



Everywhere they went in America, says Birgit Sfat, her family made new and incredible memories—memories that have helped the family to heal and given them stories they will tell for the rest of their lives.

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For the Sfats, the transition into their new life was relatively smooth. “It was amazing how helpful most people were,” Birgit says. “We loved the tolerance, open-mindedness, and creativity of the San Franciscans we met; also their engagement in political and environmental issues. There was so much willingness to try new things.”

Fast-forward to the spring of 2019 and, as the family’s time in America was nearing an end, they decided to make the most of their last months in the U. S. by traveling to as many of the country’s natural wonders as possible. They worked together to renovate a 1984 Toyota Sunrader camper van—nicknamed “Sunny”—and set out on a round trip jaunt from San Francisco to Marfa, Texas. Along the way, the family visited five stunning national parks: Death Valley in Nevada, Monument Valley in Utah, White Sands in New Mexico, and Antelope Canyon and Grand Canyon in Arizona. Looking back on that first road trip, Birgit is still in awe of the variety of landscapes they encountered. “It is simply amazing how huge and wild America is,” she recalls. “On that first evening, driving through the Sierra Nevada, we were worried because we didn’t have snow chains on the van. After spending a really cold night somewhere near Mono Lake, just a few hours later we were walking the sand dunes of Death Valley and nearly sweating to death.”

In each of the national parks they visited, the family came into contact with the sublime magic of nature, most unforgettably in White Sands: “We were walking among the dunes, and then the sun started to set,” Birgit says. “All of a sudden, it felt like we were alone on a white planet that was glowing in orange light; it was totally magnificent, one of the most beautiful moments our family has ever experienced together.”

In June 2019, the Sfats said goodbye to San Francisco, the city where they had come to seek healing six years before, and loaded up “Sunny” for one last, epic road trip. This time, the family journeyed east through the vast American heartland en route to Chicago, where they caught a plane back to Europe. On the way, they spent a few days in Yellowstone, established in 1872 as the world’s first national park. Armed with bear spray, the family explored its iconic geysers, towering waterfalls, and fields of wildflowers. “We felt so adventurous,” Birgit recalls. “Several times, we had to stop the van and let these massive bison cross the road in front of us; and we were told to always be on the lookout for wolves, bears, and moose. The nature and wildlife was unbelievable in all the national parks we visited but Yellowstone was really special, right there at the end of our long American adventure.”

Today, the family has resettled in Portugal—although 11-year-old Milla still proudly describes herself as a “California girl.” Looking back on their time in America, Birgit believes much of the family’s positive experience was thanks to the ways their daughter helped them to open up in a new culture. “Milla is such a great traveler,” says Birgit, “and because she is much more open than her ‘very German parents,’ she was always our door-opener. The best things that happened to us were because of Milla: She

was the one who got us invited to join a family barbecue in a small town we visited, or who was invited to make music with the street musicians. Cowboys let her ride their horses, and the oyster farmers we met were more than happy to show her how to dig for clams.”

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## Explore More

### THE CITY BY THE BAY

There is much for families to love about San Francisco: the climate, the giant trees, the charming cable cars, the sea, the smells, and the sights. But bring your walking shoes, the hills can be brutal.

### GO ON TOUR

Although guided tours might not normally be your thing, San Francisco is a big, hilly city. So, a guided tour of one kind or another will ultimately help your family see and do more.

### EXPERIENCE MUIR WOODS

Just north of SF is the magical Muir Woods, a protected woodland home to 97 hectares (240 acres) of old-growth redwood trees, most of which are 500 to 800 years old (the oldest is more than 1,200 years old).

### THE KIDS ARE GONNA LOVE IT

The California Academy of Sciences, the Aquarium of the Bay, the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park, Pier 39, and the Walt Disney Family Museum are just a few of the fun, family-friendly things to do.

### AN ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCE

Riding a cable car up and down the hills of San Francisco is one touristy experience that is, in fact, well worth the hype. A ride on the Powell-Hyde line is equal parts charming, fascinating, and practical.

