebooks and Park Trail Guides.

Buy a guidebook or pick up a list and map of hiking trails in a park. Check distance, difficulty, and points of interest.

Apps

There are lots of different hiking apps, like AllTrails. Be sure to download the hike you're going on because you can't count on cell service on the trail.

Ask a Ranger

In a local, state, or national park or forest, ask a park ranger. They know the area best and may suggest something you wouldn't have found on your own.

GREETINGS FROM BRUCE CANYON NATIONAL PARK!

