



International travel stimulates kids' minds and creates lifelong family memories.

Rules of Engagement

Use these tips to ensure the kiddos rave (not rant) about that cultural journey you're planning abroad

BY LINDA PACKER

I have this friend — no, really, a friend — who always wanted to go to Italy, so she and her husband spent more than a year planning a family trip there. They wanted to introduce their 8-year-old son to the wonders of Michelangelo, gondola rides in "the city of water," all the statues on the Piazza della Signoria. They thought he'd love licking a gelato while watching the pigeons in St. Mark's Square.

Call it wishful thinking; after two weeks across the pond, my friend came home one frustrated and exhausted mom. "Jeff balked at everything," she says of her son. "He couldn't see anything special about Michelangelo and got bored in the Sistine Chapel. He said Venice smelled, and that he could see 'dirty pigeons' at home. He wanted to go swimming, but our hotels didn't have pools. We might as well have gone to Six Flags."

Her disappointment was particularly acute because she believes travel instills an early curiosity about life. It was a trip to Mexico at age 11 that motivated her to learn Spanish, and a tour of Arles that led her husband, then 13, to begin painting "like van Gogh."

Looking back, does my friend wish she had done something differently?

"Yes," she says, with a touch of humor that could best be seen through a microscope. "I wish I had brought my Uzi."

Actually, according to the experts, there is something she could have done to ensure her son better appreciated the cultural experience: helped him become engaged in the trip before they even picked a destination. Both anecdotal evidence and professional opinions say the more parents engage their children in a destination and activities before they go, the happier the trip will be for all. And whereas the optimum age for a child to begin international travel used to be early teens, today it is 8, because kids are becoming more worldly at an earlier age. Sixty may be the new 40, but 8 is the new 12.

"By age 8, kids have mastered the tasks of early childhood," says Karen Gouze, director of clinical psychology training in the department of child and adolescent psychiatry at Chicago's Children's Memorial Hospital. "They have the ability to delay their gratification and manage their frustrations. When you get to second or third grade, your interest in the outside world increases dramatically."

Get Them Involved

The most important element of engagement: getting the children involved on the ground floor. "Let them help plan," Gouze says. "Let them be part of the learning. Today, with the Internet, there are all sorts of fun things you can help kids discover."

Travel agent and preschool teacher Wyn Gilbert suggests sitting down as a family to decide on a destination. Ask each person where they want to go and why, then expand on the ideas. If the kids want to go to France, tell them what there is to do beyond Paris. In the Loire, where majestic castles line the river, they can pretend they're the knights who roamed freely more than 1,000 years ago. In Lille, they can see snakes and snow leopards in a zoo on the grounds of an ancient fort.

Do they want to go to England? Tell them about Wales, the birthplace of King Arthur, where you can stay in a restored circus wagon or old milking parlor. "Kids get engaged when you think outside the box," says Bob Titley of Robert Titley Consultancy, which promotes Great Britain as a destination.

But what if a destination is presented as a *fait accompli*?

When Tom and Liz Kelsey celebrated their 50th anniversary, they told all 16 of their family members they were taking them to Italy. Their daughter Suzanne, whose children were 7 and 10, copied pages from library books and put together a picture book of art. She told her children stories about the artists and the paintings. When they got to the Uffizi in Florence, she gave each one a picture from the book and asked them to find the real painting, turning a gallery visit into a treasure hunt. "I thought we'd be in and out of there in about 15 minutes," says Tom. "But they just loved it. We stayed for more than an hour."

Consider the Possibilities

After selecting your destination, start the process of "awe." Give your children perspective by showing them their literal place in the world. "Take out a globe," Gilbert says, "and show them where they are in relation to where they're going. Try to get a detailed map of your destination, and put pins in all the places you decide to visit."

Experts say the specifics get kids most excited about a trip. Once you tell them they can learn tai chi from a master in China or watch glowworms in an ancient Ruakuri cave, they grasp what's going on. Indeed, Edward Piegza, founder and president of the upscale travel company Classic Journeys, says he has used his sons, now 10 and 12, to test-market his company's trips since they were small. For example, he recently developed an itinerary for a family getaway to Peru. When the boys heard about the destination, they thought it sounded boring. When he asked what sounded like fun, "they said 'remember when we went white-water rafting in Costa Rica, and when we got to do that really cool cooking thing on the Amalfi Coast?' We looked into those types of activities, and came up with a trip families seem to love."

Together, dig through guidebooks for activities that make their eyes light up. Internet research is de rigueur, but don't bypass your destinations' own Web sites; many have ready-made itineraries that will appeal to kids of all ages. At visitbritain.com, for instance, you'll find a "Pottering in Harry's Footsteps" tour in Oxford, designed especially for Muggles.

When Robin Kaplan organized an upcoming trip to Guatemala and Belize, she planned activities based on her children's interests. "They're interested in animals, so I told them we'd take excursions into the jungle and look for monkeys," she says. "Another thing we did was make comparisons between life here and there. When we look out the window at home we see robins. What do children see in Guatemala?"

While the importance of getting your kids' input into a destination's activities can't be overstated, Gouze encourages you not to be afraid of helping them stretch their comfort zones. If they're not adventurous eaters, find a local specialty and tell them it's what children in that country eat. One mother found that when her family took a hot-air balloon ride and wafted over the Serengeti, her height-phobic daughter was so entranced she let go of her mother's hand. By the same token, Gouze says, "be careful. You want to stretch them, but not so far that they become resistant."

Make It an Adventure

Finally, help your kids connect with something even bigger than your destination: the journey itself. Help them embrace the idea of travel as an adventure. Michelle Schragels, whose children were 6 and 9 when they went to Italy two years ago, told them, "We're going on a grand adventure, and everything that happens is part of it. We know that things can go wrong. Suitcases can be lost, planes can be delayed, a museum can be closed.

"But we travel for the experience," she explained to them. "We travel for the journey. And often, the grandest of things are the ones that just happen."

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