

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

A ping-pong accident was the catalyst that drove an 'absent' father to reassess his corporate career and his dreams for family life

WORDS // MIKE BRUCE

Humorist Dave Barry has advice for parents considering long-haul flights with infants. Collect the toys, books or games you'll need to keep your child occupied, then remain home, occupying the child until they are at least 16, he counsels.

John Ahern, 49, and Mandy Johnson, 46, not only ignored that advice, but did so at the extreme end of the spectrum. After an explosion of impetuosity in 2005, Ahern tossed in a platinum executive career, bought a campervan sight unseen (under dubious ownership arrangements) from Holland, flew to Europe and spent a year touring 30 countries across the continent and North Africa jammed in said campervan with his two cyclonic toddlers, Jaimie, 4, and Callum, 2.

It may sound like a level of hell, but it is, he says, one of the best things he has ever done. So much so that he has immortalised it in a memoir, *On The Road ... With Kids*.

But this is no travelogue or A-to-Z for budding campers. This is a morality tale, a manual for life, an affirmation of involved parenting. The campervan is not merely a vehicle, but a metaphor for unrequited dreams, for seizing the day. That one year spent as a family in "a box smaller than our bedroom" transformed four lives forever.

The transformation had two beginnings. The first was Christmas Day 2004 when, during a gladiatorial game of ping-pong, Ahern popped two vertebrae. As he lay prone for weeks, an existential debate began in his mind – the sense of the corporate grind of long days and late-night phone calls, the nonsense of consumerism and some of his life's unfinished business.

"It (the back) had me lying in bed for six weeks

in a period of enforced reflection ... you lie there feeling like you're paralysed from the waist down," Ahern says. "You start to think about everything you've missed out on doing and being caught up in the whole working world of kids and cars and houses and stuff."

That was a powder keg, and the spark that lit it was an erratic corporate meltdown months later.

At the time, Ahern was living in Hamilton in Brisbane's inner north and working as the global head of mergers and acquisitions with a large travel company where he'd been happily for 15 years, but where an increasingly toxic corporate culture was developing. Johnson, who'd previously worked for the same firm, was writing for a living.

At a meeting of notionally important people in May 2005, Ahern sat half-listening to the corporate one-upmanship happening around him and, when asked if he had anything to add, said apathetically, and impertinently: "nah".

The usually level-headed and careful property-valuer had hit a wall. He was over "playing the game". He knew his response was career suicide, and in the cone of reflection on the taxi ride home began to swing between elation and fear – and would do so for some time.

But he realised too that the watershed was also the perfect catalyst to realise a long-held dream.

"We'd lived in London, but never did the VW Kombi thing, and from the age of 23 always wanted to do it," he says. "I moved between thinking I'd made a huge mistake and about all those past dreams, asking myself 'do you chase them or not?'. Do you spend your life collecting TVs and cars, or do you chase your dreams now when you can, rather than saving and waiting until the end of your life, when you're either not around or not healthy enough to do it?"

Ahern was made redundant, but one day after the pair had wired €14,000 (\$A20,000) to a faceless campervan dealer in Holland, management called to offer him another job.

Friends, or "the dream stealers" as they became known, tried to talk the pair out of their campervan folly. But the decision was made.

"My first reaction was 'I've been saved with a lifeline back on to the corporate ship'," he recalls. "But I saw it more like a net back on to the trawler and I was the prawn."

In August 2005, they sold the car, rented out the house, stored their stuff, flew to Holland, picked up "Franki" the van and set off on a trip that would ply northern Europe, Scandinavia, the Baltic states, central Europe, the Mediterranean, Morocco, Turkey and eastern Europe.

Ahern reckons it took three months to fully adjust to life on the road, that point at which you enter the zone, when it's a lifestyle, and no longer a holiday.

Campervanning with toddlers, he says, was remarkably easy – minimal packing and unpacking, a toilet, bunks for naps and room for a box of toys. Apart from a laptop and a few DVDs, the kids' leisure time would rely on their creative elaboration in games, books and art.

Ahern says Jaimie and Callum (now 13 and 11) got the point of it all "somewhat".

"They were a bit young to really tap into it. Certainly, they had no real ambitions for the travel and sightseeing, but it was still a huge adventure and very exciting."

But their parents had unwittingly given them something far more profound. The enforced disconnection from the haste of Western life allowed them to revel in old-fashioned play, in reading and worlds sculpted by the imagination. It

Going mobile: John Ahern left a high-flying executive career and hit the road with partner Mandy Johnson and kids Jaimie and Callum (main) in a campervan, travelling across 30 countries before penning his adventures in a book. Main picture: Anthony Weate

allowed the children to be children. Or to simply be. The children became prolific readers, writers, artists, good students and developed great attention spans, Ahern says.

The impact on the parents was equally intense, but more so for Ahern who confesses the corporate grind had made him an "absent father" who'd been severed from hands-on parenting.

"This was real time (with them), attentive time, not the throw-the-dog-a-bone time," he says.

"Being the working father who'd rarely spent quality time with the kids, I hadn't developed much empathy with them at that point."

Ultimately, it was also the platform for a new way of living on their return, for a redesigned life of connection and freedom of choice, of shunning distraction and consumerist temptation. They no longer talked in terms of career and income, but how they wanted their life to look.

They believe the trip and resulting changes to their life conspired to make Jaimie and Callum more independent, more creative, more likely to play outdoors and respect any down time.

"I'm sure if we hadn't taken that trip, we and the kids wouldn't place such a high value on down time," Johnson says. "The legacy is that the year out changed our attitudes and habits, to now strive to live simply and value time together, just like we did on the road."

You couldn't say they dropped out of the rat race, they just slowed things down a little and chose to make family time something sacred.

They've now bought a half-share in a pop-top caravan, with a parents' retreat, bunks for the kids, no toilet and no TV. A lot like Franki really...

On The Road ... With Kids, by John Ahern, Pan Macmillan, \$30