

“Essential reading for families on the journey
toward a connected and fulfilling life.”

—Dan Buettner, National Geographic Fellow and
#1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Blue Zones*

WONDER LEAR

A GUIDE TO
LONG-TERM FAMILY TRAVEL &
WORLDSCHOOLING



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While all the stories in this book are true, some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

The authors have chosen to write with a US audience in mind to provide information about education and institutions, but most of the advice may still apply to those living in other countries. Contributors to this book have attempted to create a resource that is inclusive of all types of travelers, but oversight and blind spots are bound to happen. We request your understanding and forgiveness for any inadvertent omissions.

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The background of the entire page is a photograph of a desert. It shows rolling sand dunes in shades of orange and yellow, with some darker shadows in the crevices. In the distance, a dark, silhouetted mountain range is visible against a clear, bright blue sky. The overall scene is serene and expansive.

CHAPTER 1

The Case for a Wonder Year

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**When setting
out on a journey,
do not seek
advice from
those who have
never left home.**

— *Rumi*

LET'S FACE IT, modern society did not invent the family road trip. Humans have been traveling for millennia, and for many reasons—sustenance, survival, soul-searching, security. In this chapter, we look at what has motivated people to travel over time, why we each decided to take a Wonder Year, and whether it may be a good choice for you and your family.

The Case for Travel

Travel bug. Travel itch. Wanderlust. Bucket list. So many of us yearn to be on the road, soaking in adventure and experiencing other cultures and far-away places. Whether escaping the rat race, emerging from a pandemic, or cashing in on a sabbatical to pursue the dream of family travel, more and more families are moving around.

You could say we evolved for long-distance travel: to hunt and gather, secure resources and water, avoid predators, and quench a thirst for exploration. After all, our forebears were really good at foraging, at traveling; they did it for hundreds of thousands of years. But let's look at what stokes modern-day travelers to get up and go.

WANDERLUST

We often talk about a love of travel as *wanderlust*. The word is derived from the German *wandern*, “to wander,” and *lust*, “to desire.” In the fullest sense, wanderlust is that overwhelming desire to explore your world and deepen your connection to people and history while walking toward the unknown. Psychologists have posited the existence of a “wanderlust” gene in some people; correlated with extroversion, exploration, curiosity, and a migratory lifestyle. Certain people seem to love change more than others and just want to wander and try something new.²

Guðrún Jóhannsdóttir grew up horseback riding and tent camping with her family in the highlands of Iceland. As a young girl spending time in the countryside, she remembers watching the few cars pass by and always wondering where they were going. She just wanted to get in a car and go,

too, wherever it could take her. Many years later, Guðrún is doing just that—leaving Iceland for many months each year to explore Europe and Africa with her large adventurous family.

FOR ADVENTURE

Classical explorers were some of the earliest adventure travelers. From the 1400s through the 1600s, they navigated oceans, mapped the skies, bagged mountains, and established new routes. We do not glorify their trade; we know theirs was not just saffron and gold.

Today, many travelers heed the call to adventure and set out to find their physical or social limits. They do it for mystery, for challenge, and for meaning and transformation.

AS PILGRIMAGE

The practice or path of awakening is evident across cultures and time periods. Many religions have a pilgrimage, a journey to a physical holy site or a metaphorical or spiritual period of contemplation, transformation, and ascension to the sacred. In the Middle Ages, the Santiago de Compostela was a popular pilgrimage ending at the site believed to be the burial grounds of Saint James. It's now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a European Cultural Route;³ and today, pilgrims and other travelers follow the paths on foot, by bike, in silence, or with a friend. Some feel that these modern treks, expeditions of the soul, bring them closer to history, to themselves, to their physical limits, and ultimately closer to their spiritual ideal.

FOR PURPOSE

Just as early travelers were seekers, when we trace their historic routes around the world, we become modern seekers on our own journeys, looking for change, love, truth, or enlightenment.

TO PURSUE SIMPLICITY

The ideal of simple living is a motivator for some travelers. There's great liberation in being able to carry on your back everything you need to survive. It wakes up your senses and brings your intention back to the basics, unencumbered by material possessions and focused instead on daily nourishment, shelter, water, and clothing. Living simply is practical, too. It's usually easier and cheaper to occupy a 285-square-foot motor home than to pay down a thirty-year mortgage and maintain a 2,000-square-foot house.

Laura, a mother of two who spent a year in Costa Rica, was excited to get out of her busy suburban world, pursue a simpler lifestyle, and give her kids a new perspective on self-sufficiency. Her Wonder Year helped her strip away the excesses of modern parenthood and come to enjoy hanging clothes on the line. Laura and her family found deep satisfaction in living without a car, slowing down, and walking to the store. She enjoyed seeing her kids release themselves from the grip of video games because there was lousy Wi-Fi. The whole family adapted to their simple lifestyle and filled up on time together.

TO RECONNECT AS A FAMILY

Some of us feel so crazy busy that there's rarely a night we can sit down together as a family for dinner—let alone connect with and enjoy our quickly-growing-up kids. Maybe you are concerned that technology and social media are disrupting family life. Travel can bring families together and dial down the noise, and for many, it can feel like a great reset to an overbooked and overscheduled life.

TO UNDERSTAND FAMILY HISTORY

Some people travel to connect with and imagine the experiences of their ancestors. Annika and her family traveled to China to fall in love with their adopted daughter's homeland and to meet the caregivers at the orphanage where Lucy spent the first three years of life. John and Eydie traveled to West Africa to show their son, Brook, the village in Benin where John, as a young man, spent two years in the Peace Corps.

BECAUSE WE CAN: DIGITAL NOMADISM

A new technological and social reality has opened many doors for the professionally adventurous. Infrastructure for digital nomadism is steadily growing, and this presents more opportunities to pursue the travel dream. We have new marketplaces, new ways of transacting, and new models of community that support mobile lifestyles. Industry experts predict that by 2035 there will be one billion digital nomads working remotely around the globe.⁴

Whatever the reasons or context, traveling as a family sets us into motion together on a winding and textured road that may be at once restorative, cathartic, familial, purely pleasurable, or outside of our comfort zone. It is here, in these momentous, magical, unfamiliar spaces, that we become more deeply connected to history, to fellow travelers, and to ourselves.

Why We Chose a Wonder Year

ANGELA

“Breaker breaker 1-9, what’s your handle?” Mine was Blue Eyes, given to me by my Grandpa Ed. While I rode shotgun in his RV, he’d let me talk to semi-truck drivers on the CB radio, and we’d count punch buggies. These are the first trips I remember—tagging along on his fishing excursions to lakes in nearby Indiana and Kentucky, where he’d bait my hook and spit tobacco on the minnow to attract bigger fish. I loved how cozy and contained the RV was, especially where I slept, in the narrow bunk above the cockpit.

I have always loved to travel. I’m lucky that my house was a happy place to grow up in, but if I scan over the course of my life, almost all my favorite memories were made away from home. The *unknown* has always held sway.

My husband and I took many trips together in our early years as a couple, and in hindsight, I realize we made our most important life decisions on the road. We were camping in Montana when we committed to

marry. Nestled inside a cabin sheltering us from a Wisconsin blizzard, we resolved it was time to move west. Sitting next to the Luxembourg Gardens fountain in Paris, watching preschoolers play with their sailboats, we decided to try for our first child.

We had that child, a boy, a year later. And then quickly, life piled up. So did stuff and responsibilities. A decade after moving to the Bay Area, we found ourselves with two sons, two very busy jobs, and a house we were working to fill. We were doing what was expected of us, but it no longer felt like *us*. Somewhere along the way we had lost sight of what we loved most—simplicity, time together, and adventure: learning and trying new things, delighting in each other's delight. The idea for a Wonder Year was born from a desire to find those things again, to break some rules and invite the unexpected. We also hoped our kids would gain perspective and experience ways of life other than the one they'd known. Soon we realized there was no way we could *not* go—and while it was going to be complicated to uproot our lives, it wasn't impossible. Four months later and forty years after my first overnight in an RV, I found myself in one again, this time calling it home.

ANNIKA

My love of the road trip probably began the summer I turned ten and our family drove from our home in the San Francisco Bay Area to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in our VW van with just three cassette tapes. I sat in front with a stack of AAA maps, which I read with the intensity of a novel, looking out into the high desert of Nevada with awe, imagining the lives of the ranchers on the adjacent frontage roads, kicking up dust swirls. The high desert offered perspective. My mom had passed away less than two years earlier, and we were left a family of three reeling and reacting from events outside our control. Travel became healing.

Two years later, my father taught a two-week course at the Polytechnic University of Milan in Italy. My sister and I stayed with the family of a faculty member in the suburbs while he worked. We watched kids our age

playing soccer on ancient cobblestone roads, ate strawberry risotto, and saw a whole new way of life.

That Italian summer, my father came to life again and we officially found our footing. We traveled around Italy, Greece, and Switzerland for four weeks after he was finished with teaching. My frugal father, enamored with a bullet train, told the cashier, “Hang the cost . . . I want to ride that train!” Words that were unimaginable weeks before. Those joyful adventures through new places with my dad and sister shaped the form of my life; it was my first Wonder Year.

As I mentioned before, Will and I had planned and saved for our own Wonder Year for ten years before we left. But as the time for our journey approached, I realized it was coming at *the* perfect time. Parenting, stressful jobs, and busy lives had been pushing us off our center for years, and knowing that the time was set for “The Big Trip” was the sweet reward waiting on the horizon.

JULIE

When I was thirteen, my father married my stepmother, Joan, aka Noanie, and they took the new stepfamily on an extended road trip through the American West. We rented an RV in Denver and trucked our way through mountains and mesas, salt flats, and parks.

We camped under the stars, made chili in our outdoor kitchen, took a raft trip on the Snake River, and ground corn in Puebloan fashion at Mesa Verde, crisscrossing our way through the expansive West. I was a curious teen from Cincinnati, Ohio, coming of age in tube socks and pigtails.

Twenty-seven years later, my son, John David, was born, named for his beloved grandfathers and bound to generations through memories and love. Soon after his birth, my father and stepmom passed away—Dad from cancer and Noanie from a broken heart. Life is short. You never know. *Get out there now* is the reason I always wanted to travel.

We have dear friends John and Eydie who, several years ago, traveled around the world with their twelve-year-old son, Brook. They started on

bikes in Ghana, trekked in Nepal, studied Spanish in Mexico, and found themselves in the Peruvian Andes.

At the time, our Johnny boy was in elementary school manufacturing letters and numbers in what seemed to me to be a two-dimensional curriculum. I was increasingly frustrated by this and was actually looking at options for changing schools. When John, Eydie, and Brook came to visit upon their return, they shared stories of educational adventures. It struck me and opened my eyes to possibility. We played pin the flag on the country and marveled at their stories. We were amazed at Brook's cultural literacy, global awareness, conscientiousness, and grounded sense of preteen self. We figured if they could do it, so could we. John, Eydie, and Brook got the gears spinning and helped us commit to our trip. It all made sense, felt natural, and we are forever grateful.

The Benefits of Travel

In the course of researching this book and talking with current and past travelers, we heard many stories about how extended travel helped people's sense of well-being.

Travel offers many benefits. In our experience, it can:

HELP US NAVIGATE STRESS

While traveling, we remove many of the stress triggers of home and work. We have more time for exercise and activity, reading and listening to music, taking long walks, connecting with family and friends, being in nature, experiencing the change in seasons more deeply, and feeling free. We dare you to notice a rising tide, watch a moonrise, or photograph a sunset with your kids and not feel more relaxed! Now, do that for months in a row and imagine the effect.

ANNIKA'S NOTES FROM THE ROAD

Ship Creek Beach, New Zealand



We pull the RV off the highway, on New Zealand's southeastern shores, for

no better reasons than the kids are starting to bicker and I need to use the restroom. The temperature reflects layers of sharp, intermittent breezes bursting from Antarctica, and a bright, hot summer sun. Sand spills into the parking lot; weathered driftwood lines the walkways.

As we read the informational placards about brackish water, a kind woman interrupts to tell us there's a pod of Hector's dolphins over the dunes, swimming just offshore. *Come quick.* So, we scratch our informal worldschooling plan and race toward the beach. Past the break, we can focus on rare, diminutive dolphins jumping, surfing, and surfacing in tandem. We watch them in wonder. A crowd of travelers takes video by hand and selfie stick.

"Let's go in," my thirteen-year-old daughter, Lorna, says to me, in her puffy jacket.

"Gosh, we should," I reply, standing beside her in my fleece and leggings, as if *someone* should, but not the forty-seven-year-old mother that I have become. Not the woman who sees every potential hazard around her. Not

the woman who has a plan to get to the town of Haast by lunchtime.

"We might never get this chance again," she says.

And in me is this cavalcade of why-nots: Sweet Jesus, that would be cold. Doesn't this current come directly from an ice cap? I would ruin the videos and photos of the tourists, maybe become a subject of their videos. What if the surf is too strong? What if I can't swim out past that surf break? But when I look at her, I know what I should do. The voice inside that says *Don't do it* is the voice that urges me to play it small. It's time to reclaim my outside voice.

I don't see any offending offshore rocks or signs of a rip tide; and secure in the knowledge that my daughter is a competitive swimmer, I take off my fleece, T-shirt, and shoes and stand next to her in my sports bra and leggings. "Come on."

A man in a down parka tells us that we should make clicking noises to attract the dolphins once we're in. Duly noted. I stand for a few waves to ice my feet and realize a slow entry is a bad idea. Instead, we watch for a break in the waves and dive into the frigid turquoise waters of the Tasman Sea to swim toward a pod of wild dolphins.



Seconds before a beachcomber alerted us to a pod of wild dolphins swimming in the Tasman Sea.

We time our entry in between wave sets and easily swim past the break. The cold takes my breath away; I inhale in gulps. Once I can finally breathe with some success, about fifty feet offshore, I start making a frantic clicking noise and look back to my husband on the beach who directs us toward the dolphins. Lorna and I swim side by side for more than ten minutes next to these gorgeous creatures squealing with shared delight. We can feel and hear them swirling underneath us, their *click click* sounds at our feet. Suddenly five feet away from us,

a dolphin breaches, pauses to give us the side-eye, and dives below.

My husband meets us at the shore with our dry clothes. I don't even feel the cold. I just feel alive. I'm finding the will to get uncomfortable, to even spend hours reheating myself for the chance to greet a dolphin in the Antarctic currents, to let go, to share wonder with my daughter, to interact bravely with the world, to look her in the eye, and know that I'm striving to be the kind of adult that I want my daughter to become.

While traveling, you may miss some of your go-to stress reducers that are effective at home, but the good news is that you can develop new practices on the road. There is more discussion on maintaining well-being on the road in chapter 6 (Health and Personal Safety) and chapter 8 (On the Road).

As a bonus for the planners among us, the organizational process itself—putting together itineraries, researching destinations, and solving logistical problems—can be enormously fun and satisfying. The anticipation is an exhilarating prelude to the great adventure.

BOOST CREATIVITY

Engaging in new rituals and experiencing new places can stimulate creativity and prompt fresh ideas. One of the fundamental truths of travel is that it offers many new experiences, thus promoting “cognitive flexibility”—the brain’s ability to jump from one set of ideas, activities, or learning approaches to another.⁵ Traveling is rich with novel experiences; at every turn, every day, down every trail, there are unexpected sparks and nonstop innovation. We learn to think outside the box because we *are* outside of our box.

MAKE US MORE TOLERANT

Travel exposes our own biases and prejudices. It offers us new perspectives, bringing us face-to-face with fresh ideas and different cultures. Travel expands our cultural awareness and sensitivity, building tolerance, appreciation, and respect.

FEED OUR CURIOSITY

You can’t exactly make someone curious overnight. But give a child 365 consecutive days of new experiences and educational adventures while traveling, and curiosity will bloom.

The Case for Worldschooled

You may not know this, but as a parent you have the right to withdraw your child from traditional school and choose an alternative means to educate them. What happens when your concept of education expands beyond the four walls of a classroom? What happens when you notice learning opportunities can be anywhere at any time? The world becomes your school. Worldschooled is the educational foundation of a Wonder Year. Simply put, it is learning through direct interaction with the world.

Worldschooled is an educational *approach*—it is not something you sign up for; there’s no one to register with, no dogma or governing institution. There are many resources to help you design what worldschooled looks like for you and your family, and we’re going to walk you through several of them in this book.

Over the past couple of decades, the term *worldschooled* gained traction. Several traveling families who considered themselves worldschooled brought awareness to the concept as they shared their experiences online and in popular media. You might also come across the term *roadschooled*. For clarity, in this book we use the term *worldschooled* to mean it all. We want everyone to feel welcome whether you are traveling in the US or overseas, full time or part time, following a curriculum or going with the flow.

By rolling into worldschooled, you are making a choice to step forward and align yourself with the forefront of innovative educational models. Public and private schools are recognizing the value of travel as part of education. International Baccalaureate (IB) programs promote “intercultural understanding and respect . . . as an essential part of life in the 21st Century.”⁶ Leading universities encourage study-abroad programs. Some people may tell you worldschooled lacks academic rigor, but the evidence will be clear when your kids return to traditional school from a Wonder Year with grit, confidence, and a global frame of reference. Each of the coauthors’ children (six in total spanning third to ninth grades) slid right back into school, advancing to the next grade without missing an academic beat.

What better way to prepare your kids for a future, more interconnected, world than to show them the world? Interacting with the world at a young age plants seeds of inspiration and understanding in our children. We know that young brains are heavily impacted by the experiences they have—so why not share with them the art, architecture, history, food, culture, and texture of societies beside the one in which they were raised? Most of us long for greater connection to both fellow humans and the environment. Ask yourself how our future adults can protect the rainforest when they have not seen the rainforest, or connected with *any* forest, for that matter? We strive to protect what we know and love.

One of the limitations of classroom learning is that we tend to learn *about* others. With worldschooling, we begin to learn *from* others. It's an exchange. Learners begin to create their own opinions based on direct experiences, rather than simply repeating what they hear from others or read in a textbook. You can't fake a personal interaction. Your kids might come to the conclusion, for example, that countries maligned in the mainstream US media are full of good and kind people. Worldschooling is fact-finding; worldschooling is peace building.

It's been said that everything you need to know, you learn in kindergarten. The Blew family took this to heart and traveled for two years with their son, Braedon, when he was between four and six years old. After doing their due diligence, they placed him in kindergartens for one to three months at a time around the world. In Mauritius he was the white minority in his African, French creole-speaking class. He joined kindergartens in Thailand and Vietnam for similar durations. Braedon learned about friendship and practiced being the new kid. His dad says, "Four years later, he's a confident kid who is comfortable with new experiences and can find common ground with anyone. We attribute these qualities to an early life on the road where the structures that can hold us back were blown open."

We believe an early experience of travel is an investment that will deliver a lifetime of social, cultural, emotional, and academic returns. Let your children recognize the cultural lens we all carry. Let them get excited

by the real-time lessons that travel presents as they navigate public transportation, breakfasts, schools, and bathrooms. How can biking through Angkor Wat, tapping a maple tree in Vermont, or walking the streets of Madrid *not* be fodder for future passions and out-of-the-box thinking?

Twelve years after her return from a Wonder Year with her husband and three kids, Meredith Davis reflects on the long-term benefits of family travel:

Worldschooling is something that shapes kids' character, informing decisions they'll make about college and career and their own families. In Ecuador we had a guide who grew up in the rainforest. We learned a heap about flora and fauna, but perhaps more than what we learned was *how* we learned—by touching, tasting, and seeing. [Our kids] have a desire to know geography, they enjoy eating new foods, they like to explore, and they're not afraid of change. They are not afraid to ask questions. Our kids recognize the value of getting firsthand accounts, and they respect other cultures and their stories, history, and knowledge.

A Wonder Year can be a time to focus on emotional intelligence rather than grades. Many Wonder Year families use this period to explore well-being and happiness, as well as cultivating a rich inner life from various angles; indeed, many families embark on a Wonder Year and use world-schooling for the purpose of boosting mental health for the whole family. As parents we can model the search for joy; we can reinvent, repurpose, and remind ourselves that the journey never ends, that education is an exchange, a dialogue of giving and receiving.

A Wonder Year presents opportunities for risk-taking, personal challenge, and problem-solving—all twenty-first-century essential life skills. In taking a Wonder Year, you are standing up and moving in the opposite direction of expectation; heeding the call takes courage. Navigating a medieval village or struggling to make yourself understood in a new language takes perseverance. A wrong turn or a missed bus might uncover the better discovery. The lessons are life changing.

ANGELA'S NOTES FROM THE ROAD

Deadvlei, Namibia



We wake at 3:30 a.m., having committed to a desert safari in Namib-Naukluft National Park that starts at 4:00. Unlike a typical safari into a fauna-rich savanna, our aim today is to explore the massive sand dunes in the oldest desert in the world.

At this hour and without moisture to cloud the stars, we have no trouble seeing the universe spread above our heads. The boys remark on the profound quiet. There are no planes flying over, no road noise bouncing across the barren plains—only the distant sounds of jackals announcing a kill echoing across the vlei.

Ronan is psyched when he sees the safari truck, a repurposed Toyota Hilux with a mounted bed insert to accommodate nine passengers in open-air theater seating. We sit four across. Our guide hands us a worn woolen blanket perfect for one but insufficient to shield us all against the bracing predawn wind. We rearrange and put the boys in the middle so they get the most warmth.

The road is like those we drove on yesterday to reach our outpost: gravel and dirt. Ninety percent of Namibia's roads are unpaved, and although great effort is made to keep them in good

condition, sections still make for a rough traverse.

The temperature drops further as we near the entrance to the national park, where a wall of cool fog fills the valley. From the Sesriem entrance gate, our eventual destination is the Deadvlei claypan. Along the way, we see mountain zebra, oryx, and ostrich, and we learn that there are five types of sand dunes. Those in Namib-Naukluft are star dunes, which means they have been formed by winds coming from multiple directions over the past several million years.

At Big Daddy, an over one-thousand-foot-high dune overlooking Deadvlei, we stop and venture out to climb one of those star dune's rays. The dune is massive, and the line of hikers stomping up the ridgeline ahead of us nearly disappears in the haze between sand and sky. Ronan bounds out of the truck and starts the heel-toe-heel-toe trek along the narrow channel laid down by hikers across the years. Mark, Asher, and I fall in behind.

The air is warming quickly, and our elongated shadows stretch down the dune's side. There are no climbers passing us on a return journey, and our guide explains that's not the way out.

Instead, we turn perpendicular to the trail and launch down the southern face of Big Daddy toward the cracked white claypan below. High-stepping in the soft red sand, Asher calls out that he feels like an astronaut on Mars. He grips Mark's hand as they serpentine to provide some semblance of control over gravity.

At the base of the dune is Deadvlei, famous for its austere beauty. About six hundred years ago, ephemeral waters that flowed into the marsh during the rainy season stopped when the river cut a new course. The acacia trees that had filled this basin died, and because there isn't enough water to rot the wood, they still stand—blackened by the unforgiving sun. The combination of deep-ocher sand, pale-gray pan, inky acacia skeletons, and the brilliant azure sky make the vlei otherworldly. Astronauts, indeed.

Ronan directs a family photo shoot, and we capture a rare image of all of us together, frozen in time within our frozen surroundings. Even in the now-scorching heat, we want to linger, but our safari mates are ready to go, and our guide aims to secure a prime spot beneath the cooling branches of a tree

for brunch. We marvel with our fellow hikers over coffee, fruit, and bread.

Our final stop is a nearby canyon. While the rest of our group climbs down into the gap, the boys elect to stay closer to the truck, weary. After many weeks on the road and the long drive the previous day, we feel stretched thin, diluted.

Back at the outpost, we have dinner in a common room lit only by candles. Asher eats kudu, an ungulate he's seen grazing among the dunes.

Our tent cabin has an upper deck, and we go up for stargazing before returning “down-ladder” to sleep. In the US it is hard to find places far enough away from artificial light to really see the stars. In Namibia the closest light is hundreds of miles away. Our eyes adjust easily to the darkness, and the universe takes center stage.

We are totally alone, together, lying on our backs as the stars come into focus. We don't need to, but we whisper softly to one another. The boys point out satellites and meteors, and we try to identify the constellations, many of which are different from what we know at home. At twenty-four degrees south latitude, the universe is unfamiliar.

*“Our eyes adjust easily to the darkness,
and the universe takes center stage.”*

Choosing a Wonder Year

So, are you ready? Is a Wonder Year right for you?

We know it probably feels like there is no right time to voluntarily disrupt everything and embark on an extended family travel adventure. Your life is busy; your days are full. Work. Friends. Family. Laundry. Grocery shopping. Cooking. Doctor's appointments. Volunteering. Busy. Busier. Busiest. How in the world could you ever squeeze in a Wonder Year?

HELPING YOU DECIDE

Let's break it down a bit. We've come up with a simple three-question framework to help you examine your thoughts on this existential joyride so you can work through a decision process for choosing a Wonder Year. When you are ready, clear your mind of the chatter. Focus on your breath for a couple of minutes, take a walk, and unwind.

Question #1: What are your core values, beliefs, and priorities?

Ask yourself: What do I care about most? What do I believe is most important during my time on earth? Professional or personal growth? Financial security? Note that what you care most about now, as a person and as a parent, may be different from when you were younger. Be honest with yourself. Do you want freedom? Do you want a spiritual practice? Do you want security, adventure, or money? Do you want to shake things up?

Write about, discuss, or draw it. Sleep on it, and when you are ready, converse with your partner, friend, or journal. What is it that gives your life purpose?

This articulation of values will give you something to fall back on during your travels, a safety net of sorts. And if you are doing this exercise with a partner, you may find that the two of you have a shared vision. That's a great place to build from. If you realize you do not have a shared vision or common goals, it may be an indication that planning and executing an extended road trip together could be tricky. It's probably a good idea to have the conversation sooner rather than later in your process.

Question #2: What are the expectations that weigh you down?

What are the “shoulds” that tell you what “right” things you are supposed to be doing? Maybe you were brought up to believe you need to be the breadwinner or the stay-at-home parent. That you need to sacrifice. That life is supposed to be hard. Maybe you believe you are not worthy of the good life, that you don’t deserve to take some time off. Can you identify expectations that start from sources other than yourself? Just list and name them. We are not purporting to be therapists; it’s your prerogative to go deeper if and when you want to. We’re merely suggesting that it’s helpful to identify these potential pressures and separate them from your innate desires. We want you to be able to put aside external influences and instead listen to your own voice so you can thoughtfully answer question #1.



What began as a ‘wouldn’t it be crazy’ conversation condensed over several emotional months, filled with plenty of skepticism and excitement, sleepless nights, and animated debates, into an idea with mass. And the gravitational pull of the idea seemed natural . . . inevitable . . . and important.

—Angela

Question #3: Why are you considering a Wonder Year, and is anything holding you back?

When you tiptoe to the edge of your comfort zone and take a look, what comes up for you? Would you like to change something in your life, or are you searching for something new? Does your heart start to race a little when you think about taking a leap?

We have heard a lot of people say, “Oh, I would love to travel for a year, someday, when the time is right . . .” or “I wish we had done a trip like that, but now our kids are too old.” We know it might be really hard to take this kind of step. But take a look at what is holding you back. Are you worried or afraid? Identifying what’s lurking in your pit of uncertainty—concerns about education, employment, civil unrest, or public health—can help you devise a way over, around, or through it.

Now here’s the trick: Tackle your fears by creating a contingency plan. That way, you can quiet your worries and take them out of the equation. You can break out of the what-if loop that keeps you stuck in place. You’ll no longer need to ask, “What if we are making a huge mistake?” or “What if something happens and our house is rented and we’ll have nowhere to live?” or “What if we can’t find a new job—OMG what will we do?” A contingency plan could include putting aside reserve funds to support an unplanned return home, arranging with friends or family for you to live with them if necessary, or nurturing professional relationships throughout the year to keep future employment opportunities alive. We’ll cover this more in the next chapter.

Now that you have reflected on the possibility of a Wonder Year, let’s begin to envision what it may look like for you and your family.



This reading copy is not for distribution.



Chaco Canyon, New Mexico



Knowing there'd be no state troopers in this

rugged, parched region, we let Johnny, our nine-year-old, help drive the twenty-four-foot RV over thirteen miles of dusty, bumpy, deeply rutted road to Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Chaco Canyon holds the ruins of a vibrant civilization from between the ninth and twelfth centuries and is considered the ancestral homeland to many Native American tribes—including the Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo. We arrive after dark, and Johnny and Charlie stay up late, sitting on the roof of our camper oohing and wowing at the Milky Way and a meteor shower that stripes the massive midnight sky.

Johnny had read about how the Chacoans used astronomy and the paths of the sun and the moon in their design of dwellings, a technique known as astroarcheology. Visiting Chaco Canyon during a major celestial event—the spring equinox—would deepen our connection to this curious place known for its alignment with the heavens. We wake early and hike from

the campground to Casa Rinconada, a layered complex of rocks and ruins. The rising sun shines on an east-facing wall, casting golden light on ancient orange sandstone. Our cold toes tingle on the earthen floor while we three smiling visitors stand in the glow of history.

As we wander in and around the site, Johnny leads us into an underground room called a kiva, used by Chacoans for meetings and worship. The kiva has a firepit, a wind block, and a sandstone bench around the entire perimeter of the round room.

Later that afternoon, back at the campground, we notice Johnny sitting comfortably, cross-legged, on the ground by himself, moving pebbles around. He had brushed a canvas of ground and collected a pile of small stones. He carefully forms an outer circle and layers pebbles to form the rock bench. He then creates a mini firepit in the center and makes a pebble wind block. “I wanted to create my own little room, like the kiva,” says Johnny boy, who never thought he was any good at art or history.

◀ The fascinating building designs of the ancient Chacoans mystify visitors and scholars alike.

Structuring Your Wonder Year

There are many types of family travel, and new approaches are evolving all the time with emerging technology, infrastructure, and innovative models of work and school.

As you will hear again and again, there is no correct formula. A Wonder Year may coincide with a school year, a fiscal year, or some other significant time frame in your family's rhythm. If you can't take off several months or more, you can prioritize family adventures and adopt a Wonder Year state of mind. It's not an all-or-nothing prospect. A Wonder Year has to make sense to you and your family.

To help get your gears turning on what your Wonder Year could be, let's consider a few key parameters:

Breadth or depth? Do you want to travel fast and go to lots of places? Count countries? Or do you want to travel slowly and pick a few places where you settle in, find an apartment, and try to fit in with the locals?

Home or abroad? Do you want to mostly stay in your home country and learn about and explore it more deeply? Or would you like to head overseas for an international adventure where the languages, foods, and cultures are different from what you are used to?

Take your home with you? Do you want to travel in a motor home, boat, or van where, like a snail, you have your home on your back? Or would you prefer to carry a pack and be mobile, moving about freely without an engine or anchor to weigh you down?

Fixed timeline or open ended? Do you have to return home by a certain date? Do you want to wait and see how your family does in motion before you decide if your trip is six months or three years? Maybe you do not have to decide any return date at all.

Getting clear on some of these priorities can help you focus your choices and move forward confidently. And don't worry, whatever you think now, it is probably going to change! But having a few decisions made sets you in motion.

Let's drill down a little further. Your Wonder Year could be:

- A six-month sabbatical
- Two years of full-time travel to six continents and thirty countries
- A one-year road trip through the US South in an RV
- Two months every summer for five years in a row
- Nine months in Barcelona with weekend explorations throughout Europe
- An around-the-world trip with a defined beginning and end
- A walk-out-the-door-and-improvise-everything adventure

A Wonder Year can be whatever you choose; there are infinite possibilities. The consensus is this: Don't try to do everything! Put your right foot on what you love. Put your left foot on where you want to go. Now, do the hokey pokey and turn yourself around, and that's what it's all about!



A Conversation on Inclusivity

Travel builds relationships between people and with places. Unfortunately, travel and tourism are not always accessible, safe, and welcoming to all. The events of the early 2020s—the pandemic, social justice uprisings, calls for diversity and inclusion—elevated the conversation about inequities and prompted change in many sectors, including travel.⁷ The travel industry, the media, stakeholders, and communities around the globe have committed to do better. As worldschooling families, we, too, have an opportunity and responsibility to educate ourselves and support efforts that diversify the faces, voices, businesses, and experiences of travel.

For some travelers from the US, getting a passport and putting together a trip is rather straightforward. The hardest part may be narrowing options for where to go and how to get there. The experience for others may not be simple at all. Families of color or LGBTQ+ travelers may be unwelcome or unsafe in some locations. Others may face discrimination when trying to secure a rental car or accommodations, or have difficulty finding a gender-neutral bathroom. Travelers with disabilities or allergies may have to overcome accessibility obstacles and navigate planning and logistical issues many could never fathom. People who wear certain attire may be stereotyped,

harassed, or mistreated by virtue of their religious or spiritual expression. For some travelers, finding outdoor gear that fits their bodies or being comfortable in transit is a hurdle.

Subtle challenges or microaggressions are just as unwelcoming and problematic as more blatant acts of discrimination. Travelers might experience judgmental glances, longer waits for service, disparaging comments muttered under someone's breath, or shaming based on their appearances.

Businesses, governments, and nonprofit organizations have begun to examine how to change the travel industry, both inside and outside the US. Destinations and tour companies are diversifying their leadership, workforce, and advertising campaigns; they are examining their relationships with and impact on local communities; and they are evaluating how they include and meet the needs of all travelers. Advocacy and research groups are providing new ways to measure, track, and report on diversity and inclusion and are pushing for greater accountability. Domestic and international organizations are looking to promote the adoption of best practices and develop tools and the capacity to achieve responsible tourism that recognizes and works within the needs of local communities.

While the travel industry, governments, and institutions around the

world are grappling with these important topics, this is just the beginning, and the outcomes are yet to be seen and measured. There's also a lot we can do as a worldschooling community in our capacity as travelers, parents, consumers, and allies.

Here are some actions we can take to promote inclusivity and diversity:

- ▶ Pay attention—be a vocal ally when you see injustice.
- ▶ Build tolerance and cultural exchange, which Astrid Vinje recommends in her blog, *The Wandering Daughter*, by noticing “What’s different?” and “What’s the same?” compared to home.
- ▶ When planning travel, use businesses that practice and promote inclusivity. Use your travel dollars to support airlines, rental car companies, accommodations, and other operators moving in the right direction.
- ▶ While on the road, get the scoop. Support the just and fair vendors and establishments.
- ▶ Tell, read, share, and like travel stories from diverse voices on social media.
- ▶ Follow accounts and hashtags that discuss hard issues as well as represent joy.

- ▶ Educate yourself and your family about history and social justice issues that expand or limit inclusion.
- ▶ Speak up—demand that the industry change.

The face of travel has never reflected the true diversity of people, but social media is helping to change that. Mary Solio, one of the earliest family travel bloggers of color, shares, “Back in 2011, there weren’t many traveling families that looked like us. When Instagram came on the scene, people of color began to see other people traveling who looked like them. It brought confidence and helped get more diverse people out there.” Today, platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube feature diverse voices of family travel. Social media can promote access and inclusion and connect travelers who may be looking for each other and for community.

Creating safe and welcoming travel experiences will take time, awareness, and the involvement of us all.



A Family Affair

There's one more important step. When the adults in the crew are on board and ready to start planning in earnest, we urge you to bring your children into the discussion. We loved involving our kids in the process. It was their onboarding to the great family adventure, and by virtue of being engaged, they felt valued. This was essential to our trip success and could be for yours, too.



I had the expectation and hope that we would totally check out for a year. I wanted to go away, change everything up, hit the road, and not look back. But travel rule #1: things change, and stuff happens. You cannot plan for a five-hundred-year flood hitting your hometown while you are away or your dog getting bone cancer or the outside temperature dropping seventy degrees in one day. So, while my quest was for a round-the-country loop, our travel path was redrawn into a four-leaf clover with three unplanned stops back home. How lucky for us! My presumption that contact back home during the year would somehow diminish or compromise the authenticity of our journey proved completely untrue.

—Julie

Final Note: Encountering the Reactions of Others

Okay, so you've done some soul-searching, stared down your demons, considered your time horizon, talked with your partner, and engaged your kids. Now you're letting yourself feel excited. It's actually going to happen! OMG! And then you tell some people your plan, and your sister-in-law says, "Must be nice. I could never do that." Or a snickering colleague says, "Have fun in divorce court." Maybe an uncle insinuates you are reckless for pulling your kids out of school.

Others may have opinions and question your choice. They might comment on your finances. Some will react with joy, but others might suggest you are irresponsible. Please remember that you don't have to apologize or justify your decision when you encounter those reactions. Stay true to yourself and your family's priorities, and absolve yourself of any guilt or need to explain.

Sarah De Santi, who has been worldschooling for many years with her husband, Massy, and three children, shared with us, "A friend said to me, 'You have the perfect house, the perfect car, the perfect life. You're going to change that? Why??' That's why. Who says this is perfect? It's only perfect because that's what society tells you. It's not perfect. We don't have time with our kids. We're so tired all the time that we don't enjoy each other. We don't really know each other anymore." Sarah said that choosing this lifestyle has given her back all the things she felt she was missing and more. And for her, *this* is perfect.

It's okay. You will find plenty of people who get it and will understand your reasoning and support your choice. We three coauthors are some of those people, and you will meet many more of them in this book and in the greater community of traveling families.

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