

## Top 10 Scenic Drives in the Northern Rockies: Our Family's 10 Best of the Best

Submitted by [Sheri](#) on July 15, 2010 – 8:37 am



We're only half-way through our quest to drive all [Top 10 Scenic Drives in the Northern Rockies](#) in one trip. At the end of our journey we'll have driven about 10,000 miles, five states and two provinces. That's just for the Top 10, we'll also have 5 more states since we left home under our belt. There's a theme here. 10 drives, 10 states,

10,000 miles. So, since everyone wants to know what we like best, here are our 10 best of the best:

### 10. Sunsets



Sunset at Wallowa Lake

It sounds like a retired person's mantra, but it's true. Since we started this trip we've been sitting around a campfire, driving by a lake or walking somewhere amazing more nights than not. I guess at home, we're busy. We're in the house and we're trying to accomplish something, put kids to bed, finish something for work, you name it. Taking this time to get out and see the sunset every night has been life changing. You know how you sigh and just relax sometimes? That's been what this whole trip has taught us. Relax, get outside and see the sunset at least a few times a week. I'm going to make a concerted effort to embrace the end of the day, not race it for a few more minutes of work time.

### 9. Driving



Rattlesnake Grade on way to Hells Canyon

People don't believe us when they ask about driving all these miles and we're still smiling. Admittedly, we're a bit extreme and most families wouldn't enjoy 10,000 miles in one summer. Left to our own devices you can drop our family anywhere and we'll find a car and start exploring. But, we are

really having a blast in the car. Getting on a back road, going slower, really seeing what's out the window instead of just thinking about the next stop is completely different than most "car trips". After a brief stint on a big highway last weekend we got to the smaller roads and everyone in the car started chattering about what was outside. I realized that the higher speed limit and the six lane road really keeps you from looking up close at what is out the window. Try it sometime and you'll be hooked.

## **8. Everyday Something New**

It's become a love-hate relationship with packing up the camper and heading out in the morning. Some days we can hardly say goodbye. Each of us has had the experience of saying goodbye to awesome fishing, a new friend at a campground, a nice shady camp spot or a particularly interesting attraction or destination. Some of us have even shed a few tears. But, that afternoon, we roll into a new experience. And, there are at least 10 more experiences we see on side roads but don't have time to investigate. We're living in an age of hotel reservations six months in advance and planning every little step of the itinerary. Going back, just showing up and learning about a place is priceless. We'll do more of this from now on.

## **7. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**

I'm not going to lie, we've gotten cranky. We've needed a time out from each other. Our camper is 10 feet inside and the truck is, well, a truck. It's not all a rose garden, as my daughter says. But, there have been spectacular moments too. The combination of some really great things with a few freak outs is what makes us laugh later. Not everything out the window is world-class, National Geographic worthy. But many days it is. Planning to only hit the high spots of a location and leave the transit ways out of the equation is teaching our kids to just rush from photograph to photograph. We've purposely stopped at places we didn't think would be anything special and got out of the car to find something interesting. Or not. But it doesn't matter. We have a better idea of what's in some small areas of a park and a taste to come back and find more. And those less spectacular stops cleanse your palate so you can enjoy the world-class photo moments that much more.

## 6. Living History



### Hauling Water at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center

I'm not talking about those places where people dress up and tell families about how it used to be. Those are great, but there's real life history out there. Antique farm equipment. Museums with interactive displays that let kids touch and figure out for themselves how tough it was to be a pioneer. Random people whose ancestors came here and homesteaded and who will tell you all about it. My father's family history is in this area and I wonder what it would have been like to walk with a wagon for months only to arrive in Wyoming. Not exactly the promised land. It's not the planned, elaborate moments that teach your kids the most about why your family came west. It's just the little stuff they pick up. But all those little moments connect them to their roots.

## 5. Camping



### Our 1969 Playboy Trailer. Isn't he cute?

Our trailer is home on the road. We've been spending about half time camping and half time in hotels. We all agree that we prefer the camping. I'm not sure if we'd say that if we'd spent almost 30 straight days in the camper, but this country has some amazing campgrounds. Some are bare bones and some are elaborate, but at night with a fire and some marshmallows and the odd mosquito (or swarms!) it's special. I don't mean to imply that we're always like the Waltons and calling out sweet good nights. It's real life. But it feels special. Like something you don't get to do every day. Especially when you live in Arizona and it's 110 right now, and you pull on a sweatshirt to go to the restroom, it feels pretty dang special.

## 4. The Wildlife Game

I have to give this a place on the best of the best because it's become larger than life. What started out as a way to entertain my little niece one day has turned into an elaborate, math-filled accounting of what we see out the window. Discussions about whether birds or horses or people count as wildlife can be hysterical (maybe we don't get out much!) and the kid accounting and point keeping is educational

but also important to her. Various animals have various point values and when you reach 100 you get to buy an ice cream. That part started out as a way to keep the whining for ice cream to a minimum, but it's evolved into strategy and predictions of which side of the car might have more sightings that day. You probably have to be here, but we'll be talking about this for at least a year.

### **3. Surprises**

As much as we talk about just taking it easy and exploring, not trying to hit the high points only, there's that inclination to cherry pick a drive for the best scenery or the best attractions. It happens to everyone. But some of our very favorite stops have been ones that didn't start out to be the great ones. [The Bitterroot Valley in Montana](#) was one surprise after another. In a very good way. All of [Idaho](#), which none of us had been to in any meaningful way, has been another surprise. [Eastern Oregon](#) and the little towns, clear lakes and awesome geocaching is another. The great destinations are great. You can't take that away from them. But there are lots of great places on the way that will speak to your family. The routes for the [Top 10 Drives](#) have done an awesome job of taking us through these gems that we would never have thought to explore on our own.

### **2. Being Here Now**

We've talked to dozens of people about our trip and almost all of them say, "I want to do that someday." So do it. And do it now. Don't wait for the kids to get older or for time to spend three weeks in Yellowstone. Just pick a trip and go for the weekend. Chip away at the Top 10. It might take you years to drive all of the loops, but you'll be doing it now. I was thinking last night that the fact we're spending this time with our daughter, right now, is probably something we'll never really know the full meaning of. My parents took us camping every weekend when I was a kid and I'm sure we never said thank you. We probably fought in the car and made it a pretty miserable experience some of the time. But now, when we look back, those memories are still real. My dad is gone but his grandchildren all love camping. I'm crying as I write this because I wish he could see all the little chums roast their marshmallows and warn them about losing an eye and playing in the fire. Hopefully my daughter takes her kids on the road and tells them about The Wildlife Game.

## 1. Geocaching



### Geocaching at Wallowa Lake

This made number one on the list because it's the best example of what this trip has meant to us. Finding a cache in an old cemetery that doesn't make any tourist map or walking around a lake at sunset are just some of our good memories. We've gotten out of the car and hiked some great (and some not so great) trails. We've gotten bug bites and wondered if it was prudent to take a kid into the woods at exactly this spot. Bottom line, we've found dozens of places we'd never have even thought about visiting if we weren't hunting for that next cache. We are putting out travel bugs and hope to relive our memories as we watch them travel around in the years to come. And, we've had a blast together.