



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Mark Aiken**

Desert Swing

A NEW ENGLAND FAMILY EXPERIENCES A NEW LANDSCAPE



Not in New England anymore: Alison, Gunnar, and Ingrid Aiken gaze down at the Colorado from Shafer Canyon Overlook, Dead Horse Point State Park.



Clockwise from top: Delicate Arch and the Lasal Mountains at sunrise, Gunnar observes a new day dawning. Ingrid knows how to stay cool in the desert. The panel of petroglyphs at Wolfe Ranch on the Delicate Arch trail shows bighorn sheep and riders on horseback.



The Aiken family in Utah.

“Are we lost?” My kids have never hiked in the dark before, let alone in the Utah desert. So when my wife Alison and I pause to make sure we’re still on course, they assume the worst. Gunnar and Ingrid are as experienced as any nine- and six-year-old hikers. But they’re New England hikers, and well-worn forested paths in the daytime along streams or stone walls are different from barren Utah slickrock by headlamp. In airports, in our camper van—pretty much until now—the kids’ excitement for this trip has manifested in the form of singing songs with made-up lyrics. Those joyful sounds have stopped. As their disquiet moves toward panic, Alison and I remember: we’re on a Southwest camping and hiking odyssey to expose our family to new experiences. Slickrock, night hiking, not to mention the idea that parents don’t have every answer instantly, are all new to our kids.

The trail to Delicate Arch, located in Arches National Park, isn’t remote; in a few hours, throngs of camera-toting, water-bottle-sipping, sunhat-wearing tourists will hike the three-mile round trip trail marked every hundred or so feet with rock cairns. For now, however, it’s just us and the stars, and it takes a moment—and a bit of concentration—to find the next cairn.

“Are we lost?” Gunnar and Ingrid say again.

WILL HOME STILL BE BEAUTIFUL?

Our reasoning behind the predawn hike is three-fold. One, it’s consistent with our “new experiences” theme. Two, we want to see an iconic American landmark minus the crowds. And three, many of the nation’s national parks, Arches included, have shifted to a timed entry reservation system. (The resulting lines at the park entry—20 to 40 minutes on average—are an improvement over the hours-long waits that were occurring prior to the new system.) Reservations aren’t required, however, if you

arrive before the park opens at 6am, and the lines then are nonexistent. Sunrise at Delicate sounds great, we decided.

Near the end of the trail, a sheer red butte rises, hiding Delicate. We round the corner, and Gunnar stops short; Alison draws in a breath. Before us, the 46-foot Delicate Arch rises a hundred feet away surrounded by a smooth, sheer, natural red rock amphitheater with the snowcapped La Sal Mountains in the distance. Behind us, the sun peeks above the desert horizon in the east. Gunnar takes my hand, genuine concern on his face. “I’m afraid I won’t think home is beautiful anymore,” he says.

Home for Gunnar is Vermont—in my opinion, one of Earth’s most beautiful places. But I get his gist: the scene in front of us—the barren and rocky expanses, the rugged landscape, the color palettes—is like nothing he has witnessed in his almost decade-long life. Rather than answering, I let him process what his sensory receptors are taking in.



Clockwise from top left: Gunnar navigates the slot at Little Wild Horse Canyon. Goofy hikers begin to feel more at home in the desert. Alison makes coffee behind the van on a chilly desert morning, **Opposite:** Ingrid explores the desert surrounding a campsite near Moab.





A TWO-YEAR DELAY

Our trip was supposed to happen in 2020. As both of our employers shut down and public schools closed in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, we clung to our reservations and flights. Camper van life might jive well during a pandemic (especially with no school to miss)—or so we thought. Just three weeks before our departure, Arches closed in the face of crushing crowds of similarly thinking people. (Of the National Park Service’s 419 parks, monuments, and landmarks, 224 closed completely during the pandemic.) Utah would have to wait; outdoor exploration would be confined to our own neighborhood.

I had been particularly enthusiastic for the Utah desert trip; a lifelong Vermonter, I lived for nine years in the Southwest. As Gunnar digests the landscape, I recall spending my twenties (another impressionable age) roaming the Southwest as an environmental educator, wilderness and whitewater guide, and ski instructor. It had been my first independent experience away from home, and my first real exposure to the idea that the world lacks simple, straightforward solutions as I learned about issues around water rights, land access, conservation, ranching, agriculture, and ancestral lands, all central in the American West.

The sun rises, and my family exhales. For a moment, it’s just us experiencing a magical place. I wish everything were always that simple. For now, our biggest issue was Gunnar’s: the idea that there may be places on earth bigger, wilder, more mysterious, and possibly (depending on one’s perspective) more beautiful than home. It takes a few minutes, and then the sun illuminates Delicate. “I’m going to touch the Arch,” Gunnar declares. “Let’s go,” I say, and we make our way across the amphitheater.

IT’S GOING TO BE DIFFERENT

We rented a Dodge Ram Promaster camper van—dubbed “IndyVANA Jones” by Native Camper-vans, the rental outfit we used—in Salt Lake City. Equipped with a camp stove, a Yeti cooler, a rooftop tent, and a bed inside for the kids, Indy served as our home on wheels as we stayed in dispersed campsites on BLM land (that’s Bureau of Land Management) and at state parks like Dead Horse Point and Goblin Valley.

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"It's going to be different," Alison had warned me, noting that I lived in Utah 20 years ago. "What hasn't changed?" I wondered. Back then I drove a 1986 Chevy, I lived mostly on Ramen noodles, and my only instruction manual was a battered Edward Abbey paperback.

She wasn't talking about me, however; she meant the Southwest and everything I remembered about it. In many ways, she was right; for example, it seemed the whole world had camper vans like our rental, and everyone was heading for the hills. The world has discovered the value of outdoor adventure, and this brings its own issues and challenges.

We camp the last night in a side canyon in Goblin Valley on the outskirts of the San Rafael Swell, a 130,000 square-mile BLM-managed tract of buttes, mesas, pinnacles, abandoned mines, slot canyons, and four-wheel roads. Gunnar and Ingrid immediately leave to explore hoodoos and towers of reddish-brown dirt while we cook dinner on the stove behind Indy. The menu for the night: chana masala and rice. While Alison and I cook, we hear the kids as they explore and voice imaginary friends. Occasionally, they sing.

The next morning we explore Little Wild Horse Canyon. It's been a long week, and the kids are quiet as we



Alison prepares dinner in her roadside kitchen.

start down a dry wash. The creek bed descends into the earth until the walls tower a hundred feet on either side of a shoulder-width canyon. Reinvigorated, the voices of the imaginary friends rejoin us as the kids run back and forth through the slot. The characters and voices are the same as those we typically hear in our own living room among the LEGOs and Magna-Tiles toys. Our kids feel at home here.

Our goals when we first imagined this trip, before the pandemic delayed us, and before we finally rebooked two years later, had been to expose our family to unfamiliar territory. To show our kids that they can thrive outside their usual element. To leave computers, toys, and (some) conveniences behind. Ingrid bursts past me at a full gallop singing one of her songs at the top of her lungs. "Peace and love and prosperity and nature!" she sings. I look at Alison and laugh. Mission accomplished. 🍪

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Native Campervans, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Las Vegas:
nativecampervans.com

Arches National Park, Moab, Utah:
nps.gov/arch

Goblin Valley State Park:
stateparks.utah.gov/parks/goblin-valley