



Taking the Kids™ And Having a Safe Vacation

By Eileen Ogintz

The weather in Honolulu was postcard-perfect - swaying palms, blue skies, gentle breezes. Too bad we weren't at the beach, novel and tropical drink in hand. We were impatiently waiting in a stuffy doctor's office along with other vacationers who, like us, clearly wished they were elsewhere.

A painful, blistering sunburn had sent us to the nearest walk-in clinic. It could have been avoided, had my daughter's friend heeded my many recommendations that she douse herself in sunscreen while working on her tan beside the hotel pool. Now, the 15-year-old was so contrite and miserable, I didn't have the heart to launch into my "I told you so" speech, much less the "Don't you know you can get skin cancer?" lecture. Why is it teens so often tune out adults during vacation, even when we've got something to say that might actually help them?

There are plenty of vacation mishaps and illnesses that can't be as easily avoided as sunburn - stomach flu and fevers, broken wrists and wrenched backs, flare-ups of chronic conditions. Sometimes, all you can do is tell yourself things will get better, (hopefully before the end of the trip). But the reality is that more children are injured (sometimes fatally) during summer than at any other time of year, reports the National Safe Kids

Campaign a nonprofit agency dedicated to preventing childhood injuries. (Visit www.safekids.org.)

These injuries often occur during family vacations. Sometimes, they could have been easily avoided. "People get too preoccupied with having a good time," said Dr. Heather Paul, executive director of the National Safe Kids Campaign. "Parents can't take a vacation from safety."

Older children are especially at risk, presumably because preteens and young teens have more freedom in the summer. When younger children get hurt, it's usually because they're not properly supervised, Paul said. In hopes that none of you will waste even a minute of vacation time in an ER or a doctor's office this summer, here are some recommendations from the National Safe Kids Campaign and the American Academy of Pediatrics

(www.aap.org) for keeping your gang safe during summer vacation:

- **NOT EVEN FOR A MINUTE** should you leave a child unsupervised in a hot car. At least 150 children have died in hot cars since 1996, seven so far this summer. A child's core temperature can increase three to five times faster than an adult's. On a sunny summer day, the temperature inside a car can reach potentially deadly levels in just minutes - quicker than it takes to grab food at a take-out place. Paul also said that adults should lock their vehicles at all times to keep youngsters from getting inside to play or hide.

- **ARM'S LENGTH IN THE POOL** - that's how close you should be to babies and toddlers, according to the Academy of Pediatrics, which urges "touching" supervision. Put down your book while you're watching the older ones. They need your undivided attention. And never let older kids swim alone or boat without life jackets.
- **NO MATTER HOW MUCH THEY BEG OR COMPLAIN**, the kids (and parents, too) should be securely buckled up whenever you're on the road. Despite seat-belt laws, 14 percent of children ride unrestrained - putting them at twice the risk for injury and death. If all children were restrained properly in cars, 600 lives would be saved and 182,000 injuries would be prevented each year, federal studies show. Just as important, make sure your child's car seat is installed properly, and make sure you're using the right kind of restraint for a child of their size. Studies show that 85 percent of children in child safety seats aren't being restrained properly. Nearly one-third of children are in the wrong restraints for their age and size, making them much more likely to be seriously injured. Visit www.seatcheck.org or call 866-732-8243 for locations where you can make sure your safety seats are installed correctly. Kids ages 4-8 should be in booster seats, not just seat belts, said Paul, who adds that all kids are safer in the back seat. Than in front.
- **USE SUNSCREEN** with an SPF factor of at least 15, the Academy of Pediatrics recommends, and reapply every two hours or after swimming. Babies under 6 months should be kept out of direct sunlight altogether. And when kids are playing in the heat, make sure they drink plenty of water, even if they're not thirsty. Remind teens that many types of skin cancer are caused by unprotected exposure during childhood and adolescence.
- **BUG REPELLANTS** that are appropriate for kids should contain no more than 10 percent DEET because the chemical can cause harm when absorbed through the skin. Kids should avoid using scented soaps, perfumes or hair sprays on children because they can attract insects.
- **GRAB THAT HELMET**, because more than 54 percent of all injured bicyclists are children. Bike injuries send more than 370,000 kids age 14 and under to emergency rooms each year. Most serious injuries and deaths are caused by head injuries. Helmets can reduce the risk of head injury by as much as 85 percent and prevent 75 percent of bike-related fatalities among kids, yet fewer than one-fourth of bike-riding kids wear them. They ought to wear helmets when skateboarding and riding scooters, too, safety experts say.
- **NEVER ALLOW KIDS TO HIKE ALONE**, and before setting out make sure you've got a plan in case the gang gets separated. (Some parents give each child a whistle.) Pack plenty of high-energy snacks when hiking, and don't forget rain gear (weather can change rapidly) and a first-aid kit. A child can get cold much faster than an adult, so dress the kids in layers, with the innermost layer a breathable, synthetic material that will pull moisture away from the skin. There's nothing worse than dealing with a cold, miserable child when you're a long way from the car.

(For more *Taking the Kids*, visit www.takingthekids.com and read Eileen's blog.)

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Taking the Kids™ Hitting National Parks

By Eileen Ogintz

Admission is nearly free. Lodging is a bargain, too.

And no matter what happens, at least no one will complain they're bored. Not with so many rocks to climb, new playmates and water made for splashing. Rain is an opportunity for a different adventure.

Wishful thinking? Not at our nation's national parks. Even better, with visitation to the parks forecasted to drop again this year, there is more room for last-minute planners.

You're guaranteed plenty of memories. That's if you don't kill each other after you've spent three hours trying to drive 30 miles on a winding national park road (Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming), woken up in a sodden sleeping bag after a rainstorm (Acadia National Park in Maine), or lobbied unsuccessfully for your 10-year-old to put down his Game Boy to watch the heart-stopping scenery (Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado).

I've lived all those moments but I've also shared some marvelous wonders with the kids: Spying a bear for the first time (Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska), hiking to the top of a waterfall (Yosemite in California), and touching a glacier (Glacier National Park in Montana). Here's how to make some of those memories happen for your families:

- **HIKE** Online at www.nps.gov You can link to each of the 388 national parks, recreation areas and historic monuments find maps, map out an itinerary and find plenty of special packages and deals. Some parks have special areas on their websites designed for kids. Check out the new Website (www.doyourpartparks.org) that encourages national park visitors to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and help to protect America's parks from the effects of global warming.) In an effort to turn 21st-century children into naturalists, the National Park Service has launched WebRangers (<http://www.nps.gov/webrangers/>), a virtual version of the National Park's longstanding Junior Ranger program,
- **YOU DON'T HAVE TO ROUGH IT** if you prefer not to. Rooms in the historic park lodges are surprisingly affordable. Book as far ahead as you can, but don't be afraid to call at the last minute either. There's often more availability than you'd expect.
- **LET SOMEONE ELSE DO THE WORK.** Sign on for a family trip with companies like www.Backroads.com, www.austinkehman.com and www.classicjourneys.com If you are camping, they even provide the sleeping bags.
- **STAY PARKED** in one place instead of spending all of your time trying to see the highlights at several parks hundreds of miles apart. You'll feel much less stressed and can focus on hiking, fishing, camping and animal watching rather than racing from place to place. Chow down at a cowboy cookout in Yellowstone. Join an Appalachian sing-along in Great Smoky National Park. Bike for miles along the Cape Cod Rail Trail. Soak in the hot springs at Olympic National Park.
- **BE FLEXIBLE** enough so that you can spend a morning chasing frogs or an afternoon swimming in the river if your family feels like it. Linger over picnic lunches.

- **ASK THE RANGER** to steer you to the array of kid-friendly activities from tide-pool walks at Acadia National Park to storytelling at the Grand Canyon, guided fishing trips at Yellowstone, or rock-climbing lessons at Yosemite. The parks' field institutes now also offer customized family programs, ranging from photo hikes to float trips. Some of these popular programs are free. Make sure to check out the Junior Ranger programs at each park with activities geared specifically for kids.
- **HIT THE TRAIL** for shorter hikes, especially with younger children. They'll want to spend more time looking at leaves and turning over rocks than walking. Never allow kids to hike alone and before setting out, make sure you've got a plan if the gang gets separated on the trail. Some parents give each child a whistle. Plenty of high-energy snacks are a must when hiking with kids as is rain gear (weather can change rapidly) and a first aid kit.

Don't forget the M&Ms.

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com and read Eileen's blog.)

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Taking the Kids™ Surviving Theme Park Madness

By Eileen Ogintz

The kids are counting down the days until they can hit that new roller coaster.

But you're dreading the trip to Theme Park Land - the lines, the crowds and the money you'll spend. Buck up! You're going to have as much fun as the kids and you're going to bring home the goofy pictures to prove it. Here's how:

- **POWER-UP THE COMPUTER** so that you and the kids can take a virtual tour before you leave home. You won't be so overwhelmed when you walk into the park.
- **GIVE EVERYONE A CHANCE** to hit one of his or her must-see attractions each day. Let the youngest choose the first day, the eldest the next, the blue-eyed member of the family the third day.
- **EXTRA ADULTS** are always a plus so that no one grown up is responsible for a group of youngsters or teens.
- **DON'T BE AFRAID TO DIVIDE** the group if the kids vary in age and have different agendas. Just make sure you stay in touch via cell phone or walkie-talkie and always have established a time and place to meet.
- **AVOID LINES** by taking advantage of the new technologies that allow you to swipe your ticket and get a time to return to the ride rather than wait in line. You've got to be organized, though, to get the pass for the attraction you most want to ride as soon as you get to the park. Stay at a Universal Studios Orlando hotel and you can skip the lines altogether simply by showing your room key!
- **COASTER PHOBIA** can strike at any age, even after waiting in a long line to ride one. Don't force the issue. Theme parks are supposed to be fun. The last thing you want to do is make someone in the family feel badly because they don't want to ride an upside down coaster or go into a haunted house. You can always return when they're ready.
- **MEETING THE CHARACTERS** may be exactly what your kids want to do most. The best bet at Walt Disney World is to reserve a table at a breakfast or lunch where the characters will appear. That way, they come to your table, rather than you scrambling to find them. But be forewarned that the youngest ones in your family may be overwhelmed and frightened by the giant fuzzy creatures, even beautiful costumed princesses. There will always be another time...and another character.
- **YOU NEVER KNOW** when the kids are going to demand something to eat. Carry water bottles, juice boxes and some healthy snacks (crackers, power bars, pretzels, fruit) so that you don't have to wait on line when they're hungry or feed the kids a steady diet of fast food. You'll save money too.
- **MAKE SURE** the kids know what to do if they get lost. They should only talk to someone clearly working at the park who will call a security officer. Put a card with your cell phone number and where you are staying in their pocket.
- **QUIT WHEN YOU'RE AHEAD** and return to the hotel for a swim or a nap. You don't have to hit every attraction. At some places, it's impossible. When the kids get tired and cranky, leave. You can always return to the park after everyone's had a break.

- **AVOID SOUVENIR CRAZIES** by discussing how much they may spend before you go. Can they supplement with earnings or birthday money? Can they buy one big souvenir and two little ones? Wait until the end of the day and if possible, the end of the trip to hit the shops.
- **SLOW DOWN** and remember, this is supposed to be fun.

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Taking the Kids™ And Packing Smart for Flights

By Eileen Ogintz

Is there any good news for family fliers?

Just when we're taking off on long-planned vacations — airlines have begun to charge \$15 each way for the first checked bag and \$25 each way for the second checked bag. (Southwest will still allow you to check two bags free.)

They charge even more for bags over 50 pounds on domestic flights. Blame it on oil prices. This is being done, the airlines say, in an effort to defray spiraling fuel costs that have already cost them billions. They've already cut back on food and number of flights. They're upping fees for pets. Be prepared for higher ticket prices and even less room in the overhead compartments as passengers try to cram even more in their carry-on bags.

So what's the good news? We've got plenty of ammunition now for why our teenage daughter can't bring every pair of sandals she owns on vacation this summer and why the 4-year-old can't bring his entire collection of dinosaurs, including the big ones.

We're all going to have to pack smarter — even the kids. (Ask your teen if she'd like to give up some of her souvenir money to pay the fee for checking that second bag or for checking one that's over the weight limit.) At least American Airlines will still allow you to check your stroller, car seat and wheelchair for free, as will other airlines. (But read the fine print on your airline's Website before you head to the airport. Every airline has different rules — and fees.)

“The key is laying it all out and putting half of it back in the closet,” says longtime Alaska Airlines flight attendant Rene Celestin, who travels often with her husband and two kids. “It's nice to have something new every day, but it's not practical.”

That goes for shoes too. “If I'm traveling with my children, I just don't bring nice shoes,” says Veda Shook, a mom and flight attendant who also is a vice president of the International Association of Flight Attendants. Don't bring shirts either that will only go with one outfit — for the kids too. “Use self-restraint,” Shook says. “Bring a scarf instead of a whole other outfit.”

“It's carry-on or bust,” says Carol Austin, of Austin-Lehman Adventures. This summer, her family, including two teens, will travel overseas with only carry-on luggage (no worries about luggage getting lost that way). “I love clothes and shoes but I figure if I start convincing myself now I'll be OK by July,” she says.

Besides, you can find a place to do laundry wherever you are going — even in a hotel sink. Look for clothes made of quick-dry fabrics, Austin suggests. Even traditional adventure clothing manufacturers like Ex Officio (www.exofficio.com) now make many shirts, shorts, and zip-off pants for kids. So does LL Bean (www.llbean.com) and Austin says you can find less expensive variations at major discount stores like Target. I've become a fan of clothing that also has built-in protection from pesky bugs and lasts washing after washing (www.insectshield.com).

“Get the kids involved,” so you don't pack those shorts they hate,” says Kelly Vrtis, a Dallas mom of two young children and spokesman for the Container Store chain. I like the inexpensive travel space bags that

the Container Store (www.containerstore.com) sells that allow you to compress your clothes and maximize your suitcase space. Vrtis suggests Eagle Creek's "Pack-It Cubes," soft-sided, see-through bags that allow you to be even more organized and make it easier for the screeners to see what is in your bag, without taking everything out. Of course, Ziploc bags work too.

Throw a change of clothes for the kids into a travel cube and take it on the plane in your carry-one bag. They are bound to spill their drinks all over themselves if you don't!) Don't forget plenty of diapers (you'll be hard-pressed to find any on a plane, or even in an airport), healthy snacks, water and toys and games to keep the kids occupied. (Maybe this is the time to invest in a portable DVD player.)

And if you are toting a car seat, use it on the plane! Your baby or toddler not only will be more comfortable, which means you'll be more comfortable too, but safer, according to the FAA. (Check http://www.faa.gov/passengers/fly_children/.) Yes, you will have to purchase a ticket if your child is under 2 (if you are flying overseas, many carriers offer "infant" fares), but you wouldn't get in a car without your child being properly restrained. You don't want him to go flying — literally — if the plane hits severe turbulence. Use the car seats for the kiddos you've bought seats for too.

Let's not forget that you not only must pack fewer bags but make sure they don't go over 50 pounds on domestic flights to avoid even more charges. New lighter-weight luggage can help, like the well-priced Carryall line from L.L.Bean, which, according to LL Bean luggage designer Steve Jordan, is 50 percent lighter and designed so that you can maximize the space. Eagle Creek's new Hovercraft bags (available from The Container Store) are also a good, albeit more expensive bet.

Sure it's going to be a challenge to pack lighter — as much of a challenge as traveling with the kids. See you at the airport. I'll be the one with the impossibly small bag.

E-mail me your tips and trick for packing smarter to Eileen@takingthekids.com and look for more on traveling light at www.takingthekids.com.

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Taking the Kids™ And Eating Smart at Disney World

By Eileen Ogintz

The couple at the next table in the upscale restaurant eyed the two little kids in our group with decided distaste. Their mom was upset, but I convinced her we should simply ignore the dirty looks. For one thing, I didn't think the 3-year-old and her 5-year-old brother were misbehaving. True, a glass of milk got spilled and they were (somewhat) noisy and jumped around a bit, picking up crayons that had dropped on the floor. But so were a lot of the other kids at The Flying Fish, the noisy, bustling Orlando restaurant. Besides, we were smack in the middle of Walt Disney World and I figure anyone who is dining at one of the 300-plus eateries here has got to be prepared for kids at the next table (unless they're at the Victoria and Albert, Disney's only adults-only restaurant.)

That said, wherever you take your kids out for a meal — at home or while traveling this summer — it's good to be prepared with a pad and paper (I taught 5-year-old Ethan how to play hangman) and even some crackers. I was disappointed that Disney restaurants — so quick with the kids' menus and crayons and awesome kids' desserts (how about a white-chocolate puzzle that came with a brush and different color frostings so they could "create" their own desert?) — didn't immediately offer some Mickey-shaped crackers when we sat down.

If you haven't been to Disney World or Disneyland in a while, you'll be surprised by the quality and variety of the food. It's no longer about overpriced burgers and fries (though you certainly can find those). Try an Asian-fusion eatery (Yak & Yeti at Animal Kingdom) or check out The Wave at Contemporary Resort, which promises organic beers and American cooking.

Of course, the kids with us preferred the old standards — like eating in '50s-era "cars" at Sci-Fi Dine-In Theater at Disney's Hollywood Studios and watching old cartoons on the giant movie screen, all designed to make us think we were at an old-fashioned drive-in, complete with stars twinkling above us. I thought they'd also love the Coral Reef at Epcot, with its giant aquariums and scuba divers that feed the fish, but the service was disappointingly slow and 3-year-old Hannah got an earache that necessitated some of us making a quick exit. (Be prepared for anything with young kids!)

There are a lot of healthier options too, if you can get the kids to eat them.) Kids meals now come with fruit or vegetables and juice, water or low-fat milk and there are fruit carts around the park.

When I booked reservations, I was asked if anybody had allergies so that the information could be noted. (Don't be shy about dietary requests either. Walt Disney World gets more than 7,000 such requests a month — just call a few days in advance if you need meals free of gluten, eggs, dairy or peanuts, for example.) Another tip: Whether you are at Disney World or a favorite city this summer, book reservations. With young kids, earlier is better. You can always change them.

But even at Walt Disney World, you may not be able to get a table at the restaurant-of-the-moment. If you have a little princess who wants to dine with Cinderella, book as soon as you book your trip and even then, you won't be guaranteed a spot. Same with dinner at the California Grill atop the Contemporary Resort, with terrific food and a first-rate view of the Magic Kingdom fireworks. (Call 407-939-3463 for dinner reservations.)

A tip from Disney VIP Guide Maureen Murphy (Yes, Disney offers VIP guide service to steer you through the parks, though they don't offer front-of-the-line access): the Princess Storybook meals at Epcot's castle-like Akerhus Royal Banquet Hall are an easier reservation to get.

We opted for Chef Mickey's breakfast at the Contemporary Resort where the kids were so enthralled by Mickey, Minnie, Goofy and the rest of their pals, getting autographs and hugs, posing for pictures, that it was tough to get them to eat their breakfast, which was surprisingly good.

Choose your character meals (and you probably will never pay more for the kids' eggs and pancakes!) based on your kids' favorite characters — Breakfast with Winnie the Pooh and friends at The Crystal Palace in the Magic Kingdom or Lilo and Stitch at the Polynesian Resort; lunch with Chip n' Dale in Epcot, or the gang from Playhouse Disney at Hollywood and Vine at Hollywood Studios, Dinner with Cinderella at 1900 Park Fare at the Grand Floridian Resort.

Be prepared with cameras, autograph books (we filled up two!) and pens. Rest assured that the characters will stop at your table. These meals, while pricey, are a great way to get those autographs, hugs and pictures (with mom and dad too!) without waiting on the inevitable lines in the parks.

Another tip: If you are planning to spend your entire time at Walt Disney World (or Disneyland in California) consider the well-priced meal plans that you can add on to your room/tickets package that even include a daily "snack." Disney officials say you can save as much as 40 percent at more than 100 restaurants and quick-food places throughout the resort. (Book packages by June 22 for certain dates in August and September and you get the Disney Dining Plan free at Disney World. Visit www.disneyworld.com or www.disneyland.com for details.

There's one drawback: If you have any junior foodies under 10 in the group, they'll be limited to the kids' menus. The other drawback: It seems so many people are opting for the dining plan that reservations are needed. Remember, you are really booking a "priority seating" time, which means you may need to wait when you arrive, as we did several times. It's always good to get there a little early, especially with hungry kids in tow. "Birnbaum's Walt Disney World Dining Guide" (\$11.95 is a good resource, as is www.disboards.com, the Internet's largest unofficial guide to Disney World, where you can search restaurants by menus, meal type, location and chat with families who have been there and eaten that. See you at the Castle. I'll be the one chatting up Cinderella.

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com and read Eileen's blog.) © Eileen Ogintz

Taking the Kids™ Tips to Help You Survive a Family Road Trip

By Eileen Ogintz

For once, the kids agree. Whether they're 2 years old, 12 years old or in college, they all think road trips - road trips with their parents, at least - are way too long and boring. Parents have all heard the "Are we there yet? ... How much longer?" song more times than we care to remember. That's not stopping anyone from hitting the road this summer. Some 118million summer trips are expected to include kids - a 12 percent hike from a year ago.

"It's the year of the kids," says Cathy Keefe of the Travel Industry Association. It also appears to be the year of the scenic road trip. Never mind how much the kids groan; vacationers rank scenic drives at the top of their summer to-do list, according to the Travel Industry Association's summer survey.

Maybe the groaning can be kept to a minimum with the help of the new Web site www.seeamerica.org, a joint effort of the Department of Transportation and the Travel Industry Association. The site includes itineraries for every state and detailed descriptions of what to do along the way. Let the kids click on the state, and they can tell you what there is to see during the trip, all the way from your neighborhood to your mother-in-law's house at the beach.

Of course, the kids won't be checking out the mountain vistas, the cows grazing by the road or the historic covered bridges. They'll be too busy playing video games, punching each other, squabbling over the radio channel and that last set of batteries for their CD players.

Before hitting the road, check out the Web site for the National Safe Kids Campaign (www.safekids.org) to make sure your child is in the correct carseat for the child's age and weight. Motor vehicle crashes remain a leading killer of kids, in part because so many children are in inappropriate safety seats (an astounding four out of five safety seats are used incorrectly), or not in safety seats at all.

The site also can direct you to a safety seat inspection station near your home where technicians can check your seat to make sure it is installed properly. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says all children 12 and under should be in the back seat, securely buckled in age-appropriate safety restraints. (Visit www.nhtsa.dot.gov for more car safety tips.)

AAA urges you to check out the car, too. Let the kids help check the fluid levels, the wipers and the tire pressure. Do you have road maps of the region you're covering? The kids may prove to be the best navigators in the bunch. Let them trace the route on the map with a washable marker.

Keep an emergency kit in the car that includes jumper cables, basic hand tools, flares or reflective warning triangles, a flashlight and first-aid kit. It's no fun to be caught without that first-aid kit when your child's knee is bleeding. Since my kids have been prone to motion sickness, I always carry medicine for that as well. And don't forget to bring plenty of water, paper towels and washcloths.

I always stash plenty of snacks in the car, too, including fruit, pretzels and a jar of peanut butter to spread on crackers. And we never leave home without plenty of bubble gum and Tootsie Pops.

Here are some other ways to make your gang a happier group of road warriors this summer:
(OPTIONAL TRIM - CUT ITEMS AS NEEDED)

- It's smart to take along a kids' grab bag, which will come in handy when the children discover they still have two more hours in the car to go. Perhaps that grab bag should include the new Lego to-go canisters that offer new characters and pieces for the Legophiles in your bunch. They retail for less than \$10, and some are designed to double as water bottles.
- Let the kids test their reflexes as they try to finish the sequence of lights to beat the machine - and you - with Simon. This pioneering electronic game is celebrating its 25th birthday with a redesigned handheld version that retails for \$12.99.
- The artists in your crowd can amuse themselves by making peg creations that light up with the new travel Lite-Brite (\$7.99), which runs on batteries and has a built-in drawer to store the pegs.
- If the kids complain that the license plate game is "stupid," toss them the new "Nifty Plates from the Fifty States"(\$12.99). The laminated paper license plates look like plates from different states and offer all kinds of weird facts that kids seem to like, including how the states got their names. (Montana is derived from the Spanish word for mountain.) Did you know that every Kentucky citizen is required by law to take a bath once a year?
- If your pooch is joining the gang, pick up AAA's "Traveling With Your Pet"(15.95), a handy guide to 10,000 pet-friendly, AAA-rated places to stay while on the road.
- If sports fans are part of the mix, grab a copy of AAA's "Ultimate Fan's Guide to Pro Sports Travel (\$19.95), which provides the need-to-know info on pro teams, from how to get the best seats in their stadiums to how to get there. There's also helpful information on nearby hotels and restaurants, statistics and more.
- Two-way radios have kept me sane when I've been separated from my crew at theme parks, on the beach and at ski areas. They're also a good bet if you're in a multi-car caravan and don't want to waste cell minutes. New models from Cobra Electronics have a five-mile range and cost \$49.95 a pair. The \$120 PR 4000 WX boasts a seven-mile range, digital compass and 10-channel radio/weather band. Look for them at major electronics stores.
- A couple of baseball mitts, balls and Frisbees stashed in the trunk can encourage the gang to run off some energy whenever you stop.

See you at the rest stop.

Eileen Ogintz welcomes questions and comments from readers. She can be contacted at her new e-mail address, eileen@takingthekids.com.

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Taking the Kids™ Giving Back to the Places You Visit

By Eileen Ogintz

When Richard Johnston took his daughter Sarah to Tanzania with a group of her classmates and their parents, he hoped for a once-in-a-lifetime vacation that would introduce his sixth-grader to the culture and country she'd studied. He didn't know their brief sojourn would ultimately change the lives of thousands of Tanzanian schoolchildren.

"We just thought it would be nice if we could give something back to the country where we'd had such a great time," said Johnston, a Boston lawyer.

The group had visited a school in a village outside the city of Arusha, the American kids playing with their Tanzanian counterparts in a pickup soccer game and seeing first-hand the sorry state of the village school. Children were crammed a hundred to a classroom, sitting on the dirt floor, sharing a few tattered books.

Thomson Safaris (www.thomsonsafaris.com), which organized the trip, not only introduces traveling families to native cultures by arranging such visits (even encouraging pen-pal relationships between the children ahead of time), but it also works hard to help these African communities. "It makes for a much richer experience," said Thomson co-founder Judi Wineland.

But in this case, it turned out to be much more than that.

As soon as the group returned from the safari, Johnston, working with Thomson Safaris, helped found Friends of Tanzanian Schools (www.friendsoftanzanianschools.org). Since then, the organization has funneled more than \$250,000 to Tanzania - much of it coming from other tourists - to build classrooms and teachers' houses for a dozen schools. The fund also provided the first computers in any primary school in Tanzania, and it has sent much-needed books and supplies. Friends of Tanzanian Schools has also brought some Tanzanian headmasters to the United States as part of an exchange program.

"We had no idea when we started what we could accomplish," Johnston said.

When my daughter Reggie and I visited the village of Ngiresi, an isolated farming community of 600 families located in the hills outside Arusha, teachers proudly showed off a new classroom as the children shyly looked on. Some had walked miles to school that morning in their flip-flops, and after their lessons were over, they would go home to help in the fields till dark, gathering grass to feed the cow, cutting firewood, fetching water. We were the first foreigners some of them had ever seen, and they giggled at their reflections in our digital cameras.

"As a teacher, I was so happy that some of our money went toward helping provide supplies and equipment for the kids," said Wendy Hyman, a Connecticut high school teacher who was with us in Ngiresi.

Hyman said she'd be more apt in the future to seek out a travel company that was "giving back" to native communities. Others say they chose Thomson for exactly that reason.

Wineland said many of Thomson's travelers contribute to the fund, in some cases continuing to send money years after their trip.

"People really care, and they're not waiting for the government to do it," Thomson said.

Anyone who has ever visited a third world country or even a Caribbean island knows that great need exists every Day. Spurred by what they've seen and the people they've met, tourists have been quietly making a difference elsewhere, too:

- In Antigua, guests at the upscale Curtain Bluff Resort (www.curtainbluff.com) support the Old Road Fund, which sends local children to the United States to go to tennis camp, to go to college or to get medical help. The fund also accepts donations of clothes, rackets, shoes and computers.
- The women (including a lot of moms) trekking in Peru with The Dragon'sPath (www.thedragonspath.com) have carried school supplies up to an isolated mountain village. "People really want to make that personal connection," said company founder and trip leader Kathy Moyer Dragon.
- To encourage tourists' awareness and to help the Maasai people develop their own tourism businesses, Seattle-based Wildland Adventures (www.wildland.com) introduced the Maasailand Safari in cooperation with the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition. Wildland's president, Kurt Kutay, a longtime supporter of travel philanthropy, said travelers these days are eager to help, especially when they see first-hand how a small donation "can mean so much for local people with so little."

In the village we visited, the classrooms are still bare - no cheery posters on the walls, no shiny desks, no computer stations or shelves stocked with colorful books and tubs of crayons. There's no electricity. The children use bottle caps they've gathered to learn basic math. There were just 14 classrooms and 17 teachers for more than 1,000 children.

The village is proud of the two new classrooms the fund helped build. But there's such a long way to go. (Read more taking the kids at www.takingthekids.com)

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Taking the Kids™ To the Galapagos Islands

By Eileen Ogintz

The teen was having a fit. He was hungry, and his mother had left to go to work. His father couldn't calm him down and finally gave up trying. The teen stomped around, squawking. Sound familiar? Except we're not talking about humans here, but rather birds — a juvenile Nazca booby a few feet away from me on an island in the Galapagos that is home to more than half a million birds.

The bay we're anchored in — Darwin Bay at Tower Island (also known as Genovesa Island) — is in fact a caldera formed by an ancient volcano, and we walk around looking at more birds than I've ever seen in one place: red-footed boobies, blue-footed boobies, gulls and frigates, which ignore us just like teens often do. We hike up steep steps to the rim of the caldera and watch the Nazca boobies' mating dance — the male whistles to try to attract a female.

All week, as we cruise the Galapagos Islands off the coast of Ecuador, we joke about the parallels between the amazing creatures we encounter here and human family behavior. We pose with giant tortoises that ignore our presence, and we try not to disturb the marine iguanas sunning themselves on the rocks. Sea lions swim circles around us in the water. We hike over black lava fields and snorkel with sea turtles and stingrays. I feel like we've stumbled into an episode of "Nova."

This wouldn't be everyone's first choice for an expensive vacation. There are no beach chairs or tiki bars on these protected beaches, where tourists may only venture with a guide. But this is an adventure we'll never forget, starting with those sea lions we spotted on San Cristobal Island, snoozing on rowboats as if they owned the place.

Along with three other families, we've signed on for a weeklong cruise organized by Seattle-based Wildland Adventures (www.wildland.com), a member of the Trusted Adventures consortium of travel companies (www.trustedadventures.com).

Our home for the week is an 83-foot boat called Flamingo 1, operated by Ecoventura (www.ecoventura.com).

It's comfortable but certainly not luxurious. We're surprised that we can find room for all of our gear in the small cabins. There are perhaps 85 tour boats in the Galapagos Islands, from a 100-passenger cruise ship to small boats that sleep four or six people.

Some of the tour boats are yachts, including one designed to replicate Charles Darwin's ship, the HMS Beagle. Ours seems just the right size, sleeping 20 passengers. It has a crew of 11, including two experienced naturalists, Harry Jimenez and Orlando Romero, who make every excursion an adventure — even for the 8-year-old twin boys on board.

Captain Manolo Martinez has five children at home, he tells us over dinner. He invites a different family to dinner each night. We're a varied group: my husband Andy; 22-year-old Matt, who's going to start an exciting new job when he gets back; 20-year-old Reggie, our college junior; and 15-year-old high-schooler Melanie. There are also the Peets, from Seattle, with 12-year-old Summer and 9-year-old Graham; and the Strausses, from Bethesda, Md., with 8-year-old twins Joshua and Daniel. Then there is Subodh Das, of Lexington, Ky., who is here with his 35-year-old daughter Mona Mullin, friend Diane Moore and 25-year-old son Som Das. They try to take an exotic trip every year, Subodh says, his children joking that they're happy to travel with dad since he's paying. "And I'd rather leave them memories than money," adds Subodh, a divorced engineer.

Many families we meet seem to agree with that philosophy. These remote islands off the coast of Ecuador, where the wildlife (especially the giant tortoises) inspired Charles Darwin's work, have emerged at the top of many families' travel wish lists. Where else can you snorkel with sea lions or watch a sea lion nurse her pup? Even at a cost of more than \$10,000 for a family of four, adventure companies such as Wildland Adventures, Austin-Lehman Adventures (www.austinlehman.com), Abercrombie & Kent (www.abercrombiekent.com) and Thomson Family Adventures (www.familyadventures.com) report increasing interest in Galapagos trips designed for families.

"We're not the kind of family that likes to go and sit on a beach," said Sam Peet. "Definitely not," confirms 12-year-old Summer Peet as she races off to splash in the surf, sea lions lazing nearby.

The beach where we've stopped to swim and snorkel is full of sea lions — mamas and their nursing pups, frisky adolescents, fathers marking their territory. Every day is a different island and a different adventure. We see Sally Lightfoot crabs, bright red against the black lava rocks; great blue herons; penguins (yes, there is a warm-water species here); and even a short-eared owl, which is small and is apparently the only owl on the planet to hunt food during the day (no predators for the owls to worry about). Frigates hitch a ride on the mast of our boat, much to the kids' delight.

Before dinner each night, the naturalists tell us what we'll do the following day. Important clothing details — hiking shoes vs. flip-flops, shorts vs. swimsuits — are discussed. It's nice to leave all the planning and cooking to others. We do have to keep track of our own snorkel gear and wetsuits (provided by the boat) and our beach towels. That's not as easy as it sounds with the gear in identical mesh bags.

And because we're so close to the equator, we see stars in both the Northern Hemisphere and Southern Hemisphere at night. They are so bright. I can't believe we're here in the Pacific Ocean at the center of the globe.

"You may not remember the food, but you'll remember everything we saw," said Som Dos.

"This has really exceeded expectations," said Steve Strauss, whose only worry is that his two boys aren't old enough to fully appreciate this trip.

But even in paradise, kids get hot and tired, siblings bicker, teens want to get away from their parents, the boat rocks too much some nights, and the food gets tiresome. It's all part of the adventure, we tell each other. On a small boat like this, everyone must make an effort to get along. It's not as if you can go elsewhere and get away from anyone, whether your own family or others on board. There's no entertainment except that which we supply ourselves. When we're not hiking, snorkeling or exploring, we congregate on the top deck with cushioned chaise lounges, shaded from the sun, to read, talk or take a snooze — just like the sea lions. The kids play Scrabble and cards. The crewmembers do all they can to make us happy.

"Remember, you're in paradise," the naturalists keep reminding us. How can we forget?

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com, where Eileen Ogintz welcomes your questions and comments.)

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Taking the Kids™ Let's Hear it for Grandparents!

By Eileen Ogintz

Give Grandma and Grandpa a big hug. They deserve one, especially on vacation - and especially because they're often footing the bill.

Wherever there are kids, you'll see grandmas and grandpas: patiently waiting in line for the Dumbo ride at Disney World, shelling out for a gaggle of grandkids to play bingo on the cruise ship, sitting in between two wildly excited children at their first Broadway matinee, threading worms on a Minnesota dock so that two kindergartners can fish. Grandparents are also the ones twiddling their thumbs in the hotel room or beside the pool while the baby naps.

Some hearty grandparents are out skiing, playing golf or tossing the football with their grandchildren. Others go along with wheelchairs. It doesn't matter. What counts is how hard they try to create happy vacation memories for their grandchildren, many of whom live thousands of miles away.

(Send your favorite tales about traveling with grandkids and grandparents to Eileen@takingthekids.com)

I hear from grandparents all over the country who want to plan trips with their children and grandchildren. Sometimes they want to gather everyone for a special celebration, such as the couple who wanted to mark their 40th anniversary by taking their extended family back to the Caribbean, where they had honeymooned. Other times, they just want to spend some time alone with their grandchildren.

Here are some useful rules for multi-generational vacations. I hope they make your travels with your grandchildren easier, happier and, in some cases, cheaper.

- Always plan to go someplace where there will be other children. No matter how much you love your grandkids, you'll need a break and some adult time.
- Share a favorite passion. It doesn't have to cost a bundle. If you love baseball, take your Little League pitcher to spring training, or to watch the local minor league team, whose players might actually talk to your kids before the game.
- Sign on for one of Elderhostel's grandparent-grandchild programs at www.elderhostel.org.
- Check out a national park. If you're 62 or older, you can get a lifetime entrance pass (the "Golden Age Passport") for \$10. The pass is good for you and any passengers in your car. The only hitch: You have to get the pass in person at a federal area (a national park, national historic site, wildlife refuge, etc.) where an entrance fee is charged. You must also show proof of age. (For more information, visit the National Park Service Web site at www.nps.gov.)
- Don't let disabilities hold you back. Let the kids help wheel around the bags or the wheelchair.
- Dust off the old photo albums. Take the opportunity to tell the grandkids what your life was like when you were their age, and show them some of your favorite haunts, whether a museum, hotel or the part of the country where you came from.

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com and read Eileen's blog.)

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Taking the Kids™ And Volunteering In New Orleans (Where They Still Need a Lot of Help)

By Eileen Ogintz

Izzie Alley, 11, looked around cautiously, as she stepped inside the small New Orleans garage that has been temporarily converted into a studio apartment for the Strauss family. “Smaller than your bedroom,” observed Margie Alley, Izzie’s mom. Izzie nodded, taking in the space crammed with three beds, computer, clothes, and fridge. Nearly three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, thousands like the middle-class Strausses are still trying to pick up the pieces. The Alleys have come from suburban New York during a sunny spring week to help.

“I love them,” said an appreciative Denise Strauss, the mom of a 10-year-old daughter and herself a volunteer. “They get to see the human element in all this.” She told the Alleys how they left their home with not much more than the shorts and flip-flops they were wearing and didn’t return for more than a year.

“We know stress, but not this kind of stress,” said Izzie’s grandmother, Judy Goldsmith, a florist from Manhasset, N.Y., who got the idea to bring her family here when she met a family who had spent time volunteering in New Orleans as part of a Bar Mitzvah celebration. Through them, she founded the organization Beacon of Hope Resource Center (www.lakewoodbeacon.org), which is one of the few volunteer organizations that can arrange projects suitable for families with young kids.

All along the block in the middle-class Lakeview neighborhood where the Strauss family lives, less than a mile from the 17th Street Canal levee break, are houses in various stages of construction. Some are still boarded up; others are brand new, with flowers planted outside. Fewer than half the houses in the neighborhood are occupied. The Strausses hope to be back in their house by June 1 and the Alleys and the Goldsmiths are doing what they can to help, stacking bricks and clearing debris. It’s hot, sweaty work but the Alley kids don’t mind. “You feel good doing this,” Izzie said.

The situation is more desperate a few miles away in the Lower Ninth Ward, which was completely destroyed. None of us will ever forget those haunting images of people waiting on their roofs for rescue. In the Lower Ninth Ward, far fewer homes have been rebuilt; concrete slabs and a few steps are all that’s left of some. In a front-page story recently, The Times-Picayune reported that the slow progress and little help from city agencies frustrate residents of these storm-damaged neighborhoods.

“A lot of people had no insurance,” explains Pam Dashiell, of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Center. “They are working on their houses as they can and they need all the help they can get. The progress that’s being made is because of people coming to help. It’s a real person-to-person thing.”

There are college kids from around the country working here this week. And this is the area where Brad Pitt is focusing his much publicized — and much appreciated — efforts. (Your kids could donate \$5 of their vacation souvenir or birthday money to www.makeitrightnola.com.)

But even in upscale neighborhoods, like in Metairie where Jeanne Elizardi raised her three kids, progress has been slow. Some million-dollar houses have been gutted and abandoned, she said. “It’s just so sad how long it is taking people to get back on their feet,” said Elizardi, who has been deeply involved in the volunteer effort.

But there is a lot of good news here, too. Tourism is back — big time. Walk around the French Quarter where the Alleys are staying and you’ll see an entirely different New Orleans. Restaurants in the French

Quarter are packed. Tourists are everywhere, eating New Orleans' famous beignets (sugar covered pastries) at Cafe Du Monde (www.cafedumonde.com), listening to the street musicians in front of Jackson Square and strolling through Woldenberg Riverfront Park, going to the first-rate Audubon Aquarium (check out the white alligator) and Audubon Zoo (www.auduboninstitute.org). They're taking the free ferry to visit Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World (www.mardi-gras-world.com) where many of the floats are built, walking down Bourbon Street, shopping (gotta have some Mardi Gras beads) and touring museums. Check out the Mardi Gras exhibit at the Louisiana State Museum (<http://lsm.crt.state.la.us/>).

Tourists line up outside before 9 a.m. waiting for Brennan's (www.brennansneworleans.com) to open for their famous three-course breakfast, which ends with bananas foster, and at lunchtime outside the Acme Oyster House (www.acmeoyster.com), here since 1910. (Acme is the place to introduce the kids to New Orleans' famous po-boy sandwiches, New Orleans officials are proud to tell you that there are now 910 restaurants here — 100 more than there were pre-Katrina. Kids will also love the Red Fish Grill (www.redfishgrill.com), which offers all sorts of fish sculptures, mobiles and a kid-friendly menu.

There are plantation tours and airboat rides in the swamps of Cajun country. Visit www.24nola.com or www.neworleanscvb.com to plan your itinerary. If you want a guide who plays to the kids, Mary LaCoste, a retired education professor and grandmother, is terrific. E-mail her at edprofno@aol.com.

Because there is so much to see and do here (not to mention eat), New Orleans is a great place to combine a volunteer effort with some sightseeing — as did the Alleys and Goldsmith. You'll feel good contributing to the economy and the kids might absorb a little history in the process. So what was the Louisiana Purchase all about? Gumbo anyone? Fried alligator?

"You come away with so much more than you give," promises Ted Goldsmith, a retired businessman who had never done anything like this before on vacation.

"Seeing it on TV isn't the same as experiencing it yourself," added his granddaughter Izzie. "And it's been fun."

For more volunteer opportunities in Louisiana, visit www.volunteerlouisiana.gov. Some nonprofits can even arrange housing. Check out the Spirit to Serve program at Marriott (<http://www.neworleansmarriott.com/home.php>) and Renaissance Hotels, which will give \$50 of your room rate to New Orleans Habitat for Humanity. They'll also throw in free breakfast. Rates start at \$149. Make sure to tell hotels, restaurants and attractions you are volunteering. They are very appreciative and may be able to offer a discount, or at least an extra dessert. And make sure you check out special discounts for volunteer travel at (volunteer.cheaptickets.com).

"So much good is coming out of all of this," added Jeanne Elizardi, as we drove around looking at the building projects. "We just hope people don't forget that we still need everyone's help."

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com and read Eileen's blog and her trip diary about her visit to New Orleans.)

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF VOLUNTEERING WITH YOUR KIDS Since Hurricane Katrina, Tulane University has taken a lead nationally in organizing service learning initiatives and now requires them for graduation. If you are embarking on a volunteer project with your kids in New Orleans or elsewhere, Vincent Ilustre, the executive director of Tulane University's Center for Public Service (www.cps.tulane.edu) suggests:

- **DO** research before you arrive so the kids have an understanding of exactly what happened during and after Hurricane Katrina. Just search the Internet for “Katrina projects.”
- **PLAN** a project before you arrive. (Visit www.volunteermatch.org, www.volunteerlouisiana.org or www.lakewoodbeacon.org.)
- **LISTEN** to the locals. Don’t come thinking you have all the answers.
- **ASK**, “How are you doing?” The locals will be glad to tell you their story.
- **TALK** to the kids about the experience and how they can continue volunteer efforts at home.

“By coming here, they realize they can help,” explains Ilustre.

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com, where Eileen Ogintz welcomes your questions and comments.)

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Taking the Kids™ And Recession-Proofing Your Vacation

By Eileen Ogintz

The timing couldn't be worse.

Just as we're all planning summer getaways, gas prices go through the roof, and the pundits suggest the economy is going to get worse. No wonder for the first time in a decade AAA reports that the numbers of us traveling over July 4th has dropped. All this when you were gearing up to celebrate your parents' 50th anniversary with a big family trip, your college roommate is getting remarried across the country, the kids keep reminding you that last winter, during that horrible weather, you promised a trip to Orlando or your daughter (like mine) just graduated from college and you want to take her on a special trip to celebrate.

Still, I don't think we should give up planning those special trips to Orlando, Europe, Alaska or wherever you've dreamed of celebrating that birthday, graduation or anniversary — as long as we can figure out how to make it work financially. I say go for it! And obviously so do you. Many of us may not be planning that trip of a lifetime, but we are planning to take a vacation this summer.

A new survey from the big travel search engine kayak.com found that while the economic downturn has caused 79 percent of travelers to change vacation plans, those surveyed say they still intend to get away this summer. The trick then is to figure out how to vacation this summer without busting the budget.

“You've got to plan carefully,” suggests MaryAnn Whipple, a mother of four from Canandaigua, N.Y., who has made her kids oatmeal in hotel rooms' coffeemakers and is one of the winners of www.cheaptickets.com's “show us your cheap” contest. (Visit the Website for more tips from the winners.) “If you go with another family, you'll definitely save money,” she says. That's an especially good tactic for single parents who not only can split costs but childcare chores. Here are some other ways to save bucks and vacation happy this year:

- **OPT FOR A FEW DAYS IN THE CITY** where you can find plenty of weekend deals on hotels when the business people are gone. Check their official tourism websites. Go to Houston for example, and see Lucy's Legacy at the Houston Museum of Natural Science (www.lucyexhibition.com). Lucy, the 3.2 million-year-old skeleton retrieved from Ethiopia in 1974, is the oldest and most complete adult human ancestor ever found on African soil. Go to Detroit where the city is celebrating The Year of the Car, which commemorates the founding of General Motors and the sale of Henry Ford's first Model T. There are scores of activities, museum exhibits and projects. (Ready to build your own Model T? www.motorcities.org). Or see The Horse, a comprehensive exhibition on the enduring bond between horses and humanity, which opened May 17 and runs through Jan. 4, 2009 at the American Museum of Natural History (www.amnh.org).
- **CONSIDER A CRUISE.** Especially with multigenerational groups and kids of widely different ages, this is a good choice especially because your lodging, food (all you can eat!) and entertainment (including organized activities for the kids and teens) are included on board. . And with more than 24 domestic ports, you can save more by driving rather than flying to your ship. Look for deals where kids, as third and fourth passengers in a cabin, cruise at deep discounts.. Visit www.cruising.org.
- **THINK OFF-SEASON.** Who cares if it's hot, as long as there is a pool! Fort Lauderdale, for example, is offering Summer of Discovery 2-for-1 deals (www.sunny.org/summer) on everything from golf to spas to movies to kayak and snorkeling tours. Charter a yacht from SunSail (www.sunsail.com) for 35 per cent off. You'll find incredible deals — and cheaper flights (maybe you can finally use those frequent flier miles) throughout ski country. Keystone Resort in Colorado

(www.keystoneressort.com) offers a family adventure package that includes an Adventure Passport for activities that include a golf clinic, guided hikes, paddleboat rentals and more. I love that spa treatments are discounted too.

- **GO FOR THE FREEBIES** and discounts whether it's kids eat free, activities are free, or you get a gas rebate and hotel credits for the new airline fees for checked bags. Wherever you go, ask what the hotel, cruise line, resort can do for you. Remember, they want your business!

(For more Taking the Kids and to read Eileen's blog, visit www.takingthekids.com.)

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Taking the Kids™ When They Have Autism

By Eileen Ogintz

Wherever 6-year-old Lennon Gunn goes — even to Germany to visit his dad — he’s got his wooden-handled spatula in hand.

His mom doesn’t mind a bit and even carries spares. “It starts the dialog,” says Shannon Gunn, who tells everyone she meets who might otherwise be put off by Lennon’s odd behavior that he is autistic and his spatula helps him feel more comfortable on unfamiliar turf. “I’m not afraid to explain,” says Gunn, who works with parents of newly diagnosed children at the Village of Hope Center for Autism in San Antonio, Texas.

Traveling with kids, especially young ones, we all know is never easy. They don’t want to let go of their “lovey” to put it on the security belt at an airport. They get impatient in long lines, hate to sit still on airplanes and may cry and spill their drinks. And the passengers, restaurant patrons or hotel guests in the vicinity may not be sympathetic to the beleaguered parent’s plight.

That situation is only exacerbated for children who suffer from Autism Spectrum Disorder, a complex developmental disability that affects a person’s ability to communicate and interact with others. These kids, who look perfectly normal, often are very anxious and find travel — the noise, the crowds, the lines, the disruption of their routine — particularly difficult, explains Dr. Lynda Geller, a psychologist and nationally known autism expert at the NYU Child Study Center.

They may have a tantrum or make strange noises. The smallest thing might set them off. These kids, she adds, don’t have the social skills to realize they are disturbing anyone else. “For these families, the judgment of others can make a very difficult situation far worse,” Dr. Geller says. “They have no idea what that parent is going through.” They just see a bratty child and inept parent, other parents who have autistic kids agree. “Think of standing in that parent’s shoes,” says Dr. Geller. “Be sympathetic rather than disapproving. How would you feel?”

And no matter how well a parent prepares — as with any child — there can be a meltdown in a public place. That’s what happened recently to North Carolina mom Janice Farrell, who ultimately was asked to get off an American Eagle flight with her 2-year-old autistic son Jarett. “If they would have been a little more understanding, I think that none of this would have been a problem,” she told local TV reporters.

The situation caused an uproar in the blogosphere — more than 1,500 posts just on the “Good Morning America” Website alone, after the family appeared there. American Airlines spokesman Tim Smith said the bigger issue — besides the child’s uncontrollable screaming — was that he wasn’t buckled in his seatbelt — an FAA requirement for takeoff. “Every effort was made to help the passenger comply with safety regulations,” he said. “It was a last resort measure to deplane the two passengers.” Smith added that it is possible for any passenger to note special needs in their customer record, which might have alerted the crew in advance to be prepared.

Whatever airline you are flying and whatever special needs your family might have, that certainly is a good idea. Delta Airlines, in fact, is going a step further, developing special travel recommendations for families traveling with someone with developmental disabilities. The guidelines, prepared with Atlanta’s Marcus Institute for Development and Learning, will soon be available on Delta’s Website (www.delta.com) said Delta spokesman Katie Connell.

Autism is now the fastest-growing developmental disability, diagnosed in 1 in 150 births and impacting more than a million Americans, according to the Autism Society of America (www.autism-society.org). The majority of those affected — more than 80 percent — are under 21 notes Peter Bell, the executive vice president at the advocacy organization Autism Speaks (www.autismspeaks.org). Bell is himself the parent of an autistic teen. Bell says some families don't go anywhere, not even out to dinner, for fear of a situation like what happened to the Farrells — while others, his own family included, opt “not to let autism rule our lives.”

Bell adds that his family of five has successfully navigated national parks, cross-country car trips, theme parks, ski resorts (where many offer terrific adaptive programs) and Hawaii. “It takes extra time and practice,” he says, and isn't often relaxing, but he encourages parents to try — and the rest of us to be more empathetic.

Suburban Miami mom Katherine Revell, whose 6-year-old son Eric has autism, said to encourage that empathy, she now hands out wallet-sized cards from the Autism Society of America that explain the disability to people, including airport security screeners. The good news is that there are more options for these families than ever before. The Autism Society of America, in fact, just brought 2,000 people to Orlando because Walt Disney World is so accommodating with front-of-the-line passes for autistic children who find it so difficult to wait, said spokesman Marguerite Kirst-Colston, whose son has autism.

Other theme parks, including SeaWorld and Busch Gardens, also have similar programs. Resorts like Club Med and cruise lines like Norwegian, Carnival and Disney also try to be more inclusive in their organized activities, though that doesn't always work. At the same time, Adaptive Sports Centers are offering special camps and programming that enables these kids and their parents to get out and try activities — even white water rafting — that would be impossible otherwise.

The Adaptive Sports Center in Crested Butte, Colo., (www.adaptivesports.org) is having a special High Adventure Weekend for families with children with autism, while the National Ability Center in Park City, Utah (www.DiscoverNAC.org) offers several week-long day camps this summer. This allows autistic children to have a special program, the families to have some time with their other children and the entire family to share vacation time together, said Ability Center spokesman Ryan Jensen. The National Sports center for the Disabled in Winter Park, Colo.,(www.nscd.org) and Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports (www.vermontadaptive.org) also offer programs and activities appropriate for these families.

As for Shannon Gunn, she and her twins just got back from Oregon and are looking forward to a Disney Cruise at Christmas. “Every time I take my child someplace,” she says, “We all win.”

(SIDEBAR)

If you are traveling with a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder, here are some tips from the experts to make the experience easier:

- **PREPARATION IS THE BEST DEFENCE.** Call ahead and inform the airline, hotel, resort and cruise line of your child's condition and ask what special accommodations are available. Ask if you need a fridge, inside room, etc.
- **BRING** your child's own sheets, if you think that will make him more comfortable.
- **SELECT** an environment your child can handle.
- **TALK ONLINE** with other parents who have been there, done that. Simply
- **GOOGLE** the destination and kids with autism and you likely can connect with a local parent's group.

- **BOOK** low season on a cruise or at a resort like Club Med so there will be fewer children and the staff will have more time to devote to yours.
- **TRAVEL** by car if you think flying will be too difficult. Opt to stay someplace where you can eat some of your meals in your room.
- **BE FORTHRIGHT** explaining the situation to those you meet.
- **DEVELOP** “social stories” complete with pictures that explain to your child exactly what you will be doing and where you are going.
- **WHATEVER HAPPENS**, stay calm.

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com, where Eileen Ogintz welcomes your questions and comments.)

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Taking the Kids™ And Exploring an Ancient Culture in New Mexico

By Eileen Ogintz

Three hundred and 40.

That's how many steps and ladder rungs we climb to Bandelier National Monument (<http://www.nps.gov>), to crowd into its ancient (dating back to before 1300) cliff dwellings about 50 miles northwest of Santa Fe, N.M. Even the kids are impressed that Ancestral Pueblo families lived here before Columbus arrived, even before the Pilgrims stepped foot on Plymouth Rock.

We look at the crumbling adobe and try to imagine apartment-type dwellings that stretched more than three stories: We crouch inside the ceremonial Kivas where the ancient people gathered to teach the children, weave, congregate and discuss the affairs of the day. These unique sites — Bandelier certainly isn't the only one — and spectacular desert landscape make New Mexico a terrific family destination winter or summer, and one that will win kudos from all ages.

Where else can you ski one day — in Taos or outside of Santa Fe, gallery hop or take a cooking lesson the next, shop or tour museums till you drop and gain a new perspective on Native American history?

Take The Kids To Visit A Pueblo. New Mexico is home to 22 sovereign Indian nations, including the Navajo Nation, two Apache Tribes and 19 Pueblos. (The Pueblo of Acoma (<http://www.skycitytourism.com>), which sits on a 367-foot-high sandstone rock, is considered the oldest inhabited village in the United States. The Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque can help you get started (www.indianpueblo.com).

You can even stay on a Pueblo — the deluxe Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort and Spa (<http://www.tamaya.hyatt.com>), owned by the Santa Ana Pueblo and managed by Hyatt, offers holiday packages. The 350-room resort, halfway between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, sits on 500 sprawling acres of a 73,000-acre reservation and is one of the largest resorts ever built on Native American land. And you can't beat the Sandia Mountains on the horizon for scenery.

Great pains have been taken to respect the ancient spirits at the resort. One of the pools is built in a circle, replicating the ceremonial Kivas that have been an integral part of Pueblo life for centuries. Spa treatments are designed to use products that are indigenous to the area (how about a hydrating treatment using desert seaweed or an exfoliation treatment with Tamaya Blue Corn flour?) The signature Corn Maiden restaurant serves dishes from the region. The profits go back to the Pueblo and fund everything from college scholarships to senior centers.

Sure you can hang out by the pool, opt for the spa, or play golf here, but horseback riding through the pueblo's backcountry to see petroglyphs, making adobe bricks, drums or pottery or visiting the cultural center and museum devoted to the history, culture and art of the Santa Ana Pueblo make this a different experience.

"All of these activities appealed to us," said Eric Shimabukuro, who is from suburban Chicago and was busy making bricks one morning with his two daughters, Lauren, 9, and Carolyn, 7. New Mexico, I think, as I make my way down the ladder at Bandelier and later, watch my daughters knead the dough for Pueblo bread at the Hyatt Tamaya, under the watchful eye of a member of the Santa Ana Pueblo, can be a terrific winter vacation bet for families who's members are not all equally enthusiastic about spending their entire vacation on the slopes. Especially at holiday

time when there are traditional dances at Northern New Mexico Pueblos and a variety of celebrations in Santa Fe and around New Mexico (www.santafe.org, www.nmtourism.org). Santa Fe Mountain Adventures (www.santafemountainadventures.com) can help plan a unique sojourn, organizing family activities from touring Bandelier to geocaching, an outdoor treasure-hunting game, to snowshoeing, cooking and pottery making.

“You get so much more out of a visit to a place like this when you’re with a guide,” offers David Thompson, whose family joined us touring Bandelier with Santa Fe Mountain Adventures guides Bill Neuwirth, a college professor, and Anne Stanley, an artist and guide.

As we climb ladders and steps, courtesy of the National Park Service (www.nps.gov/), Neuwirth points out the foot holes in the volcanic rock that the ancient peoples used. We wonder what it was like to live in this community so long ago when 30 was considered old, when children were married as soon as they reached puberty and when everything was about the community, not individuals. They raised corn, (the Pueblo people have some 50 recipes to prepare corn) squash and beans. The elevation here is 7,000 feet, but it doesn’t seem to bother us. Where we hike at Bandelier, there are as many as 50 dwellings in one section— and the ground floor doesn’t have any doors or windows. The people who lived here climbed up to the roof and then climbed down into the room, which they probably did to protect their homes.

No one, Neuwirth explains, really knows why the ancient Pueblo people decided to leave — whether it was drought, or illness or an impulse to move to another Mesa; Neuwirth gestures out to the desert landscape, “You couldn’t have walked a meter in any direction without running into pueblo remains.” As we prepared to fly home, all I could think about were those ancient families (did their kids drive them crazy sometimes too?) and all those Pueblos I would have liked to visit, the cooking classes I didn’t have time to schedule, the hikes we didn’t attempt and the galleries and museums we missed.

“We did something different every day!” my husband said. More important, no one complained about what we did or where we were going. No one was bored. We ate great food, especially the guacamole at El Pinto restaurant (www.elpinto.com) outside of Albuquerque, which was made right in front of us.

Not that our New Mexico sojourn was perfect. Traveling with kids — no matter what their ages — never is, even in the most spectacular locales. What matters, of course, is the chance to explore a new place — a new culture — together.

Pass the guacamole, please.

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com, where you can read Eileen’s blog and her trip diary about her New Mexico adventure.)

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