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WE BROUGHT 'EM BACK ALIVE

It was clear that almost all of our friends were skeptical. Some tried to dissuade us; others knowing that we were not to be denied shrugged their shoulders and kept their silence although this silence from normally exuberant people was heavy with meaning. A very few were encouraging and even enthusiastic; from these we took heart, ignoring for the moment that these were the impractical ones among our acquaintances. When it became apparent that we were not to be denied, all -- even the hitherto silent ones -- came forth with advice we found useful.

So, on the evening of July 25th, we set off on the first leg of our journey which was to stretch out over 6500 miles in five weeks. This is not a remarkable distance to go in this length of time, nor is a journey of five weeks duration a notable feat of endurance. What made our trip seem so incredible to our friends was that it involved herding our tribe of five children ranging in age from 10 months to 10 years into the heart of Mexico and back again.

"Mexico is more foreign than any country in Europe," we were told by several world travelers. We welcomed this information

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having become rather self-conscious about being stay-at-homes while connected with an institution whose outlook embraces the world. Fortunately, we found it not too foreign for communication to be beyond the reach of the phrase books, gestures, and often English.

"You have to count on having dysentery which with a chain reaction through your large family might put you out of commission for most of the trip; you can get sick from fresh fruits and vegetables, restaurant foods, and even from drinks," warned the realists. We thought that this could be handled with precautions and stocked up on chlorine bleach to purify water when necessary, rubbing alcohol to bathe our hands to conserve purified water while traveling, a few medical supplies and took the standard battery of shots. While we felt safe with these preparations, we realized that there was danger in being smug and asked the pediatrician for further advice.

"You'll have to be careful about having things stolen," hinted the cynics. So our children made crude money belts which kept them out of mischief but otherwise were not particularly useful; my search for a locking gas tank cover was too casual to be fruitful and fortunately proved unnecessary.

"Gas stations are a government monopoly and are few and far between and often out of gas," observed the cautious ones. We borrowed a five gallon gasoline can, but found that the gasoline situation had improved immensely within the few months prior to our visit, and gasoline was readily available at least in the regions we visited.

"Public restrooms are filthy," shuddered our fastidious friends. Being fastidious in these matters ourselves, we found a

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supply house that sold disposable toilet seat covers. Nor did we find every public restroom impossible.

But most of the alarm was centered around the fact that our children were involved in the project. "You're not going to travel that far with all the kids are you?" was a frequent query. "How will you entertain them and keep them interested?" was a challenge to which we gave careful thought. "What'll you do when your kids get hungry and there's no decent place to eat within hundreds of miles?" asked one otherwise resourceful father who had just returned from Mexico with two youngsters and had found this problem beyond satisfactory solution. "What'll you do with your baby?" wailed all.

There were other warnings and dire predictions too, but we were not to be diverted. We had just celebrated our twelfth anniversary a month and a half earlier, and this was to be our first trip together outside of the United States. My wife, Olivia, and I are both afflicted with chronic, incurable wanderlust, and when our fourth child reached the age of three, we were beginning to make ambitious travel plans; however, the unexpected but not unwelcome appearance of the fifth child had apparently set our timetable back by several years.

I forget the occasion, but it was a cold, blustery day in late fall preceding a miserable winter that my wife and I simultaneously decided that even with the baby we would go to Mexico the following summer. Inasmuch as we have stumbled onto the same idea at the same time frequently, there was nothing especially mystical about this, but we were happy to be in agreement.

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Family travel at this point seemed possible as all except the baby had reached the age of some understanding, and the baby would still be too young to be walking around getting into predicaments beyond simple solution. At the time we proposed visiting Mexico, Bruce would be 10, Jesse 8, Chiyo 6, Kimi 4 and Ross 10 months. The three older ones, we felt, were capable of a certain amount of responsibility. Bruce was studying Spanish, and his teacher was confident that he would be capable of carrying on a considerable amount of conversation. This proved a delusion; Bruce is not particularly communicative in English, and I don't know why we expected him to be garrulous in Spanish. We felt that as soon as the baby began walking, a trip of this sort would be out of the question for at least two and probably three years. Our only fear was that he would be precocious and would begin walking earlier than our other children had.

This account is not intended as a travelogue but as a journal of one family's solution to what many seemed to think a monumental task. While some of the circumstances are unique because of the fact that our trip was to Mexico, most of the situations are endemic to any extensive travel with children. But we found that children need not curtail trips such as ours; indeed, we found that with a little care and planning with them in mind, our trip was enriched. Furthermore, we found that the children were great catalysts in establishing a rapport with the Mexicans whatever their station and calling, whether they were Indians, Spanish or Mestizo.

Our preparations began the previous fall. Once we began talking about it, I went to the AAA office and loaded myself down

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with all kinds of literature pertaining to Mexico. We answered an ad placed in a magazine by the Mexican Government Tourism Department and in due time received a great deal of information which helped to pass the aforesaid miserable winter. We also visited the Mexican Tourist Information office in Chicago and the local travel service.

By this time, although we weren't quite sure yet that we were going, we had reached the stage of preliminary planning which became a rather entertaining problemgame. It seemed best that because of the family, we should have definite headquarters to which we could retire each night even though this limited our range somewhat. For the same reason, we felt it important to be in a metropolitan area where there would be facilities to meet any unforeseen emergency that might arise. We also thought it desirable to have housekeeping facilities in order to have some control over the food we would consume. At the same time, we wanted to be close to cultural, historical, and archeological sites. It became obvious that Mexico City would be the most desirable location at least for our first venture.

We then wrote to nearly twenty motels, hotels, and apartments listed in the AAA Travel Information Catalog on Mexico and Central America and in the information sent by the Tourism Department, avoiding the obviously plush hostelrys and those unsuitable for family living. We also wrote to a minister of one of our churches in Mexico City.

When the airmail replies came back within a few days, it was apparent that our decision to headquarter in one spot was a wise one economically as well for the apartment we finally selected

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rented by the month for the same amount that the cheapest alternative would have cost for eight days on a per diem basis.

The minister wrote back a rather discouraging letter indicating the folly of traveling in Mexico with small children but did recommend facilities in the event that we persisted in our folly. We later worshipped for three weeks in his church, and each Sunday, he would shake his head and say, "I wish I had your courage." We felt neither brave nor reckless.

Sometime after Christmas, we mounted the AAA map of Mexico on a partition in the kitchen where we usually eat and broached the subject of the proposed trip to the children. Their response was so enthusiastic that it was obvious that with our bringing them into the discussion, we had gone beyond the point of no return. The time had come for real, concrete planning.

Obviously the most urgent decision to be made was the date. July seemed the best time as the baby would be big and strong enough by then and yet hopefully not yet walking. This would be the rainy season in Mexico, but so were the alternative possibilities. Selecting the departure date of June 26 was simple; that was the day after payday and would give us five days to get to Mexico City.

Having selected dates, we wrote to the apartment manager asking to have a three bedroom apartment reserved for the month of July. A suitable deposit was made, and by return airmail, we received confirmation of our reservation.

Our next official act was to get the necessary shots and have them verified by our public health officer.

In the meantime, the three older children were devouring as much reading material on Mexico as they could find; 'Livvie and

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I also passed the winter reading a few books about Mexico and spent a lot of time making pests of ourselves, pumping all of our friends who had been anywhere south of the border. I am sure that even though they questioned the wisdom of our venture, more than one of our widely traveled friends felt that our preparations were more appropriate to an assault on Everest rather than to an automobile trip over well-charted roads to a neighboring, friendly country. But after all, this was to be our first expedition after a dozen years of marriage and was to involve children into whom we wished to instill our own interest in other cultures; it was important, therefore, that this be a memorable occasion.

We also spent long hours calculating routes down and back. Because we have friends and relatives whom we haven't seen for many years roughly en route to Laredo, our border destination, we were tempted to map a zig-zag route to include them. But regretfully, we decided that visiting friends and relatives would have to be a separate project, that the Mexico experience should not be diluted, and accordingly we mapped as direct a route as possible. Our only departure from this was to jog over to the Gulf of Mexico on our way home as the children had never seen salt water.

Because economy was one of our chief considerations, we contemplated camping en route to the border and on the way back from the border. The advice was unanimous that camping in Mexico was not only impractical but dangerous. On the other hand, it seemed feasible to attempt the feat in this country. We borrowed a tent, sleeping bags, portable ice chest, and camp stove and made a dry run one weekend at a nearby state park. The experience was

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enlightening. It proved to us that it would be completely impractical to haul that much gear around for such limited use. So we decided that like visiting friends, camping was a fine idea but as a separate project. We kept the ice chest and returned the other material.

While I tend to do everything in a rush at the last minute, usually settling for less than originally planned, 'Livvie, with the infinite wisdom of women through the ages, was quietly setting aside wardrobes for each of us. Because our trip was to be through ^a hot, humid area and then through a hot, arid region, and finally to the moderate, ~~can~~tral plateau of Mexico, our wardrobe requirements were somewhat complex, but clothing made from fabrics that resist dirt and wrinkles while being easy to launder helped to keep clothing at a manageable level despite our numbers. Disposable diapers were dandy for the trip, but as the bulk of a full month's supply would have required a trailer, we took along cloth diapers as well for use once we were settled.

'Livvie also dressed up and sewed a device with large pockets to fit over the ^{backrest of the} front seat of the car, providing pockets for the children in the back compartment. These pockets were large enough for drawing tablets, crayons, pencils, books, and a few favorite, small toys. Each child, with the exception of the baby, had his own personal pocket. As my wife has not applied for patent, any manufacturer is welcome to utilize the idea.

She prevailed upon me to make a small cupboard the width of the car to go behind the back seat of the station wagon when the seat was up or to be placed against the tail gate when the seat was folded down. This held crackers, peanut butter, processed cheese,

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raisins, a small pail for washing up, paper cups, paper plates, napkins, baby food sufficient for a day's travel, washcloths, soap, cosmetics, and medical supplies. Unexpectedly, the cupboard turned out to be a fascinating toy for the baby and unfortunately the contents also when he solved the riddle of its opening. But between the cupboard and the pocket gadget, it was possible to have a maximum of clear space in the rear of the car. With a family the size of ours, maximum is not too much. Everything we didn't need while the car was in motion was on top of the car.

While we intended to buy most of our food in Mexico, there were some items that we thought best to take along. All of our children had finally gotten used to the idea of drinking powdered milk; this simplified matters, especially for the baby as all we had to do with his bottles was to put the proper amount of dry milk solids in them and then add purified water when needed; we had also purposely kept the baby on prepared baby foods beyond the age we had weaned the others as it saved making special preparations for him. We also took chlorine bleach in the event that purified water would not be available as well as for cleaning. I questioned some of the purchases as I had understood that they would be available in Mexican markets. We did find that the supermarkets were physically the equal of the finest we have, but the things that my wife insisted we take were definitely in the luxury class in Mexican stores and even with the favorable exchange rate were very expensive.

I did have foresight enough to ask the AAA to prepare a triptyk, the wonderful strip maps they put together with information of interest regarding motels, historic sites and other points of interest along the route. This also furnished the information that the

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road from Laredo to Monterrey was undergoing extensive repairs and that the detours could be avoided by using the new crossing at Falcon Dam not marked on the maps of that date. Because the AAA office had suggested waiting until a week before departure to request the triptyk, the information regarding road conditions was absolutely up to date.

Our favorite mechanic gave the car a careful scrutiny after being told of the geography we expected to encounter. After some minor adjustments and new brake linings, the old beast was pronounced fit.

One of the last things we did before departure was to borrow a backpack in which to carry the baby. This enabled us to go places that would otherwise have been difficult, tiring, or precarious had we been carrying him in the conventional manner. We had the use of both hands in climbing pyramids and unimpeded vision while descending.

I did NOT have enough foresight to apply for tourist permits well in advance. Having been assured that applications were processed fast enough to get them by return mail, I waited until a week prior to departure time with the result that they had not been received by the time we were ready to go.

Incidentally, our departure date precipitated our only quarrel relative to the trip in all the months of preparation. (Our non-trip quarrels occurred with their usual frequency.) 'Liv had things packed, ready to go by the 25th with laundry up to date and no dirty clothes in the hamper. I was sure that we had decided on a June 26 departure date; my wife accused me of not communicating (an old and continuing grievance, by the way) and that she had been

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under the assumption that we would depart by the 25th. The guppies and parakeet were farmed out, the mail pick-up arranged for, newspapers discontinued. The children were in pajamas, ready to leave by the time I got home from work, dinner was ready on paper plates, and 'Livvie was bound and determined that we were going to leave on the 25th.

Even a single generation away from a patriarchal tradition is enough to destroy it completely, and I yielded without striking a blow. Having asked the Mexican Consulate to forward the tourist permits to the AAA office in Laredo if they could not get them to our home by the 25th, I assumed that they were on their way and was not worried that we hadn't received them.

The reasons for beginning our trip in the evening were many, and all proved sound: (1) With five children and a standard station wagon, we felt that we could cover the most territory without fear of being called upon to stop at every fourth service station if the younger children were asleep. (2) Being asleep at the beginning of this lengthy journey, the children would not become travel weary at least until sometime the next morning and perhaps much later; we hoped that during the night by some kind of osmosis they might be transformed into veteran travelers. It was amazing how quickly they DID become adjusted to life on the road as a result of their good rest while we were covering some 500 miles; sleeping together, they learned that they could coexist in cramped quarters. (3) We thought that departure in the cool of the evening was more desirable than taking off into the heat of the day. (4) Although we had given up the idea of camping along the way, economy was still a consideration, and by starting in the evening and alternating driving chores, we

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felt that we could drive through the next day and save one motel stop; we thought that we would have the endurance to do this at the beginning of the journey.

Our children seemed to feel a kind of magic in awakening some time after dawn in a moving car traveling through unfamiliar and therefore excitingly new territory. We stopped to freshen up as soon as they were awake, and then at the first roadside park, we stopped for a leisurely breakfast consisting of orange juice, pre-sweetened dry cereal, sweet rolls plus milk for the children and coffee for the parents.

While the breakfast was unhurried to give everyone a chance to unwind from the previous night, our rest stops through the morning were no longer than necessary. If the children were hungry, raisins furnished nourishment and energy with a minimum of mess. Water exclusively (to avoid stickiness in the event of spilling) quenched thirst except at rest stops where pop was permitted. Lunch in a park was again leisurely, and we all had the opportunity to run and stretch our muscles. In the heat of the afternoon, we found that driving made the heat more bearable than stopping; so our rest stops were infrequent and of minimum duration.

When we stopped for the evening, we were approximately a thousand miles closer to our destination. The next day, we varied the routine by stopping at small-town drug stores for refreshment instead of confining our stops to service stations; in this way, the children also became aware of the regional variety in our country. And of course, for the sake of the boys, we had to pay homage to the heroes of the Alamo at San Antonio. This slowed our progress somewhat, but we were in Laredo by evening.

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We found Laredo with its strongly Mexican flavor an exciting prelude of things to come. After waiting in vain through two mail deliveries for our permits, we decided to get new ones at the border crossing, and the AAA office accomodated us by drawing up affidavits of citizenship and also exchanged some money for us. After a final car check, we took off for Falcon Dam.

Falcon Dam, a joint project of the Mexican and United States governments is a great monument to the friendly spirit of cooperation between the two nations. It is about 75 miles south of Laredo and is the newest entrance into Mexico, so new that we almost missed the turnoff. Before crossing, we filled our jug with U. S. water, crossed the dam and were at the port of entry.

We had been told by many that Mexican officials were inefficient, slow, and so underpaid that they would not be above taking bribes to hasten things along. We never ran into this breed, and it certainly was not true of the officials at Falcon Dam. There was a great influx of Americans on their way south who arrived about the time we did, and most had come without permits. These were processed rapidly and efficiently with no waste motion. Far from expecting a bribe, the man who processed the automobile permit recoiled when I reached for my wallet, having forgotten that there is no charge for such. He backed off, assuring me that it was free.

In the meantime, my wife, armed with disposable toilet seat covers, was herding the girls into the ladies' restroom but had to beat a hasty retreat after finding a huge dog sleeping there. The training we had given the children regarding sanitation paid off when, after getting all the papers and clearing the car with the customs officers, I stooped to get a drink of water from a waterpipe on the

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ground only to be drawn up short by a cry of "Daddy!" from four little voices in unison. The water was probably potable, but our minds were eased by their almost instinctive reaction although I am sure that 'L'v wondered about me.

By this time, it was 4:00 p.m., and we had been warned not to drive on Mexican roads after dark because of the habit of livestock and peons sleeping on the roads. We wanted to get to Saltillo because it was above 5000' in elevation and likely to be cool, but we knew that we would have to settle for Monterrey which we reached just before sunset.

Because we did not know exactly what our schedule would be, we had not bothered to make reservations en route. However, we were able to secure very good accommodations at all our stops by following the AAA recommendations. Our first night in Mexico was spent in a frighteningly elegant hotel, and we successfully negotiated our first attempt at bargaining by getting a suite for the rate of a double room. After cleaning up, we tried the dining room and got a taste of Mexican service; it was leisurely but so courtly that my wife and I would have been enchanted by it except for the fact that the younger children kept dropping off to sleep waiting for the food to come.

After early breakfast, we investigated the environs of the hotel, enjoyed window shopping everywhere, found exchanging dollars to pesos at a bank a simple process, were accosted by young children peddling chiclets but resisted their studiedly doleful eyes, looked in vain for bottled water, settled for a jugful from the hotel, and departed for Saltillo, stocking up with more picnic supplies at a supermarket on the highway out of Monterrey. We found Saltillostwith

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its narrow, hilly streets, colorful shops, cathedral and churches everything we expected a Mexican City to be.

That evening we were in Matehuala and remember the wonderful purity of the air. After ridding ourselves of travel grime, we went to the motel dining room, received the same considerate service, and again had children fall asleep on us unfed.

As it was apparent that if we continued our present rate of travel, we would be in Mexico City a day before our apartment was to be ready, we decided to make an additional stop at Queretaro (which took care of the savings we had realized by driving through the night at the beginning). This was a relatively short hop from Matehuala making it possible to visit San Luis Potosi, the largest city since Monterrey. This was on a Sunday, and the city had a festive air. We found a place to park near the cathedral and waited to be besieged by small boys offering to guard the car as we had been told we would. Not only did we not have hordes of boys descend upon us, we could not find one to watch the car. Feeling some security in the number of people out promenading, we left the car untended to explore the town on foot. By sheer chance we stumbled onto the market, our first experience of this sort, and wove single-file through the stalls with the baby on my back, snug in the backpack, attracting some attention but mostly receiving what we took to be friendly smiles. The children were strung out behind me in no particular order, and 'Liv brought up the rear, periodically counting the heads in front of her to make sure we were all there.

We had decided beforehand that unless we found some priceless treasure at a real bargain, we would not buy things on the trip down to Mexico City; this was particularly trying on the

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children who had been given small sums of money to spend for themselves, but we were happy to note that they resisted the temptation to grab the many things that attracted them. We took note of different foods and other exotic merchandise and made mental notes of prices on things we thought we might want eventually and returned to find our car and vulnerable top carrier still intact. I should hasten to add that later, under other circumstances, we did hire car watchers. We then drove leisurely to Queretaro where we spent the night. Finding that the service in the dining room would be more of the same leisurely sort we had encountered earlier only compounded in this case by a lack of kitchen help, we demurred and broke out the rations we had been saving and had an adequate snack of crackers and tuna, peanut butter, and cheese. At least everyone had food BEFORE falling asleep.

With Mexico City only three hours away, we spent the morning exploring the city and did not depart until afternoon. By early evening, we were in what was to be our home for the next few weeks. Before the car was fully unloaded, Livvie prepared a chlorine solution, wiped the furniture, mopped the floor and wiped the walls as high as the baby could reach so that things would be reasonably antiseptic for Ross; the apartment had been cleaned by the management and was immaculate, but we felt that with the baby crawling, it would be better to take this additional precaution.

In general, although we did not follow the routine slavishly, we alternated days exploring Mexico City with trips away from the city, returning each night to the apartment. While traveling on tollways or roads in the neighborhood of Mexico City, driving after dark did not dismay us, and we usually took full advantage of

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daylight. Although it rained almost every evening, we did not let it deter us. My wife had made squares of heavy plastic into ponchos, reinforcing the slit for the head; these were portable and added little bulk.

We usually packed a lunch on our trips out and found that picnicking atop an ancient pyramid gave food a zest such as no seasoning could. While taking our own food was done for economy as well, we found that it was much simpler for the children and enabled us to see as much as we could with a minimum of interruption while offering the opportunity to relax as much as we needed to. Indeed, had we been dependent upon restaurant service, our movements would have been severely restricted. One noon found us lunching miles from civilization in a lofty forest en route to Cortez' pass between the twin volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl.

While fresh fruits and vegetables offered no problem in the apartment where we could soak them in a chlorine solution, we found the fresh fruits at picturesque portable stands in the country tended by Indian women irresistible and learned that we could make them safe/^{for immediate consumption}by using cloth swabs soaked in rubbing alcohol to wipe our hands and wipe the fruit and then rinsing with purified water.

We also learned not to scorn the guide-books. Being generally opposed to packaged culture and tours and the like, we had the same snobbish attitude toward guidebooks. But we found the good ones to be effective time-savers in pointing out areas of interest as well as dispensers of some historical background. We also found some to have other useful information as to which pasteurized milks were really pasteurized to our standards, which ice creams were safe, which restaurants served which kind of foods at what prices and so on.

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One excursion that the boys and I undertook could have been made only in a foreign country. I wanted to make an appointment with the Cultural Attache at the United States Embassy, and my wife thought it a good opportunity for the boys to realize that even in Mexico, there was a bit of the United States where the flag flew and that services to its citizens were available; they were duly impressed as I was by the caliber of the professional staff.

If the children had a heavy dose of culture and history and archeology, they were able to enjoy it for at least two reasons: (1) We talked with them about places we were planning to visit the next day, discussing historical and anthropological and archeological aspects if pertinent and then exchanged impressions later; this was beneficial for parents as well for in reviewing the day, we became aware of different points of view, giving us extra sets of eyes as it were. (2) We tried to anticipate and stave off the boredom that comes with excessive saturation by trips to the parks or zoos (where they were amused to see Siamese cats in cages). For that matter, almost every archeological site had built-in adventure for them with ancient pottery shards to be picked up, room to run, the fancied presence of Aztec or Toltec ghosts from pre-conquest days.

While we would have enjoyed sampling more native life than we were able to on the few occasions that we got out without the children, the young were so obviously enjoying the adventure that we never felt deprived.

By the time we returned via the Pan-American highway to Victoria and thence to Brownsville, we were all seasoned travelers. Although we had only scratched the surface of Mexico, we felt greatly enriched and capable of being much more adventurous another time. We

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had maintained our health thanks in part to precautions we had taken as a result of warnings from friends but thanks also to a large amount of good fortune.

If we needed proof that the experience of travel was good for the children, we had only to listen to their conversations among themselves recalling various incidents or recalling some of the geography and topography, or watch their play built around a visit to an archeological or historical site or to one of the outdoor markets or to some of the shops.

But the clinching evidence was that when we got home, before we were fully unpacked, the three older children were at the road maps, the atlases, and encyclopedia planning a trip to Canada.

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