

Take Your Kids. Please. Shrewd ideas, early alarms and urgent warnings for vacations likely to leave your dignity, and your family intact. [FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C. Author: Pamela Gerhardt Date: May 31, 1998
Start Page: E.01 Section: TRAVEL Text Word Count: 2653

It's 105 degrees, and I'm walking with a 10-year-old boy on the searing pavement at Sea World in San Antonio. We're clutching Big Gulp-size watery lemonades, desperately sucking at the bent straws, praying for relief from the relentless sun and the speakers hidden in every shrub that have been blaring songs like "It's a Small World After All" at piercing decibels since 8 a.m.

"Can we ask someone to turn down the music?" my nephew asks quietly, clearly defeated, holding his arms out in hopes of the mildest breeze.

Forty minutes later we find the wave pool at the opposite end of the park. The water is as hot as -- you guessed it -- and as packed as a trout hatchery.

"In the U.S. we create these bizarre, artificial, fenced-off environments for families traveling with kids," says Dan Hallinan, co-owner with his wife, Wendy, of Travelling With Children, a San Francisco family-travel agency. "And they're expensive. They might as well stick a vacuum cleaner in your pocket."

Okay. What vacation options does that leave for a thinking parent? You work every day. In the evenings, you fold clothes, mow the lawn

make plans for a bedroom in the basement for your growing teen. You try to fathom the stock market, you argue with the cable company about the reception. Last time you checked, your baby daughter had five teeth. Now she's eating Fiesta Whoppers. What you want is simple: A chance to step back and get away, with your family, from the madness. For just a week. Doing something that both you and the kids will enjoy and -- who knows? -- maybe even derive some benefit from. You want to stand on top of your recently resingled rooftop and scream: Just let me have one week, oh travel gods, a sweet vacation memory that I can hold in my palm like a tiny, still bird in this flock of seamless days.

We've got good news. We talked to parents and a bunch of people in the business, and they shared with us their favorite family destinations and trips. We've weeded out the self-interested (the family all-inclusives pushed by travel agents) and the obvious (a week at the beach in Rehoboth).

Keep this section, go forth, be happy this summer and multiply.

Memories, that is.

International Travel, or: Mommy, Will You Spread Some Goose Liver On My Baguette?

More than one veteran traveler we talked to suggested that the United States is one of the worst places to travel with kids.

"In the U.S., everyone goes their separate ways -- the teens go there, the seniors go here," says Rick Steves, author of 12 guidebooks, including "Europe through the Back Door," and host of the PBS show "Travels in Europe." "But Europe is very multigenerational. You go to the harbor at sunset and everyone of all ages is out there together."

Mexico, South America, Sri Lanka, Italy and France -- all boast cultures that embrace childhood. "In Rome we went to a \$100-a-night-dinner-type place, and the cooks came out and took our kids back into the kitchen," says Hallinan. "They pretended to fix them cocktails, pretended like they were going to put them in the oven, then chased them around in the kitchen. You would not find that here."

Susan Forsyth, contributor to several travel books in the Lonely Planet series, said people in countries such as Sri Lanka view children as a vital part of the society. "Everywhere you go people will sing to your kids."

But is it worth the expense and hassle of intercontinental travel?

"It's more fun to change a diaper in Paris than in Seattle," says Steves. "You have to parent anyway. You might as well go."

One universal negative named by everyone was dealing with jet lag. Nap and meal times spin off schedule. For this reason, Cynthia Harriman, author of "Take Your Kids to Europe," recommends traveling abroad only when your kids are between the ages of 6 and 16. Before 6, kids still rely heavily on naps and other familiar rituals to maintain their sanity. "After 16, no kid wants to be seen with his parent," she says.

Steves, who has been traveling with his kids since they were 8 months old, says international travel with children is particularly stressful at 1 1/2. "They can't talk, but they are very mobile," he says. "Two-and-a-half gets better, and it's been getting better ever since."

Since a jet-lagged family is so much less pleasant than a jet-lagged individual, plan a long-distance trip so that you're based in one place, and everybody can spend a couple of days adjusting to the new schedule without facing the hassles of strict breakfast times, museum openings, show schedules or having to get to the next town by sunset. In other words, a good family trip is a week on a lake in Italy, with a few interesting day ventures. A bad family trip is trying to "do" Florence in five days.

Our suggestions for travel abroad:

Venice. Your kid's jaw -- and yours -- will drop when you first behold this Byzantine fairyland of domes and arches and pigeons and water. "Compared to Rome or Florence, Venice is much less stressful for kids because there are no cars," says Helen Gillman, a Lonely Planet writer who has traveled throughout Italy with her 5-year-old daughter. Plus, the entire city smells like a creek. What kid could resist?

Anywhere in the Yucatan, excluding Cancun. Dozens of small, family-friendly resorts, azure ocean, ancient ruins, recognizable food, eye-opening history lessons about the Spanish and Aztec slaughtering of agrarian Mayan culture. Vivid descriptions, including rivers of blood running down the sides of temples for days. Kids will not forget this.

Ireland. Head for any pub. "In Ireland, the pubs are family gathering places," says Steves. Hang around a while. Have a meat pie. Have a Guinness. Have a cry.

Denmark. Specifically, Legoland, an enormous park filled with giant Lego structures. Imagine Mount Rushmore made of Legos. "This was a mecca for my son when he was 10," says Harriman.

France. Surprisingly, several people named France as their No. 1 kid destination. "We all think France is very adult," Harriman says. "All can-can dancers and champagne. Fact is, the French are very warm to kids." Apparently, kids love the monuments, fountains and medieval history in Paris, and can periodically be coerced into brief museum visits.

France's Dordogne Valley received top votes by several people. Oldest-known cave paintings in the world. House dwellings. Largest sand dune in Europe, 19 stories high. Take a three-hour canoe ride down the river and stop to explore ruined castles.

And in the Brittany town of Carnac you'll find fields of stones called menhirs. Walk around in the morning fog for a sense of the mystical.

Anything medieval that involves weird battle equipment and dungeons and prisoners. In case you forgot, kids love to get grossed out. Some of the visiting centers in Wales, for example, let kids try on medieval battle outfits and watch a video that illustrates how to use a catapult. According to Steves, Wales has some of the darkest, creepiest dungeons.

Blackpool, England. Britain's Coney Island in northern England. "Tacky, yes. Lowbrow, okay," writes Steves in his book. "But it's as English as can be."

South Mediterranean. "None of the museums is kid-oriented," says Harriman. "But in restaurants they let kids peek into pots and serve water in cocktail glasses." Footnote: Barcelona just opened an unusually worthy aquarium.

U.S. Destinations, or: This Land Was Made For You and Me

Based on the size of the United States alone, you know there must be places that don't involve concrete or long lines.

Remember the truths that brochures and travel agents try to make you forget: Kids love simple trips that involve animals, physical activity and/or water. And it doesn't have to be the ocean. Missouri and Minnesota are brimming with cabins and family campgrounds along rivers and lakes. Forget the so-called damage done by Nintendo and the Cartoon Network. Give your kid a tadpole or a crawdaddy and see what happens. A cabin on a pond is the only "interactive science exhibit" your kid needs.

Laura Sutherland, author of "The Best Bargain Family Vacations in the U.S.A.," strongly urges you to keep the vacation simple. "Everyone is so programmed these days with soccer practice and piano and school and work," she says. "The kids and parents don't have time to just fiddle and explore and invent."

She says her family's most successful vacations involve staying put for a while in a cabin or lodge without a lot of other people or distractions.

Our U.S. suggestions:

Northern Minnesota wilderness. In the summer, portage in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness from one glacial lake to the next. No motorboats, or roads, are allowed in the area. In the winter, if you have your own sled you can take your kid "mushing" -- dog sledding -- along the Gun Flint Trail.

Northern California and Redwood national and state parks. Never mind Big Sur to the south. Fly into San Francisco and head north to Humboldt County. Cliffs, Pacific Ocean, wildflowers, redwoods, Avenue of the Giants, granola, good wine.

St. Louis and Hannibal, Mo. Why? The Arch, the riverboats and one of the largest/best zoos in the country. Head north to Mark Twain's childhood town and visit Tom Sawyer's Cave. Head west for canoe trips on hundreds of tributaries to the Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

Lake Powell, Utah. Houseboat rentals are great for a large family or two families sharing. Sleep on top of the boat under the desert stars -- and bats. No more than a half-day's drive to the Grand Canyon, Painted Desert, Monument Valley, Arches National Park.

Charleston, S.C. Wild, virtually empty beaches (try the north end of Folly Beach). Salty, sensual evenings. Mind-boggling history of this country's enormous slave trade and one-time incredible wealth. Live oaks, Spanish moss, spooky graveyards, slave descendants who still weave Sierra Leone-style baskets.

St. Augustine, Fla. The Sunshine State's little family secret. Slightly wild, open beaches, Southern history and a Ripley's Believe It or Not! museum for the kids in case of rain.

Family camps. Some people swear by parent-child sleepaway camps, such as Montecito-Sequoia Family Camp in King's Canyon National Park, Calif. (1-800-227-9900 or 650-967-8612). "There are a lot of great family camps, but this one has the best counselors,"

says "Best Bargain Family Vacations" author Sutherland. "Not to mention the very good food." A six-night stay in the lodge between June 28 and Aug. 29 is \$730 per adult, \$680 per child, including meals; there's a waiting list, but ask about cancellations. Sutherland also recommends Alden Camp in Oakland, Maine (207-465-7703), "for an old-fashioned vacation. You can rent sailboats, canoes." During July a two-bedroom cottage is \$540 per adult, and from \$150 to \$390 per child, depending on age.

Mesa Verde National Park, Colo., and Canyon De Chelly National Monument, Ariz. You'll talk about this for years. Climb among the cliff dwellings of the Anazasi in what was northern America's first communal-agrarian society, around A.D. 400.

Cattle drive. Be a working cowboy for a week on an 1800s-style cattle drive. At High Island Ranch in Hamilton Dome, Wyo., sleep under the stars and don't bathe. Cost is \$1,550 per person per week, including meals. For kids 14 and up; other programs available for younger ages. 307-867-2374.

Climb a tree. In Atlanta, mountain-climber-turned-arborist Peter Jenkins teaches people how to climb trees with ropes the way they do in the rain forest. His motto: "Get high, climb trees." Classes at his Tree Climbers International School are held the first and third Sundays of each month at 2 p.m.; all equipment is supplied. A \$10 donation is requested. 404-377-3150, <http://www.treeclimbing.com>.

Lake Placid, N.Y., bobsled and luge tracks. Speed. Need we say more? The four-man bobsled run is open June 20-Oct. 12, and from mid-December to mid-March, at \$30 per person per ride in winter, \$20 in summer. Kids must be four feet tall; parents sign a disclaimer. The Luge Rocket runs from mid-December to early March. Kids must be 5 feet tall. Details: 518-523-4436.

Sound Advice

Some of the best, road-won advice we turned up for those traveling with kids:

Ignore nearly everything you read about family travel. Most books are full of inane homilies and unfiltered press releases, cobbled together by nonprofessionals who accept freebies from various destinations in exchange for favorable write-ups. The books are hopelessly upbeat and full of genial fictions designed to serve the industry. My trip with my nephew to Sea World? Got the idea from a glowing review in a local newspaper. The writer should have warned: "Go in the fall when the concrete cools."

I picked up a book called "Great Family Vacations" by Candyce Stapen, and for the entire state of South Carolina the writer mentions only Hilton Head. Family activities? Golf and tennis. I don't think most kids know their love from their par. Every single blade of grass on the island is mowed. Would your child have fun there? Beware.

Beware the old faithfuls -- and, for that matter, Old Faithful. Don't fall into the trap of designing a vacation around Big Attractions. "The changing of the guard at Buckingham

Palace is boring with a capital B," says author Cynthia Harriman. "I always look up England first in European travel books, and if they recommend the changing of the guard, I don't trust anything else in the book." And while you're at it, stay away from Stonehenge. "It's nothing like it was in 1971 when I first went," Harriman says. "They fenced off the entire area due to vandalism, and you end up standing a mile away next to a hundred Japanese and German tourists." The same goes for overrun national parks, whose natural spectacles are easily overwhelmed by summer crowds. The time you spend lazing along an obscure lake, or in a state park, is a lot more valuable than the stressful hours you spend negotiating the crowds to witness Old Faithful.

Don't plan any trip based on what you'll see or where you'll go. Instead, think about what you're going to do. Any kid can tell you: Looking at stuff is boring. Just being somewhere "important" is boring. Doing things -- climbing, riding, playing in the lake, digging in the sand, walking a stream, exploring an old fort, riding a horse, paddling a boat, following a path, building a fire, watching for birds -- is fun.

"In Amsterdam," says Harriman, "my kids and I split up and went down three different streets on a scavenger hunt for a certain kind of roof on the buildings. Afterward, you can meet up and draw pictures of what you saw."

Corollary: Avoid museums, particularly crowded ones. Massive, popular places such as the Louvre can make anyone -- especially a kid -- feel like his brain is made of pate. "Museums are doable, but in small doses," says Dan Hallinan, co-owner of a family-travel agency in San Francisco. "Go to the gift shop first, find postcards of art work inside the building, then have a search for those paintings." When's the right time for kids to go to museums? When they, not you, put them on the to-do list. Or when few other visitors are around.

Engage the kids in the planning -- but make it clear you make the final call. Discuss with your kids what might work or what sounds interesting, based on a list of possible activities that you generate.

Just make sure you don't put the least desirable choices -- like the August visit to a Texas amusement park, or the all-nighter in a video arcade -- on the list of possibilities.

After all, the vacation's for you, too.

-- Pamela Gerhardt

[Illustration]

PHOTO,,Curtis Compton; PHOTO,,Lucian Perkins

Credit: Special to The Washington Post

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.