

Road School

Learning through exploration and experience

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Contents

England 1

English Lessons 18

Stepping Out of the System 19

The Netherlands 21

Dutch Lessons 38

The Practicalities 39

Germany 45

German Lessons 74

Cultural Literacy 75

Italy 79

Italian Lessons 123

An Education 125

Portugal 129

Portuguese Lessons 141

Travelling with Children 142

France 145

French Lessons 151

Pussycat Parenting 152

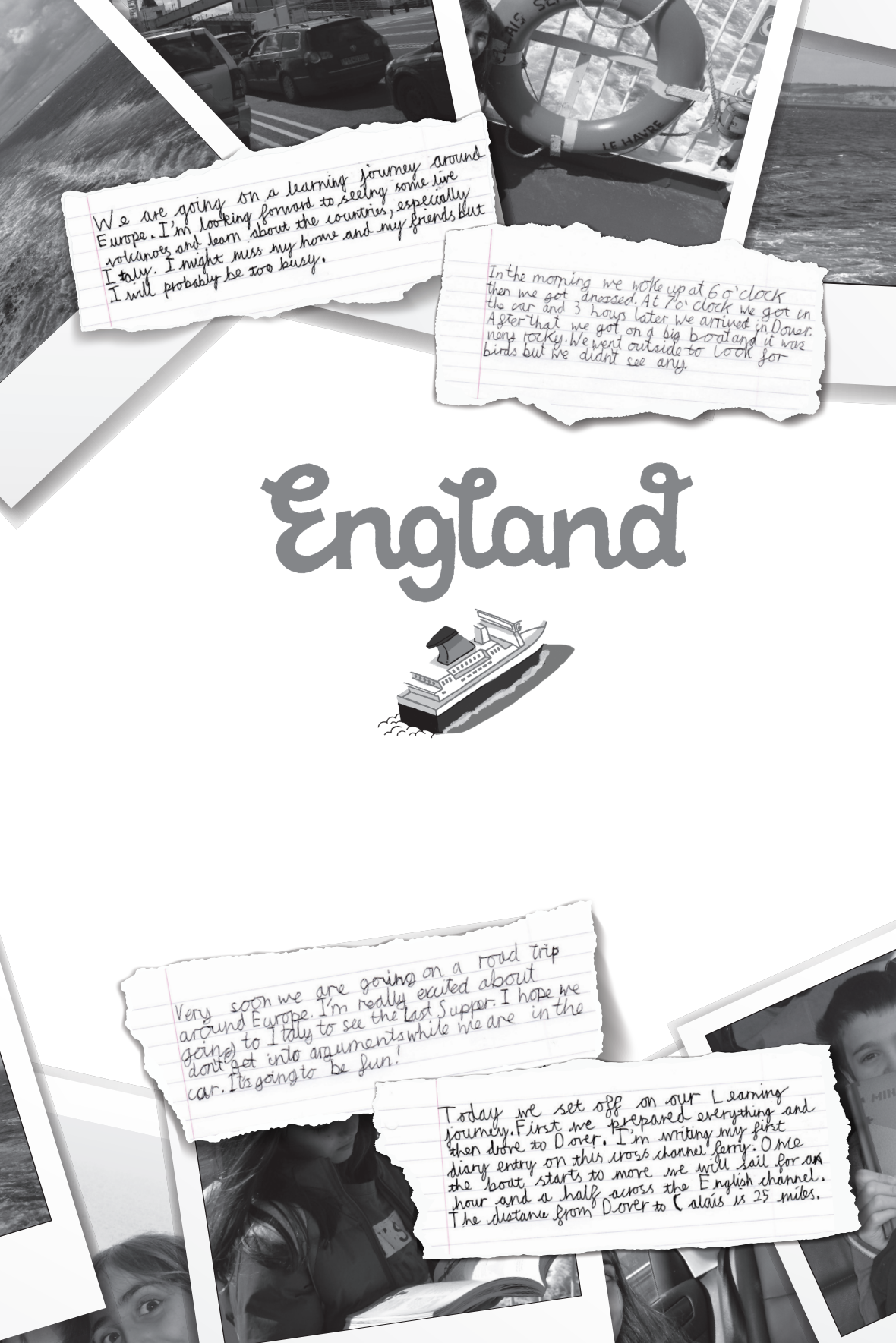
China 155

Chinese Lessons 208

A Road School Curriculum 209

Epilogue 219





We are going on a learning journey around Europe. I'm looking forward to seeing some live volcanoes and learn about the countries, especially Italy. I might miss my home and my friends but I will probably be too busy.

In the morning we woke up at 6 o'clock then we got dressed. At 7 o'clock we got in the car and 3 hours later we arrived in Dover. After that we got on a big boat and it was very rocky. We went outside to look for birds but we didn't see any.

England



Very soon we are going on a road trip around Europe. I'm really excited about going to Italy to see the Last Supper. I hope we don't get into arguments while we are in the car. It's going to be fun!

Today we set off on our Learning journey. First we prepared everything and then drove to Dover. I'm writing my first diary entry on this cross channel ferry. Once the boat starts to move we will sail for an hour and a half across the English channel. The distance from Dover to Calais is 25 miles.



Ready to Go

‘I want to go travelling,’ I said, sliding a copy of *The Rough Guide to Europe* across the dining room table to where my partner Frank was sitting. Frank caught the book and looked up from his laptop. He had a spreadsheet open and he was tapping numbers into it. The spreadsheet had the title: ‘Household Expenses’. Radio 5 Live was playing in the background.

‘Huh?’ Frank said, shaking his head. ‘Like a holiday, d’you mean?’

‘No, not a holiday,’ I said. ‘Proper travelling. Where you leave home and you don’t come back for months on end. That kind of travelling.’

‘And how would we pay for this?’ Frank entered some more numbers into his spreadsheet. Frank’s an accountant. He likes to know how much everything will cost. (It’s a good thing somebody in our family does.)

‘It’s the ideal time to do it,’ I said, leaning over to turn down the volume on the radio. I wanted to explain my reasoning as fast as possible. If QPR scored a goal in the match I was dead in the water. I had my speech all prepared.

‘The kids are at the perfect age,’ I said. (Our son Alfie had just turned 11; our daughter Edith was 8.) ‘Alfie gets to avoid the whole Year 6 “endless months of preparing for SATs” thing. And Edith is a bright spark – she’ll love the adventure. Plus, once they start secondary school we’ll be stuck in England for the next eight years at least. And, as an added bonus, we get to spend lots of time with our children.’

‘I don’t want to spend lots of time with my children,’ Frank said.

When I was a child my parents had a VW camper van, and one summer we went on tour in it. Thinking back, this happened shortly before they got divorced, so maybe there was a correlation between the two events. On our trip we toured around France, Switzerland and Italy. Quite how my parents managed to do this without the

Internet, the euro, TripAdvisor or the EU, I have no idea, but my memories from that holiday are still vivid, forty years later. This was the kind of adventure I wanted to recreate for our kids: strange new places, dusty tracks, exotic smells, the magic of exploration and the open road.

Frank typed a few more numbers into his spreadsheet, sighed deeply, then looked up and finally met my eyes.

‘Is this even legal? Aren’t they meant to be in school all the time or we get put in jail?’

‘Home schooling isn’t illegal, Frank. Not yet, anyway. We can teach them on the road,’ I said. ‘Or, rather, the road can teach them.’

‘You mean *you* can teach them.’ Frank scratched his goatee. ‘You didn’t answer my question about who pays for it. Travelling costs money. We can’t work if we’re travelling.’

‘It wouldn’t have to be expensive,’ I shuffled in a bit closer to him and draped my arm across his back. ‘We could both take a bit of time out. I was thinking we could hire a camper van. It would be romantic. And I could write a book about it. That way it would be tax deductible.’ (Frank finds it very seductive when I talk about things being tax deductible.)

‘I’m six foot five,’ Frank said. ‘I don’t do camper vans. Can you imagine trying to drive a motor home into the centre of Rome?’ He paused for a moment. ‘No camper vans. And I want to fit in a visit to China. I’ve always fancied going to China.’

‘Is that a yes?’ I could hardly believe it.

Frank sighed again. It was the deep, long, heavy sound he makes when he is resigning himself to one of my crazy ideas.

‘It’s a yes,’ he said, turning up the radio again to show that we were done. ‘I guess that us going travelling is better than you having an affair, buying a fast car or learning to ride a motorbike. I think I’d better start a new spreadsheet. I’ll call it “Midlife Crisis”.’



Everybody Wants to Rule the World

‘If we’re going to do this, I want to go to India, China and Japan,’ Frank said. ‘Oh, and South America.’

‘You’re ambitious.’ We were arguing about the route for about the millionth time. ‘I was thinking more a road trip around Europe, finishing up in Paris. Then maybe a week in South America.’

‘I’m *definitely* not going to Paris,’ Frank shook his head as though he had a bug in his ear. ‘I’ve been there too many times already. Don’t you remember when we were in our twenties and Tom lived there? We used to visit him all the time.’

‘My main memory of those days is of getting drunk and staying up until dawn, Frank,’ I sipped my tea. ‘That wasn’t exactly the kind of visit to Paris I had in mind.’

Frank made a harrumph sound. ‘I did the Interrail thing around Europe when I was a teenager. I’ve got some great stories about that. Mind you, it’s probably best if you don’t put those in your book. I’d like to go back to Germany, though. See the places where I spent time as a child.’

‘Well, if we’re going to India, China, Japan and South America, I’d really like to go to Malaysia or Indonesia,’ I said.

‘Japan sounds good. How about Brazil?’

‘Yes, North America too. And Hawaii. I’ve always wanted to visit Hawaii.’



A week later we had argued about the route another million times. I had communed with Google and I had the ammunition I needed.

‘Okay,’ I said to Frank. ‘I’ve got some figures for round-the-world flights taking in Malaysia, China, Japan, Hawaii and Brazil.’

‘And?’

‘And it comes to £3,832.27.’

Frank smiled. ‘That sounds doable.’ He began to tap some numbers into a spreadsheet.

‘Each.’

‘Ah.’ His fingers stopped tapping. ‘A road trip around Europe it is, then.’

‘We should do one other destination. We’ve already been to India, Hawaii is too far and too expensive, and South America is full of poisonous bugs.’

‘Like I said before, I’ve always fancied going to China.’

And that was that. Finally. Decision made. Destinations chosen. Now all we had to do was make it happen.



Bright Side of the Road

The kids were in the living room, collapsed on the sofa, watching TV after a long day at school. They were trying to munch their way through a packet of chocolate chip cookies before we noticed. We were pretending not to notice the disappearing chocolate chip cookie trick, because we had something much more important to talk about. I cleared my throat and made the announcement.

‘We’re taking you out of school.’

‘Yay, cool,’ Edith glanced up at me for a moment and then returned her gaze to the TV.

Frank came to stand beside me in a show of fatherly solidarity. ‘We’re going to go travelling around Europe, and then after that we’ll fly to China. We’ll be on the road for six months. Isn’t that exciting?’ he said.

‘Yeah, great,’ Alfie said. His eyes were still on the TV.

‘We’re going to learn through exploration and experience,’ I said. ‘No timetable. No SATs. No uniform. No teachers. No limits. We’re going to educate you ... on the road.’ I’ll admit that my voice broke with emotion a bit at that point. I thought I was doing a good job of selling the dream.

‘Sure, whatever,’ Alfie said. He shrugged.

‘You’re a teacher, mummy, so there will be teachers,’ Edith pointed out.

‘She doesn’t count,’ Alfie said.

‘Yes she does.’

‘No she doesn’t.’

‘Yes she does.’

‘No she doesn’t.’

‘Thanks kids.’ Their level of enthusiasm wasn’t exactly inspiring.

‘Aren’t you excited?’ Frank wanted to know.

‘Yes! We’re really excited!’ the kids shouted.

‘Now can you be quiet?’ Alfie said, exasperation in his voice. ‘We’re trying to watch *South Park*.’



Breaking the Law

The pages of my little black Road School notebook were filling up fast with lists of places to visit, museums and art galleries to see, hotels to book, things to pack. And rules. There had to be rules. You can take the teacher out of the classroom, but you can’t take the classroom out of the teacher.

‘We’re going to need some rules for Road School,’ I said as I scribbled another note in my notebook.

‘What is it with teachers and rules?’ Frank was typing some numbers into yet another spreadsheet. I looked over his shoulder. The title of the spreadsheet was ‘Petrol Prices: Europe’.

‘What is it with accountants and spreadsheets?’ I stuck my tongue out at him.

‘Why do we need rules? We’re not exactly the rules oriented kind of people.’

‘Rules are important. Rules help to create the right environment for learning. It’s not just a free-for-all. These kids are going to need rules.’

‘If you want rules, you go ahead and make some up,’ Frank said. ‘Just don’t expect me to follow them.’

‘Or us,’ the kids piped up from the sofa.

‘How about if I make up some rules that we will all like?’

‘Doesn’t that kind of defeat the object?’ Frank asked.

‘No one likes rules, mum,’ Alfie said. ‘That’s why schools have them.’

‘I think you’ll like these rules,’ I said. ‘Why don’t you just listen and see what you think? Turn off the TV for a minute.’ I grabbed the remote and paused *South Park*. ‘You really shouldn’t watch this stuff anyway.’

‘Aww mum!’ Alfie said.

‘That’s our favourite episode of *South Park*,’ said his little sister. ‘It’s the one where they go to an aqua park and end up swimming through a tsunami of urine.’

‘Just give me five minutes.’ I held up my notebook and tried to read my scrawled handwriting. ‘Here you go. The First Rule of Road School is that we are on the move – the only constant is change.’

‘Very poetic,’ Frank said. ‘What does it even mean?’

‘That’s not really a rule, mum,’ Alfie said. ‘It’s more a statement of fact. Obviously we’re going to be on the move, because otherwise it wouldn’t be called Road School. It’d be called Staying At Home School.’

‘I like the first rule, mummy,’ Edith said, smiling at me. ‘Especially the changing constantly bit. That’s great.’ I think she was just trying to make me feel better.

‘Can I continue?’ I said. They all nodded and Frank made a ‘get on with it’ signal with his hand. ‘The Second Rule of Road School is that we hunt for interesting things – we are looking for learning.’

‘I’m interested in learning about guns and volcanoes,’ Alfie said.

‘I’m interested in learning about Leonardo da Vinci,’ Edith said.

‘I’m interested in lunch,’ Frank said.

‘Noted. Can I continue?’ I’m not going to lie and tell you they looked particularly enthusiastic about my rules, but I was on a roll

now and I was damn well going to get through them.

'The Third Rule of Road School is that you have to write a page in your diary every day. I got you these,' I said, holding up two hard-back A4 lined books.

'I don't like rule number three,' Edith said.

'Me neither,' Alfie agreed.

'Tough,' I said.

'Why do you have to ruin our trip with writing?' the kids whined.

'Because it'll keep the authorities off my back,' I said, 'Plus you'll thank me when you're older and you have it as a memento. You can stick tickets, maps, postcards and all sorts of things in your diaries as well. It'll be a brilliant record of what we did.'

'I don't have to keep a diary, do I?' Frank said.

'No you don't, Frank, because you're old already.'

Frank gave me a look. 'So are you,' he said. Then he muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like 'bloody midlife crisis'.

'Is that the last of the rules, mum?' Edith said, stifling a yawn and looking longingly towards the TV, where Kyle was paused in mid-stroke as he swam through a giant pool of pee to hit the emergency release valve.

'Last one,' I said. 'The Fourth Rule of Road School is that some rules were made to be kept, but some rules were made to be broken. We just need to figure out which rules to follow and which ones to break.' I was pleased with this rule. Road School meant no uniform, no timetable, no government tests, no detentions, no homework. We were breaking the rules, right, left and centre.

'Now this rule I like,' Frank said. 'This is a rule I can live with.' Frank likes to think of himself as a bit of a rebel, although I'm not convinced that a desire for rebellion and a love of spreadsheets are natural partners.

'Hey, dad!' Alfie said. 'I've got a great idea!'

'What's that?'

'I'm going to apply rule number four to rule number three. That way I don't have to do any writing.'

'Great plan,' Frank said.

'Good idea, Alfie! I'm going to do that too,' his sister joined in.

'Well, that's just perfect,' I said. I tore the page of rules out of my notebook, screwed it up into a ball and threw it in the bin. 'You *have* to write in the diaries. That rule is not up for negotiation.'

'Dictator,' Frank said.

‘Tyrant,’ Alfie said.

‘Meanie,’ Edith said.

‘Thanks for the compliments.’ I snapped my little black notebook shut and handed the remote control back to the kids. ‘But you can just call me mum.’



Heroes

The moment she learned that we were going to be travelling around Europe, Edith became obsessed with Leonardo da Vinci. She was interested in him before she found out about our trip. She had a library book from school about Leonardo that she read over and over again. Now she wanted to read every book ever written about him, visit everywhere he ever lived and see every painting, sculpture and model he ever made. It was pure, unadulterated child-like curiosity, fired up by an interest in *something*. Why does the education system stop us sustaining this feeling in kids? I was hoping that our road trip would help me to figure this out.

‘Leonardo was born in Vinci,’ Edith said. ‘So obviously we have to visit Vinci.’

‘I’ll put it on the list,’ I said, scribbling in my notebook.

‘We have to see the *Mona Lisa*,’ she added. ‘That goes without saying.’

‘I’ve already told your mum – I’m not bloody going to Paris,’ Frank said, looking up from his spreadsheet. ‘I’ve been there a million times already.’

‘We’ve got to take them to Paris, Frank,’ I said. ‘You can go for a long lunch while we go up the Eiffel Tower and visit the Louvre.’ Frank made a sound that was somewhere between a snort and a huff. I made another note in my notebook.

‘Anywhere else, Edith?’ I should really have kept my mouth shut at that point.

‘*The Last Supper*,’ Edith announced. ‘We definitely must see *The Last Supper*. It’s Leonardo’s greatest masterpiece, alongside the *Mona Lisa*. Where’s that one?’

‘I think it’s in Milan. I’ll check now.’ I opened my laptop and fired up Google.



Unless you’ve ever tried to visit *The Last Supper*, you’ll have no idea how difficult it is to visit *The Last Supper*. You might imagine that you could just roll up in Milan, pay your entrance fee and go in to see it. But you’d be wrong. Instead, you have to book a slot for your visit by calling a phone number in Italy. When you call the phone number in Italy it is permanently engaged. When you eventually get through and talk to the woman in the ticket office, you have to nominate a specific day and time to visit. But you can’t choose just any day or time. You must nominate one of only a few fifteen minute slots that are available, several months in the future.

During her reading, Edith was particularly entranced by the notion that, on some days, da Vinci would stare at his unfinished painting on the refectory wall for many hours, before adding a single brushstroke and going home for the day. Unfortunately, Leonardo decided to use an innovative new technique for his painting, and literally as soon as he had finished it, it began to deteriorate. Over the centuries various restoration methods have been used, and the latest restoration took twenty-two years. Yes, that’s *twenty-two years*. It’s no wonder they wanted to limit access to the thing. It took Leonardo several years to paint his masterpiece and, by the time I eventually made the reservations, it would feel like it had taken a similar amount of time to book to see it.



‘It looks like it’s quite tricky to get tickets,’ I said to Edith. ‘Do you really, really, really want to see *The Last Supper*?’

‘Yes. Definitely.’ She did a little flounce of her head to indicate that it was not up for debate.

Frustrated by a regime of statutory testing, and keen for a midlife adventure, Sue Cowley and her partner decided to step out of the system and set off on the educational trip of a lifetime with their children. This is the story of their family's escapades around Europe and across China, and what they learned along the way. Part comedy travelogue, part parenting guide, part treatise on educational philosophy, *Road School* asks you to consider what 'an education' really is and offers tips for anyone planning their own learning odyssey.

This book is an inspiration. I might not be off for six months, but I am certainly eyeing my suitcases with a glint in my eye and a bit more bravery.

Nancy Gedge, consultant teacher and author

A magnificent book, which will start an educational revolution.

Mike Fairclough, Head Teacher, West Rise Junior School and author

Road School suggests an alternative which is every bit as valid and powerful as conventional learning.

Dorothy Lepkowska-Hudson, freelance journalist and writer

An entertaining, accessible and practical guide to home education on the road.

Fiona Nicholson, home education consultant



Sue Cowley is a writer, presenter and teacher trainer, and the author of more than twenty-five books on education. After training as an early years teacher, Sue taught English and drama in secondary schools in the UK and overseas. She now spends her time writing educational books and articles and is an educational magazine columnist. Sue works internationally as a teacher trainer.

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