

Our Trip Takes Us

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By Becky Hirn

Abby's first art lesson at school last week was to draw a self-portrait. I don't know for sure if she's ever done that for a class project. If she has, I don't remember it. I will definitely remember this one though because I was her learning coach for the lesson. We looked at some examples of portraits together, learned what makes facial features realistic and then the computer program we use through the Ohio Virtual Academy, instructed her to get a mirror and begin drawing her self-portrait. I just loved watching this reflective process. In a way the experience is similar to watching a child take their first step or ride a bike for the first time. It's something you don't want to miss if you can help it. It made me think how lucky all the teachers starting back to school this week must feel sometimes. They get to see such special moments.

One of the main goals behind our trip is to expose our children, and ourselves, to people, places and things we've never seen before. It's about spending time with the kids and learning right alongside of them. When we first told the kids about the yearlong trip, they started calling it Family Year. Nearly 80 days, 12 states and 5,000 miles later, we still call it that sometimes and I think we're continually meeting our goal.

For instance, taking the RVs on a ferryboat ride across the Atlantic between New Jersey and Delaware was a surprising amount of fun. It was like a one-hour cruise with music, food and the Atlantic breeze out on the deck. Also, in Maryland, I tasted my first crab cake. I would have never known I'd like it. Abby held a live horseshoe crab while someone fed it oyster meat. We watched wild horses pass our RV unexpectedly one evening while visiting a National Park. When we were hiking in West Virginia, Carter squeezed through a 50-foot tunnel just to see if he could reach the other side alone.

Now the start of school is adding a new twist. Just like everyone else starting school, we had some anxiety about it. Abby had her own fears about entering the fifth grade without the classmates she's had for years. I had worries too. I remember the night before school started I couldn't stop asking Dan questions about how we were going to handle various situations. I thought I wasn't prepared. I wondered how we'd keep track of all the hours and report them to the state. I wondered if we could keep Carter busy enough. I worried about how school time would affect our sightseeing time. I thought up questions related to our RV lifestyle like what if we don't have enough electricity or we can't get an internet signal. Dan was better at managing these day-before-school anxieties. He said it won't really be much different than all the planning we've done for our trip and the planning we do every day. We know how to plan, it's what we do. That made me feel better.

In addition to that, he reminded me that the Ohio Virtual Academy has so many resources available to the parents and students of the school. Abby's teacher had already called to offer her assistance. There are multimedia presentations, online conferences, and a wide array of discussion forums and parent

groups to connect with for help. Plus we have all the books and a computer to guide us through this new experience.

The best part of this new experience is that our own trip is an excellent supplement to this new kind of schooling. Next time we're in a museum and we see a self-portrait, it will be really neat to look at it with Abby. Since I was there when she studied portraits I'll know to say "Hey, look at the lines the artist used for the eyes in that portrait."

We can also pull out her self-portrait ten years from now from the portfolio she created in Lesson One. We can look at her 10-year-old face and the T-shirt she drew on herself that reads "I ♥ NY" and we'll remember that was our big year, full of new experiences, Family Year.

Becky Hirn is a Delphos resident traveling America with her family for a year. She documents the journey at www.ourtriptakesus.com. Follow the Hirn family in photos, blogs, on Facebook and Twitter. Or learn how to partner with the trip as an advertiser. You may e-mail Becky at beckyhirn@ourtriptakesus.com