

Camping at a roadside in Utah's canyon country.



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK AIKEN ✧

Stand in Four States at Once

A DOWN-SEASON VACATION OFF THE BEATEN PATH



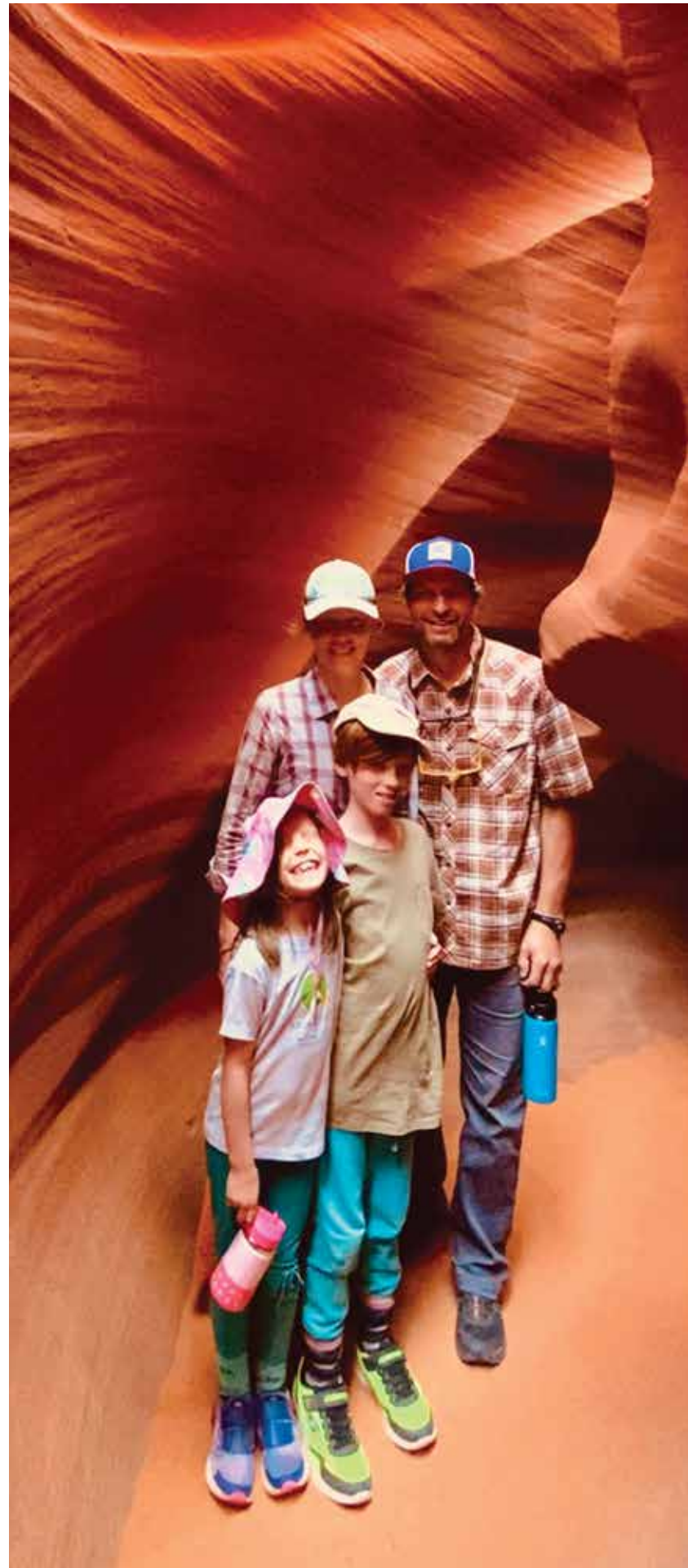


Above: The culmination of an odyssey: Gunnar stands in four states at once.
Right: The Aiken family in Antelope Canyon.

During school vacation in April, some kids go to DisneyWorld, staying in hotels with pools and arcades, and go on movie-themed roller coaster rides. Others park next to a dusty cattle guard and a Bureau of Land Management sign and hike to etchings in the side of a sandstone cliff, camping in a van surrounded by cicadas, juniper bushes, and red dirt, and wade in a remote, coffee-colored river and paint canyon walls with river mud.

My kids fall solidly in Group Two. Throughout our lives, my wife Alison and I have generally tended toward off-the-beaten-path destinations and away from crowds of people. But with these priorities, is it possible to vacation with kids?

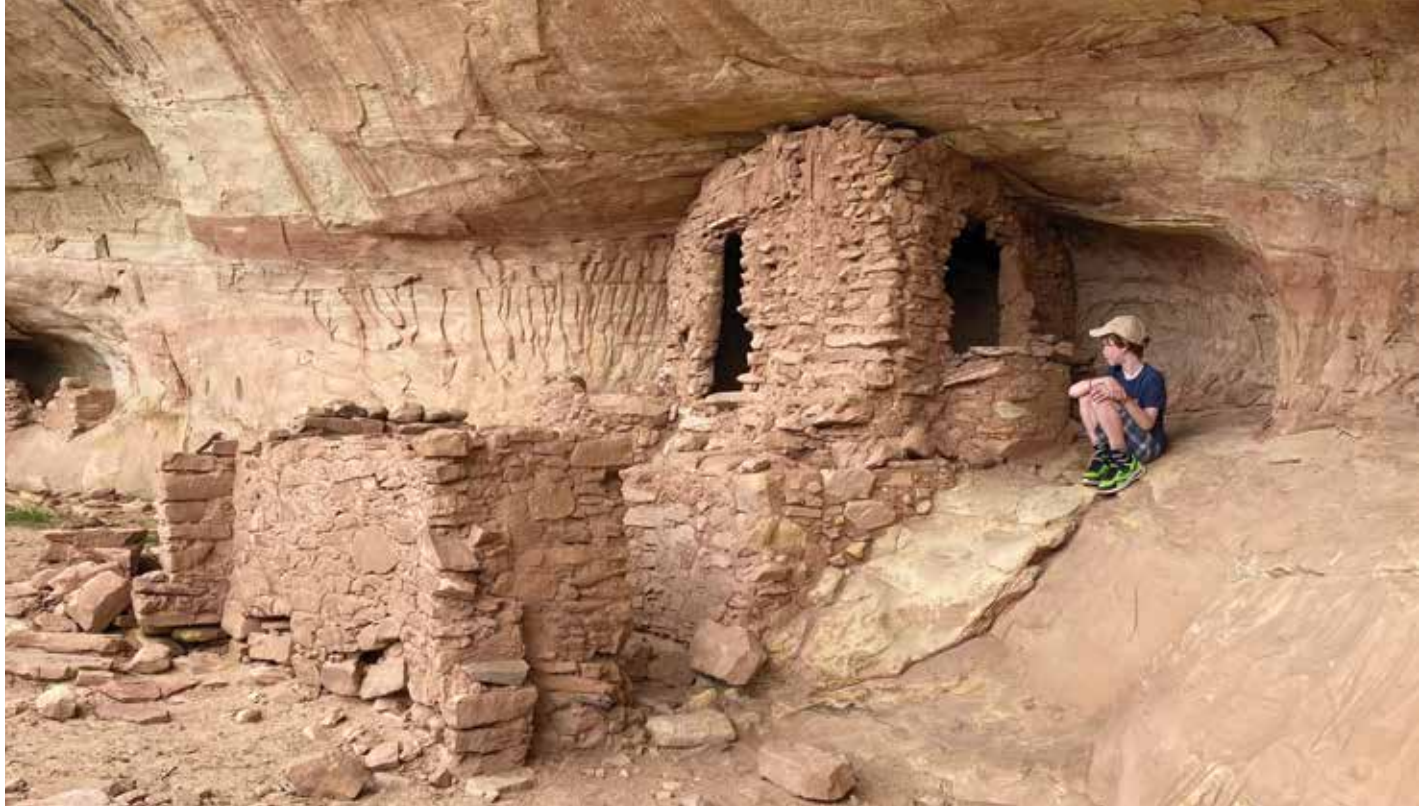
In our experience, the answer has been yes. But rarely have we just marched them off on our own odysseys; we have involved them in our planning. For example, last year our 10-year-old Gunnar looked up from his book *Hidden Life of the Desert* by Thomas Wiewandt. Pointing at a map in the book, he said, “Do you know there is a place when you can stand in four states at once? I want to go there.”





Exploring a slot canyon is
an almost other-worldly
experience.

Clockwise from top right:
Gunnar views an ancient site at close range.
Ingrid trail-finds in Butler Wash.
A vendor displays Native artwork and jewelry.
Ingrid scribbles notes in her Junior Ranger packet above Spruce Tree House at Mesa Verde.



Right: The Four Corners marker.

Below: Rock art at Petroglyph Point in Mesa Verde.



We had visited the Southwest before with great success, so Alison and I did not take much convincing. We decided to explore the Four Corners area by camper van. The kids were with us as we looked up rental outfits and chose a van. For weeks they recited the YouTube video Kodiak RV Rentals, the company we rented from: “It’s got a pop-top penthouse!” the video said (and the kids repeated a thousand times). “Kids love . . . *everybody* loves!”

They participated in researching where we should go and where we should camp. By the time we flew from Vermont to Durango, Colorado, our kids were ready for a trip to Mesa Verde National Park, campsites overlooking the San Juan River, driving through the Navajo Nation, and hiking slot canyons in Utah. It would be a trip filled with dirt, dust, thorns, and rocks. Just what our family wanted.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH CAN GO AWRY

The Four Corners isn’t exactly off the beaten path. But it is in April, when we went. The high tourist season in canyon country is in the summer when literally millions of visitors, many driving RVs, visit the region’s many national parks. In April, however, it’s quieter. With the quiet comes a trade-off: fewer services, amenities, and—simply—help.

Our first stop was Mesa Verde. The national park offers tours right down to many of its amazing cultural and architectural sites like Cliff Palace and Balcony House—but only during the high season. We settled for distant views of the coolest, most famous places in Mesa Verde.



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We also knew Morefield Campground, the only campground in the park, was closed in April. However, campers are allowed to use Morefield's campsites for free during the off-season with the knowledge that the bathrooms, running water, and any amenities are unavailable. When we arrived at Mesa Verde after a day of flights, picking up our camper van, and with our folder of information, we got a curveball. Due to the historic winter snowfall, Morefield was underwater! The free camping was closed.

No problem. We turned around and exited the park, knowing that there were miles of public land where campers could park their vans anywhere and set up camp. News flash: except during elk mating season!

That first night, we drove into an RV campsite at one minute past five o'clock, where the operator was closing up for the night. He sold us a site saying if we'd shown up a few minutes later we'd have had to drive an hour back to Durango.

OFF-SEASON UPSIDE

On the other hand, we had Mesa Verde National Park more or less to ourselves the next day. Sure, we saw other off-season tourists, but surely a far cry from the thousands of visitors that come daily in the summer months. Gunnar and our seven-year-old Ingrid headed down the trail to Petroglyph Point with snacks, maps, extra layers—and pencils and a “Junior Ranger” packet. I have been impressed in my travels by these age-appropriate (but not overly simplistic) educational packets distributed by national and state parks across the United States.

At one moment, Gunnar and Ingrid would be scrambling over rocks or helping each other through a tight squeeze between rocks on the canyon wall. The next, they'd be on the ground studying plant life, interpreting rock art, and scribbling notes in their packets.

Later, back at the Visitor Center, they got their reward: an opportunity to have a park ranger review their packets, then recite the Junior Ranger's pledge and receive Junior Ranger badges. “I always make time for kids when they come in,” said the ranger who talked to Gunnar and Ingrid. “They are the future.”



Petroglyphs in Butler Wash.

ACHIEVING (AND ADAPTING) OUR GOALS

We camped that night in Goosenecks State Park in Utah, more a dirt road next to a thousand-foot drop into the San Juan River than a “park.” There were no railings or safety warnings, but our Junior Rangers respected the views—and the canyon edge.

Because we couldn’t hike down and walk around the ruins at Mesa Verde, we had a goal of walking to and standing next to an ancient ruin. Outside Bluff, Utah, we parked on a dusty track and hiked into Butler Wash to the little-known Wolfman Panel, a red sandstone wall with cleanly etched images including birds, a mask, a plant, and the Wolfman (a human shape with large hands and feet). Gunnar consulted a field guide that interprets native rock art, informed me that my interpretation (“Aliens landed to go ice skating”) was incorrect, and we descended to the willow and tamarisk jungle at the canyon floor.

Ascending halfway up the far canyon wall we found two small dwellings. We studied them and the pottery shards on the ground around them, reflecting on what life must have been like among the rocks and sand in 1250 AD.

From Wolfman, we drove through the Navajo Nation in Arizona, camping at the tiny, first-come, first-served campground at Navajo National Monument and hiked to an overlook of Betatakin, a vast ruin. The highlights of our trip were back in Utah where we explored two canyons. From above, Antelope is a foot-wide crack in the earth. But below, sedimentary lines in the rock, the lighting from above, and the smooth sandy floors give an other-worldly experience. Although we are usually



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crowd-averse, it's just not possible at Antelope, which is accessed only in groups with local guides. The beauty and wonder of the place overshadowed the lack of solitude.

Our next stop was a day hike in Paria Canyon and the coffee-colored Paria River. Coming straight from winter in Vermont, temperatures under the mid-70s and the blazing Utah sun made us only too happy to wade in the Paria and play in the canyon mud, which Ingrid used to make her own "Ingrid-glyphs" on the canyon walls, knowing that—different from the rock art we had been visiting—hers would wash away during the next rainfall.

Our final stop—and Gunnar's reason for taking the trip in the first place—was the Four Corners. In the middle of nowhere, the monument is four lines drawn on a patio surrounded by vendors peddling local turquoise jewelry, Kachina dolls, and souvenirs. I visited the site as a 12-year-old nearly 40 years prior; one woman told me her parents and grandparents had also sold their artwork here. "They would have been here," she said.

On their bedside tables, Gunnar and Ingrid have gemstones and souvenirs that they bought that day with their own money. They have memories of hikes that they had a hand in planning in a landscape that is nothing like their home. And they were the only kids at their school who came home from vacation having camped in a van on the sides of canyons where unknown humans walked and lived centuries before under the same cliffs and sky that towered over us on our Four Corners odyssey. 🌀

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