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**THE**

**AMERICAN**

**GREAT**

**ROAD TRIP**

The Airstream  
in tow on  
Route 1, south  
of Carmel.

On the eve of the 150th anniversary of  
Yosemite National Park, **KATE BETTS** takes the wheel  
for an unforgettable Airstream adventure down  
California's Pacific Coast Highway and beyond.

**PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAKE STANGEL**



Right off I should tell you that my husband, Chip, and I are not what you'd call car people—or “glampers.” We've had our share of outdoor adventures (climbing Kilimanjaro as newlyweds; camping by a glacier in Alaska's Kachemak Bay), but we've always wanted to take our kids, Oliver, 14, and India, 9, on a road trip to Yosemite, and when we learned about Airstream 2 Go, the new company that rents the iconic trailers for short-term excursions, it was settled. We would tow the Airstream behind us from Los Angeles to Yosemite and then west to the Monterey Peninsula and down Route 1.

I explained to the kids that we'd also be climbing the granite faces of Yosemite, and kayaking in Monterey's Stillwater Cove, and along the way we'd see America from our glamorous little vessel. They were excited. I should have been, too.

Everything had been taken care of, including the customized itinerary created with the help of the Bozeman, Montana-based outfitter Off the Beaten Path. But the idea of towing 28 feet (and three tons) behind us was keeping me up at night.

“Driving won't be an issue,” said Dicky Riegel, founder and CEO of Airstream 2 Go. “You'll learn how to get into the curve.” And he was right, sort of. Driving the rig from behind the wheel of a GMC Denali felt easy for about five minutes.

“Do you rent drivers, too?” I asked Mona Heath, the patient Airstream 2 Go manager who was trying to teach me how to back the damn thing into a space in the parking lot in East San Gabriel. “Jackknife! Jackknife!” my husband shouted as several orange rubber traffic cones disappeared under the rear wheels.

**WE LOADED UP** the Denali with iPads and itineraries and supplies for the next eight days, and lurched onto Route 5, headed for Yosemite. After a few miles the used-car lots and bulldozer dealers flanking the highway gave way to orange groves and vineyards stretching as far as the eye could see. “The Salad Bowl of America!” my husband proclaimed as he cautiously eased into the right lane, shifting gears from automatic to manual as huge trucks roared by. This is it, I thought, as we lumbered north, Jay-Z



and Adele blasting on the radio. We were officially unhooked from our daily routine, ready to explore. By the time we got to Fresno, the endless acres of fields had morphed into red-earth rock cuts and stands of ancient, angular live oaks jutting into the blue-sky horizon.

If travel is about dreams and imagining yourself in places you've never been, then an Airstream adventure channels romantic notions of freedom, communing with nature, and nostalgia for seeing the world just outside your window. I had envisioned our newly refitted silver bullet parked in the valley beneath El Capitan, or perched on the craggy cliffs of Big Sur. I hoped the definitive American road trip would summon all sorts of revelations about the country, my family, and my own adaptability. We would bond, live in nature, and revel in Woody Guthrie's endless skyways and golden valleys. But when we pulled into the High Sierra RV Park in Oakhurst, 15 miles south of Yosemite's South Gate, all the nostalgic fantasies of Ansel Adams views out my bedroom window vanished. "Well, this is nice," my husband said hopefully as he began the jackknife procedure, backing into our "riverside" parking spot overlooking a parched Fresno River. Oliver tried to cheer me up by hanging a string of festive LED lights along the Zip Dee awning of the Airstream. The kids didn't care about the view; they were thrilled by the silver bullet and its sleek interiors, the flat-screen TV, and an accordion door that enabled

privacy in the queen-size bedroom. That evening, as Chip struck up a conversation with our neighbor, a middle-aged guy who was driving his mother around California, Oliver and India struck out on their own adventure, joining a group of kids kicking around a soccer ball just outside the lot.

The next morning we locked up the trailer and detached the Denali. We would hike in Yosemite's Mariposa Grove before making our way to the top of Sentinel Dome. We tilted our heads back in amazement at the towering sequoias and the ponderosas, identified by their jigsaw-puzzle-like bark. As we hiked up to Sentinel Dome, with its glorious view of El Capitan, our conservancy guide told us about gold-rush pioneers and forest fires, and explained that granite naturally exfoliates the rock faces to create their impressively smooth silhouettes.

The second day we were up early to meet Aaron Jones, our climbing guide, inside the Yosemite Mountaineering School. He had that cool-dude vibe of a 28-year-old with 42 El Capitan ascents under his belt. After measuring us for shoes, harnesses, and helmets, Aaron taught us to boulder on the Swan Slab. The kids were quick studies in Aaron's lesson in threading the rope through the pig's snout and the carabiner. "On belay!" they shouted, carefully passing ropes hand over hand. Before I could even assemble my harness, Oliver had scrambled up a crease in the face.

"Slow down, boy," India said as Oliver casually hopped down from the 5.6 climb like a daddy

## IS IT POSSIBLE TO BECOME BLASÉ AND NONCHALANT ABOUT THOSE COASTAL VIEWS DOWN ROUTE 1?

longlegs. It wasn't as easy for their elders. Years of rock climbing couldn't prevent Chip from falling off on his first attempt. And I was barely able to hoist myself up the face more than two inches. Defeat crushed me for a nanosecond and then, with a deep breath, the immensity of the valley seemed to extinguish the anxieties of urban life we'd left behind in New York. I was hooked on being unhooked.

On day three we hitched up the rig and headed west, driving past the giant San Luis reservoir as the golden hills of the Diablo Range rose up around us. By midday we had crossed the San Juan valley, the wind whipping through the surrounding fields of garlic *(Continued on page 110)*



Want to see more beautiful photos from the road trip? Follow along as Kate Betts takes over the @travelandleisure Instagram handle on July 7.





**Top row, from left:** On the pier in Monterey, California; Half Dome, in Yosemite National Park; the author's son, Oliver, on belay; Kate Betts and her family at Pezzini Farms, in Castroville; harbor seals in Monterey. **Second row:** Lunch at Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant; a break on Route 1; La Bicyclette, a restaurant in Carmel; fresh fruit in Castroville. **Third row:** The Secret Garden bookstore, in Carmel; on the Monterey pier; Big Sur's Del Campo Gallery; a Yosemite view. **Fourth row:** Jellyfish at the Monterey Bay Aquarium; surfing at Morro Bay, near Monterey. **Fifth row:** Yosemite hiking trails; India reading inside the Airstream; afternoon light in Yosemite; a cookout at Marina Dunes. **Bottom row:** Kayaking on Monterey Bay; Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant; sunset at Morro Bay.

