

P R E H I S T O R I C

A life-size einiosaurus model greets visitors to Choteau's Old Trail Museum. Opposite: The party sets out to find a T-Rex in their LX.

P L A Y D A T E

THE LEXUS LX TIME TRAVELS TO THE MONTANA OF A 4½-YEAR-OLD DINOSAUR LOVER'S IMAGINATION.

THE IDEA HAS BEEN DRUMMED INTO our heads since we were children: The keys to understanding the universe's mysteries are hidden somewhere in the unregarded vastness of the American frontier. At the end of a Kansas cornfield lies the gateway to Oz; a dirt mesa in New Mexico is the landing pad for spacecraft. There still are a few places left in this country where this is not a myth, where the land does hold millions of years of secrets, where, if you're determined enough and willing to get a little dirty, the key to a lost world can fit into your pocket. In the high summer, when the sun dries the thick mud of the badlands into chunks of earth perfect for excavating, the seemingly empty plains just east of the Rocky Mountain front in Montana becomes one of those places. In dusty towns like Jordan, Malta, Havre, and Choteau, gray-bearded paleontologists rub shoulders with T-Rex-obsessed moppets as they retrace the footsteps of creatures that

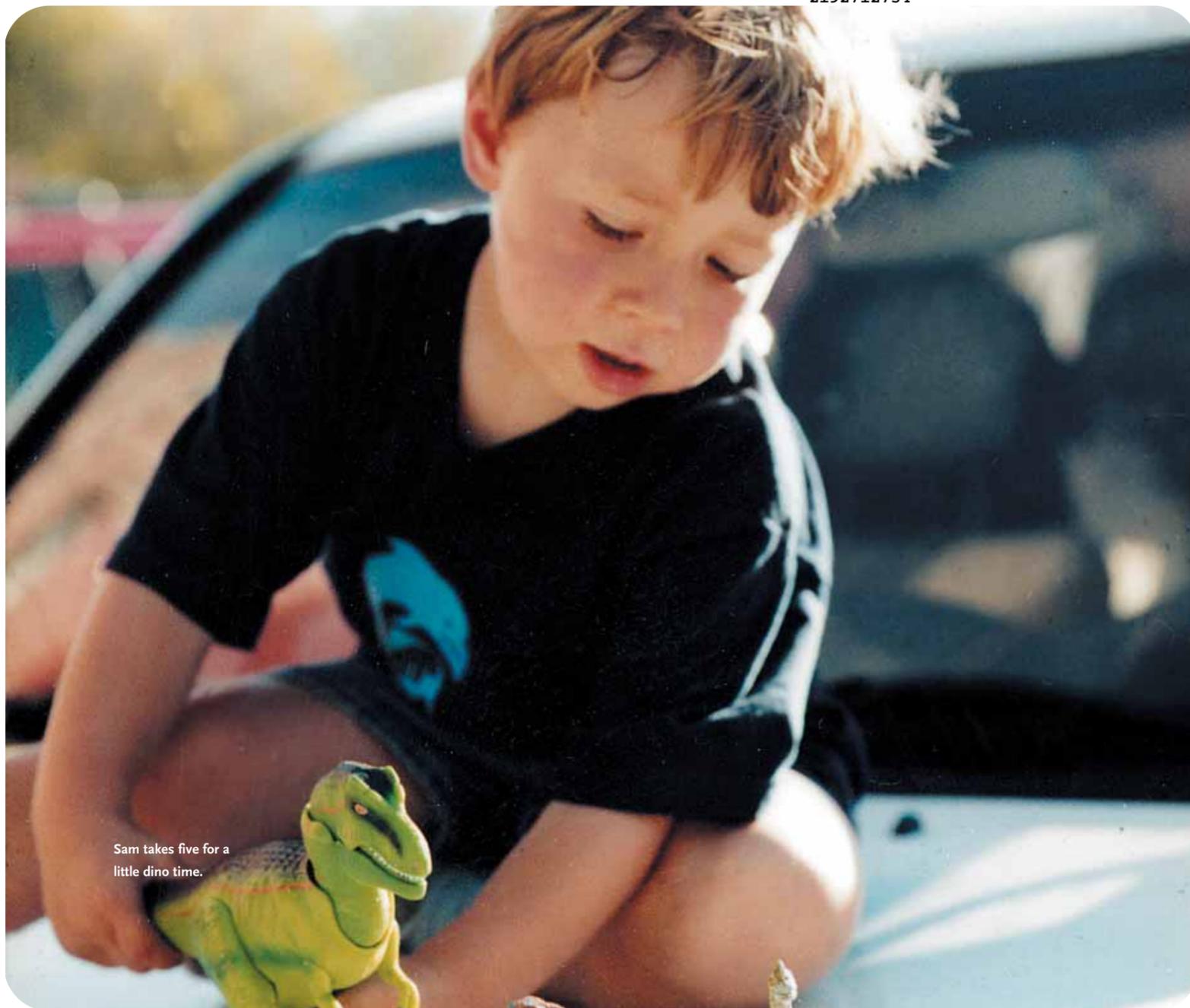
died 75 million years ago. Sam, my best friend Eric's son, has known about the state's legendary status in the dinosaur community all his life, and he's not yet 5. "Montana," he tells me during our flight to Billings, "is where the dinosaurs still live."

Well, not quite, but you can forgive Sam's confusion. After all, Montana was the first place that dinosaur remains were discovered in North America, and it's from nesting grounds uncovered here that we've learned nearly everything we know about dinosaurs' social behavior and physiology. The geologic makeup of Montana (and its northern cousin, Alberta, Canada) makes it perfect for time travel, which is exactly what Eric, Sam, and I plan to do during a five-day road trip through the badlands and the Rockies. In Montana, the Mesozoic rock is on the surface, and in its layers, just waiting to be plucked, are dinosaur bones perfectly preserved by sediments deposited millions of years ago by forgotten

waterways, including an interior sea that once ran from the Rockies to the Appalachians.

Of course, the surface of an ancient ocean can be rough going, so it's crucial to have a vehicle up to the task. We're driving an LX, and we need every bit of its full-time four-wheel-drive muscle. Just a mist of rain can turn a badland back road into a clumpy mud soup that the locals affectionately call gumbo. This car has brains, too: Dinosaur bones don't tend to be close to the interstate, and the LX's DVD navigation system somehow knows of the existence of roads that are little more than tractor ruts. If Lewis and Clark, whose trail we'll be intersecting, had had this thing, Sacagawea would have been out of a job. Then there's the optional rear-seat entertainment system and the Mark Levinson audio system. Sure, two college buddies can go on a road trip with a chatty 4½-year-old and not have a DVD player in the back and a world-class stereo up front, but I wouldn't especially recommend it.

BY OLIVER JONES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB HOWARD

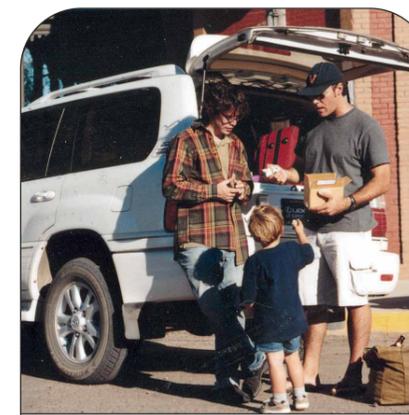


Sam takes five for a little dino time.

We start by heading northeast toward the two largest Mesozoic formations in Montana: Hell Creek and Judith River. The long stretches of badlands are haunting and stark, and the limitless sky and endlessly empty plains provide an ideal visual respite from the clutter of Los Angeles, where we're from. At least they do for Eric and me; Sam prefers his *Land Before Time* DVD, and peels his eyes from the screen only when antelope dart alongside us. It's not until we arrive in the town of Malta (pop. 2,340) and he spots a dirt-spattered dinosaur field station that the Montana of his imagination begins to reveal itself.

Inside the field station we meet Nate Murphy, the research director at the Judith River Dinosaur Institute, who introduces us to the two prides of Malta: Roberta and Leonardo. Both specimens are 77-million-year-old brachylophosaurs, perfectly intact to the point that we can see the results of a mouth infection on Roberta. (Apparently, good dental care was not a major concern of the Mesozoic age.) It's Leonardo, though, who's eye-popping: His skeleton is entirely covered with fossilized soft tissue, making him one of only three dinosaur mummies ever discovered. Sam runs his fingers along the corn-kernel-size scales on his rib cage. But Leonardo's real bounty is beneath the skin. His stomach contents are so well preserved that Murphy has been able to surmise the teenage duckbill's last meal: a mélange of ferns, conifers, and magnolias.

The chances of our finding a specimen like Leonardo are slim, but that's not going to



The author (left), Sam (center), and Eric bone up on their paleontology, with help from skeleton pieces purchased in Fort Benton.

slow Sam down. The field station has only whetted his appetite for an actual dig site, so the next day we drive the Highline—a string of towns in northern Montana less than 40 miles from Canada—to Havre, where we meet Vickie Clouse, a professor of earth sciences and biology at Montana State University–Northern. Vickie is typical of Montana's dinosaur enthusiasts: She grew up here and spent childhood fishing trips looking for fossils instead of trout. Her enthusiasm is as contagious as her knowledge is priceless. Vickie considers her life's work excavating a duckbilled Lambeosaur nesting ground that she discovered in 1991. We reach

the site—an unmarked quarry near the banks of the Judith River—after traversing some 20 miles of grassland roads.

The moment Sam hits the site he's like a hound on the scent of a jailbreak. "Children are the best fossil hunters," says Vickie as Sam sifts through bits of rock and Lambeosaur eggshells. "It's simple: Their eyes are closer to the ground." Less than 10 minutes after she speaks those words, Sam makes the discovery of the day: a fossilized 1.5-inch bone fragment. The curvature of the bone tells Vickie that it belonged to a carnivore—probably an *Albertosaurus*, an older relative of the T-Rex. Those two syllables cause Sam's eyes to glow like Christmas lights. "Daddy," he yells to Eric, "a T-Rex hunted here!"

On our way back to town, Vickie takes us to another valley of unexcavated Mesozoic rock, a stunning vista overlooked by an abandoned tepee circle. The rock circle—laid down some 150 years ago by Plains Indians—reminds us that dinosaurs are only one part of Montana's rich history, a fact driven home when we deviate from the Highline that afternoon and arrive in Fort Benton. Long before Montana was even a state, Fort Benton was a fur-trading post on the banks of the Missouri River. Since 1862, the Grand Union Hotel, where we spend the night and have a meal worthy of the most discriminating carnivore, has been the choice for bed and brew among river men, and as much a symbol of Montana's history as any fossil.

After three days of flatlands, our eyes and hearts thirst for the Rockies, so we head east

REAR-SEAT ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM



The Lexus LX comes equipped with an optional DVD **Rear-Seat Entertainment System**, which consists of a DVD player and 6.5-inch screen that drops down from the vehicle's roof, just behind the front seats. That makes it ideal for long road trips: Backseat passengers, especially young ones, get to enjoy movies or games—and use the two sets of headphones and remote control—while front-seat passengers get to enjoy far fewer are-we-there-yets.

MARK LEVINSON AUDIO SYSTEM



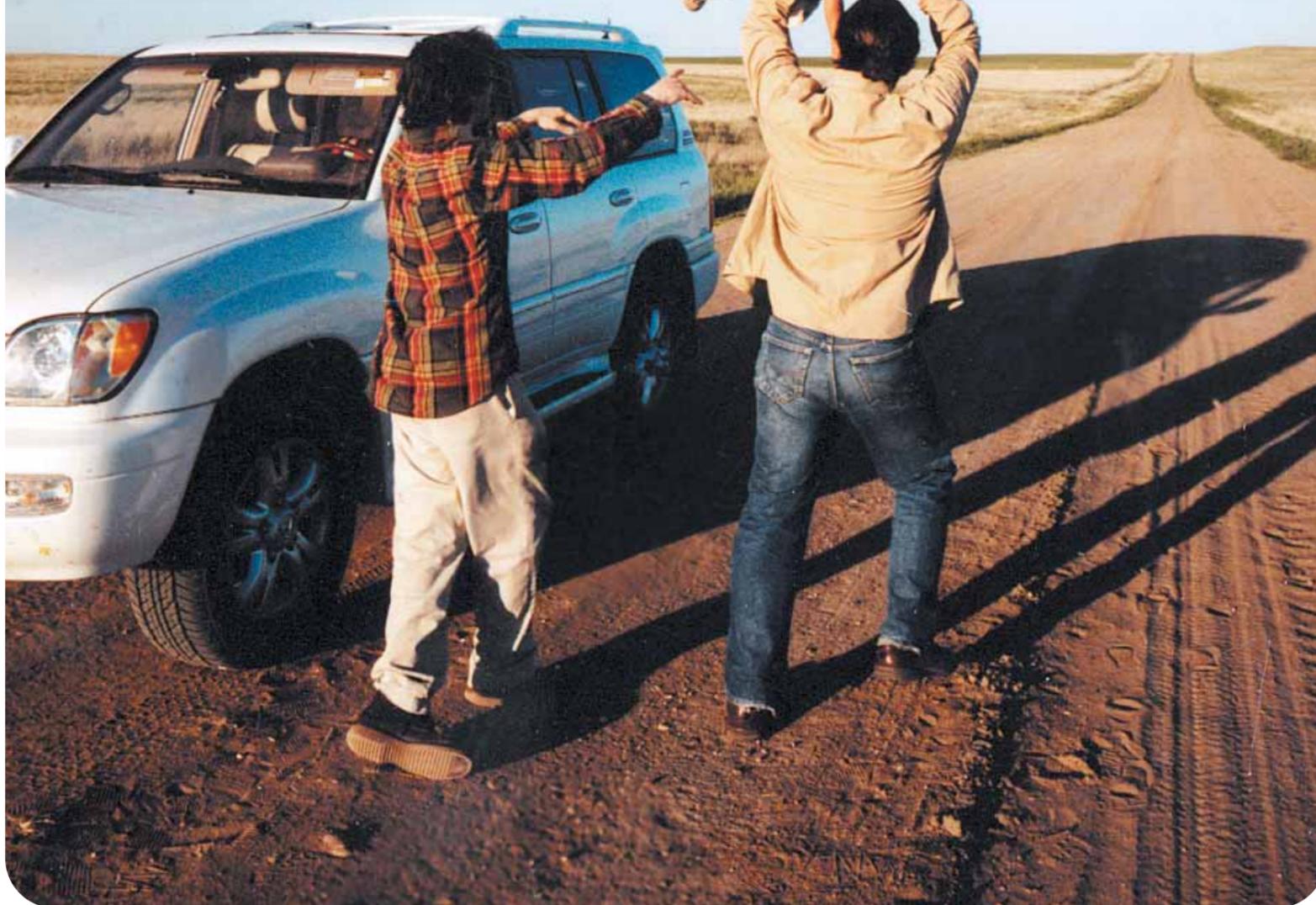
The LX includes the **Mark Levinson audio system**, as well as the **Automatic Sound Levelizer**, which adjusts volume to compensate for wind or traffic noise.

VOICE-ACTIVATED DVD NAVIGATION SYSTEM



Vital for long journeys: a good map. In the LX's case, the map comes with the **Lexus Voice-Activated DVD Navigation System**. This GPS-driven system can calculate up to three routes for most destinations, and it guides with clear verbal and visual directions—and does it all faster than unfolding a map.

Taking a rest, the party playfully sends Sam airborne under Montana's big sky.



LEATHER-TRIMMED SEATS



For maximum comfort, the LX comes standard with **leather-trimmed seats**, which are complemented by the interior's **bird's-eye maple** trim woodwork.

AIRBAGS



The Lexus LX's standard airbag configuration consists of **front seat-mounted side airbags**, **Roll-Sensing Curtain Airbags**, and driver and front-passenger airbags. The airbags are **Supplemental Restraint Systems (SRS)**



Todd Crowell, curator of paleontology at The Old Trail Museum (top); Sam, dinosaur fan and veteran Montana fossil hunter

toward the towns of Choteau and Bynum and the Mesozoic rock layer known as the Two Medicine Formation. It was here that the legendary Montana paleontologist Jack Horner discovered a nesting ground for the then-unidentified, nurtured, duckbilled *Maiasaura*, now the state fossil. Horner first found the baby dinosaur bones in a dusty rock shop owned by Marion Brandvold, which is still there today. After stocking up on fossilized squid tentacles and dinosaur teeth, we stop next door at Timescale Adventures, where Sam is awestruck by a life-size 130-foot replica of a *Seismosaurus*, the largest dinosaur model in the world. Timescale offers three-hour to 10-day guided paleontology trips though the Two Medicine Formation, but we have just a

couple of hours. The spot where Horner found the *Maiasaura* nesting ground is 20 miles south of here along the fence line of an elk farm. (Suffice it to say, if not for the GPS we'd still be there.) At the nesting ground, Sam's fresh eyes hunt tiny shards of ancient eggs until the relentless sun forces us back into the comfort of climate control.

For pure scenery, the highlight of our trip is the drive through the eastern edge of Glacier National Park toward the town of Whitefish. There are conifers whose tops we barely see, waterfalls overflowing with melted ice, and snowpacks close enough to the roadside to play in, which is a magical thing in mid-June.

Whitefish is part early-19th-century industry, part laid-back ski-town chic. There are some 40 restaurants in town. When Sam gets restless, I take him to the train tracks, where we run alongside a tortoise-paced freight train longer than a herd of *Seismosaura*. "It's like a dinosaur on wheels," Sam yells over the clamor, speaking more truth than he knows.

The next day we head south along Flathead Lake. We're a day away from our final dinosaur stop: the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, where Jack Horner has curated one of the most comprehensive paleontology displays in the country. Before we began our trip, Eric was having serious back pain, and we expected that at this point we'd need to hit the natural hot springs far out of our way to the west. But after four days of focused warmth from the heated leather-trimmed seats, he's without even a hint of tenderness.

So instead we head to the National Bison Range in the Flathead Valley, since bison are the closest living things in Montana to dinosaurs. Up close, they certainly seem to possess the power of the ancient beasts, and some of their mystique. It's not lost on any of us that these creatures were just barely spared the same fate as the dinosaur. Though we'll never thrust our camera out of the moon roof to take a snapshot of a dinosaur, by following their footsteps and finding their remains, we've given vertebrae to the soft images in Sam's imagination, and in that vast preserve they'll live forever. □

Vehicle shown with optional equipment.

RESOURCES

Getting There: From Los Angeles, we flew in to Salt Lake City, then took a Delta Connection Sky West flight to Billings. From there we drove north on Route 87/191 to Malta, where we headed west on Route 2, then south on Route 87 to Fort Benton. After passing through Great Falls, we headed northwest on Route 89 through the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, where we picked up Route 2 to Whitefish. Then it was south on Route 93 along Flathead Lake to the bison preserve. At Missoula, we hit the interstate for the first time, taking I-90 through Bozeman and then back to Billings.

Where to Stay: THE GRAND UNION HOTEL, Fort Benton; 888-838-1882; www.grandunionhotel.com
GOOD MEDICINE LODGE, Whitefish; 800-860-5488; www.goodmedicinelodge.com

Where to Eat: TUPELO GRILLE, Whitefish; 406-862-6136

Where to Learn About Dinosaurs:

JUDITH RIVER DINOSAUR INSTITUTE, Malta; 406-654-2323; www.montanadinosauridigs.com
Contact VICKIE CLOUSE at clousev@yahoo.com; learn more about her research exhibitions at scimath.msun.edu/dinosaurs/webhome.html

MARION BRANDVOLD'S T-REX AGATE SHOP, Bynum; 406-469-2314

TIMESCALE ADVENTURES, Bynum; 800-ADVNTRE; www.timescale.org

THE MUSEUM OF THE ROCKIES, 600 W. Kagy Blvd., Bozeman; 406-994-2251; www.montana.edu/wwwmor/