IN FOCUS CANADA

VIVE LE ROADTRIP

Jane Anderson and family go on a campervan adventure and explore the natural wonders and fine cities of Quebec province.

At once wild and civilised, Quebec province is the perfect summer playground for a family to explore with a campervan. Forget Africa for a safari. Here, the Big Five are whales, black bear, moose, caribou and polar bear.

There are 27 incredible national parks and the mighty St Lawrence River to marvel at, not to mention the two beguiling and family-friendly metropolises of Montreal and Quebec City. Add in the exotica of this being a French-speaking province where your kids can try out their school French, and you’re on to a winner.

Here’s what my family and I got up to last summer.
DAY 1
MONTREAL
After a surprisingly quick hop across the Atlantic of less than seven hours, the children are now under the misconception that the whole of North America is French speaking. We’ve checked into the Delta Montréal, a smart new city hotel with an indoor saltwater pool that’s just a stroll to the Quartier des Spectacles where the Festival Mode & Design is taking place. This is also the venue for Montreal’s famous Jazz Festival and Just For Laughs Festival in July.

DAY 2-3
QUEBEC CITY AND ÎLE D’ORLÉANS
We’re up early next morning for a cab ride out to the suburbs to pick up our Cruise Canada (cruisecanada.com) home on wheels. We’ve opted for the 138-long model, which comes with a picture of a labrador on the side door – like taking a virtual pet along with us for the ride. The kids love the bed over the driver’s seat and bag it for themselves. There’s another double bed at the back for their dad and me. There’s nothing cute or arty about the interior, but it’s relatively roomy and well equipped with a shower, toilet, mini kitchen and table for the kids to sit at while we drive.

(Go to familytraveller.com/quebec to watch our video tour of the campervan.)

Once we’re out of the city sprawl, we follow the mighty St Lawrence River 157 miles through the Maurice region, destined for Quebec City, whose Amerindian name means ‘where the river narrows’. Children would be forgiven for mistaking this place for a fairytale kingdom. Built on a steep hillside by the water, its skyline is dominated by the impressive turrets of Château Frontenac, now a five-star resort. The old fortified city is a treasure trove of cute streets, such as Rue Saint-Jean Baptiste set at the foot of a funicular railway with shops selling carved wooden socks and Charlevoix Pure Laine woolly creatures. We spend the night in the salty seaside town of Saint-Siméon. Its municipal campground has great views over the water.

DAY 4
BAIE-SAINT-PAUL AND THE CHARLEVOIX REGION
After a picnic breakfast by the water, we set off bright and early for Baie-Saint-Paul, the birthplace of Cirque du Soleil. This arty town in the foodie Charlevoix region has the children in raptures with its cute boutiques and artists’ studios. We join Route 362 for one of Canada’s most scenic drives, along the St Lawrence River.

A highlight is a stop at the Musée Maritime de Charlevoix, where the kids board an old schooner and a tugboat and unconsciously absorb the local maritime history. It’s here we learn that the Charlevoix region owes its undulating terrain to a mile-wide meteorite, which crashed here 350 million years ago. Further down the road is a charming alpaca farm where we get to meet the woody creatures. We spend the night in the salty seaside town of Saint-Siméon. Its municipal campground has great views over the water.

DAY 5-6
BAIE-SAINT-Catherine AND FERME 5 ÉTOILES
Day five begins with a whale watching cruise from Baie-Sainte-Catherine where the St Lawrence meets the 62-mile-long Saguenay Fjord, the southernmost fjord on the planet and the only one in North America that is navigable. Whale watching takes place from May to early October when endangered species such as the Atlantic right, beluga and Atlantic cod feast on the buffet of krill, shrimp and capelin.

From our solid Croisières Dufour vessel, the kids have their binoculars at the ready as we spy grey seals, shrimp and capelin. This animal rescue farm-cum-outdoor pursuits centre is our home for the next two nights. The kids come face to face with Stanley, a beautiful baby red deer; Cobalt, an ageing cougar; Zelda, a young Canadian lynx; Tempest, a husky pup (and 90 of his older cousins); and two impressive Arctic wolves that we’re allowed to pet under the watchful eye of Dereck, their keeper, whom they respect as leader of the pack.

The kids’ trousers were gently chewed, but it’s a thrilling experience that we won’t ever forget.
DAY 7-8
PARC NATIONAL DU FJORD-DU-SAGUENAY
Today we’re en route to Parc Aventures Cap Jaseux and, although my kids are not big walkers, there’s no whining when we reach Baie-Sainte-Marie for a panoramic walk over vast wobbly bridges and scenic trails to Haite du Beluga, a spectacular lookout spot across the fjord. Then it’s back in the campervan for the cute village of Sainte-Rose-du-Nord where we devours a lunch of smoked salmon salad and croque monsieur followed by blueberry pie at the al fresco Rose Café.
A little further west, we reach Parc Aventures Cap Jaseux. This beautiful fjord-side adventure park was one of the first places in Quebec to build a via ferrata (steel climbing ropes along a cliff). We park the van and decamp to one of two new camping pods suspended in the trees. Ours is a space-age silver sphere that makes us feel like futuristic birds nesting in the branches. As the sun sets, we head out on the inky-black fjord with our instructor Sylvain in sleek sea kayaks before the weather closes in. Afterwards, the kids, soaked and weary yet elated, snuggle up around a wood-burning stove in Sylvain’s log cabin, although the walk back to our pod in the dark forest slightly freaks them out.

DAY 9-10
PARC NATIONAL DE LA JACQUES-CARTIER
A huge highlight of our Quebec tour is the Parc National de la Jacques-Cartier, an impressive wilderness just 24 miles from Quebec City, named after the Frenchman who discovered Canada in 1534. It’s here that we try our white-water rafting for the first time. Our fabulous guide Tommy brings the whole experience alive with details about the high spruces and yellow birches, and the massive boulders that date back to glacial times. We’re all set in our wetsuits to experience alive with details about the high spruces and yellow birches, and the massive boulders that date back to glacial times. Our fabulous guide Tommy brings the whole experience alive with details about the high spruces and yellow birches, and the massive boulders that date back to glacial times.

Back at our campervan that night, we feel we’re becoming assured campers. We’re all hooked up to water and electricity, the camp fire is lit and we’re snuggled round it in our sleeping bags listening to another camper playing his ukulele.

DAY 11
PARC DE LA RIVIÈRE BATISCAN
We have one last park to explore. We’re out of the mountain country and back to the clapboard houses and farms of the Maurice region once more. We’ve come to the Parc de la Rivière Batiscan for our final night in the campervan and more specifically to try out the via ferrata at night. You have to be 48 in tall to do this activity. My son’s a fraction too small, so the boys stay in camp while my daughter and I head out to meet Philippe, our guide. I’m apprehensive. It’s dark and we are planning to walk along steel ropes high above a rushing river, secured only by clips that we loop over one another. My fearless daughter is untruffled, even when we climb over a noisy waterfall. The stars are out in force overhead and it’s a priceless moment we won’t forget. There’s one last highlight – a zipline over the river in the dark. Even though we can’t see Philippe, who’s whooshed across first, we courageously launch ourselves off the platform, whooping in delight.

DAY 12
MONTREAL AND AU BEVOIR
After dropping off the campervan and heading back to the Delta Montréal, we have a little time to explore the city and its family attractions, such as the Montreal Science Centre, the Planetarium, Botanical Garden, Lachine Rapids Jet Boating or the new Exalto Urban Acrobatic Park. We take a gentler approach after all our adventures with a trip to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Then it’s on to Mount Royal Park for a stroll by the beautiful Beaver Lake and panoramic views over the city. After a chocolate-infused meal at the new Juliette & Chocolat, it’s time to pack up and head home.