

Reflections/Lessons Learned since Summer Trip 2009 (written 23.12.2009)

Having returned from our shakedown trip approx almost 4 months ago, much has been happening. Mainly with regards to us trying to get our house, lives and all important 'finances' in order before we leave next year. We're still working on all 3 of these and next on the list of concerns includes leaving our jobs, packing up our home, organising paperwork/visas etc. and finally departure. We write this entry with a degree of excitement, relaxation but also uncertainty and worry in the air. We have also realised we are now finally into double rather than treble figures as far as 'days left until we go' is concerned.

It has been difficult to concentrate on normal life these past few months and yet there has been so much to do and we are exhausted. Living an existing life, planning a new adventure and dealing with the transition of both of these is a task and a half.

We are still wavering as to what to do regarding our caravan - we worry about it's weight, lack of flexibility and the additional expense it provides. We are not ignorant to the caravan's limitations and the issues it will bring on a long-haul trip such as we are planning. On the otherhand, there is no getting away from the comfort, insulation, safety and security it provides us and the children on the road. The jury still appears to be out and we are running out of time to finally decide one way or the other.

Some thoughts following what we didn't cover anywhere else in our updates since summer are following. Might be useful hints and tips for some and for us meantime, they serve as useful reminders:

Child Safety/Security

Children wandered off on one occasion on campsite causing a safety issue. Although we had thought about, we hadn't discussed boundaries when playing, running freely on larger campsites. This is something we need to take more seriously during bigger trip wherever we are and whatever we are doing.

Education

We brought a small box containing reading materials, spellings and maths for both Jessica and AJ. We also brought a journal for Jessica to fill. But, what we failed largely in doing was to have was a set daily structure.

We did regular reading each night and Jessica's journal was completed most days but spelling, maths and any special topics and plans were non-existent. Just the daily journal writing with Jessica we found a struggle at times (e.g. to make Jessica concentrate - to make us concentrate!) As parents, we were as bad as the children (or worse!) in terms of preferring the sun, bikes, beach, sight-seeing, lazing or eating - as precedence over any educational element. We know our faults and are now doing some pre-planning and research into home schooling to ensure we have a more consistent and structured approach to daily educational elements.

Medical

Andrew's tooth (abscess) was unexpected

Jessica got stung by a jelly fish

Children and Andrew got diarrhoea and sick on way home

We used what felt like a 1,000 plasters through the trip for the children's cut knees etc.

We brought a course of medication for AJ for a hearing and balance deficiency he has

There were a few insect bites

No real disasters and overall we felt well prepared - probably had too much 1st aid stuff but then you can never be too careful

Andrew has had some 1st aid training but would be handy for us both to have before we leave to provide more confidence.

Toys and Equipment

Jessica and AJ each brought their favourite bedtime toy, a DS Lite Gameboy each and we had a cheap DVD player with DVD's and story CD's. In addition, pens, pencils and small backpack which was kept in car to hold any additional toys and bits they wanted to bring. Basically, if the children's stuff didn't fit in the bag, it didn't come. This worked well. We used in-car invertors while on the move and what they brought was portable and use-able both in and outside of the car. Only thing was that we seemed to amass an additional amount of toys and bits along the trip somehow! (Vehicle came back packed laden with children's things - you name it, we seemed to acquire all kinds of junk).

Budget

We realised that a larger contingency than initially planned will be required for our bigger trip. We will need to be more realistic at about

our spend. While we are not anticipating a huge overspend for the bigger trip, around a +20-30% gap would be desirable. We can tell you now that we don't have this contingency to hand so reliance on credit cards for emergencies will probably be the order of the day for us.

Camping

Camping was best option for us with facilities for children and laundry etc. available. Combined with rough camping (we wished we could have done more of) - this by far was the most fun, flexible and cost effective.

Camping Equipment

We brought more than what is listed below but the following spring to mind of note:

- For us Colemans dual fuel burner stove with petrol in spare jerry can - very good
- Two lightweight pop up tents - invaluable when we got stuck for storing equipment (covered from view/protected from rain) or needed somewhere to sleep and didn't have vehicle (e.g. would have been completely stuck if just relying on e.g. roof tent as this would have gone with vehicle to mechanic)
- Engel Fridge - invaluable for a family of 4 on the road
- Cobb Barbeque - very good but unsure about bringing due to bulk and coals required for the future
- Picnic blankets - doubled up as floor mats, protective water proof covers, black out blinds for car - loads of uses.
- We brought a whole host of other useful stuff e.g. sleeping bags, warm blankets etc. for variable weather.
- Neck rests - as opposed full size pillows inside Land Rover. Their fleece covers were more comfy for kids, stayed clean and were more flexible for children for resting/sleeping.

Communications and Equipment

- Small good quality digital camera - excellent
- 2 x mobile phones with internet capability - excellent (we had 3 phones in total with us)
- 1 x 10" laptop - lightweight - excellent, good battery life but we didn't have internet (also need to get wifi internet connection set-up - most places we visited were wifi only capable) - need to address this.
- Standard laptop - great for better keyboard but too heavy and cumbersome (not bringing next trip)

- Garmin GPS - unused (didn't get a chance to master before leaving) - assumed will be useful tool in place of Sat Nav the further along our route we get. Still need to read instructions and master.
- Sat Nav - used all the time (appreciate this won't be usable most of the time on bigger trip)
- Maps - used all the time - some local ones picked up along the way
- Rough Guides - used all the time and picked up local leaflets/pamphlets along the way. Also used word of mouth via people we met.
- Find me Spot Satellite Tracker - excellent - but we didn't like that only retains co-ordinates for 7 days. An upgrade to Spot Adventures is planned which retains co-ordinates and also allows download of photos to these.

Food

We brought:

- 3 huge boxes of Weetabix (children's favourite) and none of this got wasted. We also made sure we had a regular stock of long life milk and sugar. Doubled as emergency, more filling snack if needed. Enabled us flexibility and no immediate worries for re-stocking or deciding alternative sources of food the children liked. Dried food (pasta, rice, etc.) was de-rigueur.
- Regular supply of water plus other easy things to eat including grapes, tomatoes, biscuits, crisps, bread, butter, honey bought en-route. Although we preferred the children not to eat in the vehicle, sometimes it was unavoidable so we tried not to be too precious about it. Things like yoghurts were a definite 'no-no' while on the move. We tended to stop and buy a coffee or tea to make us take a proper break at a service station regularly. We also had staple items like rice, pasta, noodles etc. always on board.

All of the above worked well and we quickly learned to avoid expensive campsite shops in favour of supermarkets mainly.

Countries

We felt:

France - very beautiful but horrendously expensive and inflexible regarding lunch., evening dinner etc.(if we weren't in a restaurant by a certain time, we wouldn't eat). Didn't like mechanics due to lengthy wait times. Loved campsite accommodation, motorways and stop points. The country itself has something for everyone and amazingly beautiful.
Spain - dramatically different and naturally rugged. Reasonable cost. We've been lots of times to different places previously. Lots of flexibility regarding eating times and accommodation. Loved Spain for speedy, efficient mechanics.

Morocco - our stay was too short but we enjoyed all we discovered - accommodation, people, food, country. We'd love to go back and see more some day. We didn't see enough to be able to realistically comment but we loved what little we managed to experience. Too hot to go during summer unless you plan coastal or mountains

Any country - service station food should be avoided at all costs - in any country - very expensive and bad quality much of the time.

People

Wherever we went, we always met really nice people who were always willing to help no matter where we were. As for ourselves and with children to consider, there was no point panicking and calmness and positivity often paid off for us when any issues arose. We would try to change any dilemmas we had into fun rather than let the children see any worry or despair.

Clothing

Should not be overlooked. We brought a couple of good micro fleece items as well as dark clothes. Paid off, especially when we couldn't find decent wash facilities. Old clothes work well for knocking about in and not worrying about.

Emergency Contacts

Have to hand important insurance telephone numbers, contact details & paperwork - saves time - know where they are. Nothing worse than unexpectedly breaking down at the end of a long day with two hungry, tired children and then having to search for what you need.

McDonalds

McDonalds is like a universal symbol - never touch it at home yet it became a handy, cheap emergency food mecca together with play-centre area for kids when required (not everywhere has play/park facilities). Also handy when sleeping rough - we could pop in - use nice clean toilet facilities to wash, brush hair and teeth, get changed and have breakfast all at the same time.

Overnight Stay

Two night stay min with children recommended where possible unless really passing through. Return journey one night stops were not so bad as we tried to limit as much as possible or make up for it by leaving late the following day to enable down-time and play for the kids.

Regular Stops

With children, plan lots of stops so they can run wild for a while, eat, drink and stretch their legs. Try to cover reasonable rather than mad distances.

Internet

Internet on the move - can be expensive luxury but dead handy sometimes to work out where to stay at reasonable cost. without relying on sometimes last minute, expensive unplanned hotel stays. Also handy to find out more about an area especially if stay is very short and for blog updates.

Plans/Promises

Try not to make fixed plans/promises with family or friends. In nearly every case we were either late or missed our deadlines. Best attitude is 'see you when we get there' type approach where possible. Plans, dates, itineraries constantly change.

That's all we can think of for now but we're sure there's more. We'll add anything significant we can think of when we think of it.