

Quivertree **Top 10 Travel Tips**

We've been traveling with our kids for quite long now –over 17 years and six continents and we've learned a lot along the way. Some things you only learn by hard experience, but it always helps to be forewarned! So here are lessons we've picked up over the years, and we're not talking about the things you see everywhere, like finding theme parks or restaurants with kids menus – we're talking about real life family travel lessons we've picked up along the way.

Our mantra we've developed over the years is that if your children are not happy traveling, you won't be either. So if there's a site or museum you really want to see, or a restaurant you absolutely have to go to, think twice about how happy your children will be. Because if they're miserable, you will be too. You may need to improvise, but it's worth it. Ultimately, there's nothing quite like the thrill of discovery with your children.

-- Gideon and Philip

#1 Food

There are few topics more discussed and stressed over when dealing with family travel than food. That need to hunt down the restaurant with the kids' menu, or the one 'western' style restaurant in some fairly remote destination. People sweat over this too much; there is an excitement and joy over discovering and trying out new, different foods all over the world. We insist on knowing what we're eating and we're not overly daring, but part of the experience is trying local foods whether in a restaurant or in a market. Be careful though that the establishment looks clean. If you're worried about it, see how many local people are in the restaurant – if there are very few, try somewhere else. If you want to try things out but are too scared of foreign foods, hire a guide for a day. Generally they'll be very good at ordering for you. We found this really useful in China and Vietnam. You'll never go wrong with ice cream or candy, and spending time browsing through foreign supermarkets can be a really fun filled family adventure!



How can kids resist this?

#2 Toilets

Again, much is made of this, especially in less developed areas. So, surprise, surprise, often it's the grownups who make a far bigger fuss over the toilets than kids, who are better able to see the funny side of what can be an absurd situation. Generally, like with other aspects of traveling, they just seem to roll with it. (I have to admit I have had my less than memorable moments when my kids were very small (and not so small) – trying to change a diaper in a toy store in Amsterdam – they did not like that; unable to leave the car on safari – we used an empty water bottle; and more recently a very unfortunate scene in a huge indoor market in Beijing.) Carry toilet paper with you and do your homework! In Hanoi you can dart into any smart hotel and use their facilities; in Turkey all mosques have toilets, mostly very clean – use them!



Some toilets are worth waiting for.

#3 Do Your Homework

A lot of unnecessary stress is caused by not being prepared. Family travel is incredibly rewarding, but there is work involved. Be prepared. Don't be like me and assume Iceland is warm in summer (it's not; actually mostly it's really wet and cold – maybe that's why they call it Iceland). Check and double check flight times – they change more than you'd think, and sometimes quite a lot. Check flight connections. Check all the regulations different countries have for passports (while my whole family waltzed into Ireland, I was at first denied entry for not having enough space in my passport for the entry stamp) – some want 2 clear pages, some want the passport to be valid for 6 months after entry.

We also have our passports scanned into our email just in case. Read a guidebook for tips and scams: in many countries it's a good idea to carry one dollar bills for small items; check the calendar for local festivals – they create incredible atmosphere, but also generate huge crowds (and food may not be as readily available as usual); never accept a gift from a merchant who is actually selling the item; keep your valuables locked up or out of sight. There are many tips like these covered in the guidebooks.



Summer in Iceland.

#4 Luggage

Ok, this is a topic debated on the same level as food and toilets. Hand luggage only? Overpack or travel light? There are no obvious answers. One thing though is to pack clever. As a family, the more pieces you have the more that can get lost. Mix up your luggage among family members, so that if one bag gets lost, you're not stuck with one person without luggage (and if you have kids of similar ages, or kids who can share clothes with a parent like moms and teenage daughters, try packing items they'll all wear). Also, put key clothing in hand luggage, even if you check your luggage.

So if you're going on a beach vacation, put bathing suits and sandals in your hand luggage just in case. And if you're like me and my boys, and you like buying t-shirts all over the world, don't bring too many from home. I have tons of long sleeved light running shirts – I always take a few for anyone who needs a bit of warming up. They take up virtually no space, and can fit in almost any pocket. And remember, the more luggage you have, the harder it is to transport it whether you're carry it, flying in a small plane, or going by bus or taxi.



Only hand luggage in here, please.

#5 Go to and get to the airport early

Yes, I know this might fall into a mundane category. But family travel can be stressful, so don't make it more so. Remember, you're never in total control of all circumstances, so don't tempt fate too much. If you're in your home city, consider the potential traffic. If you're not, find out how long it really takes to get to the airport, and double-check your mode of transport (once in New York City, the taxi driver asked me how to get to JFK. Not good.) My experience is that USUALLY the airport is a breeze. But on those (hopefully) rare occasions when things fall apart, you'll be so grateful for the extra half hour you gave yourselves. And you probably weren't going to relax much at home anyway.

#6 Modes of Transport and Tours

This is a really important but overlooked part of family travel. If you're somewhere a little remote, usually in the developing world, and you're offered a great excursion, think very carefully about the transport. How many times my kids have got sick on a car/bus ride on terrible, windy roads, or seasick, I do not want to remember. And every time I thought why did I not anticipate this? If your kids don't do well on long car or bus rides, or at sea, take this into account when making your plans. Boats are particularly troublesome as there's no way off. Rather take a ferry: they're usually shorter, filled with locals (more colorful than other tourists) and probably sell food far more interesting than what the tour provides.



Middle Eastern transport.

And then we have tours. By this we mean those incredibly popular mass market day trips to some famous site. A little bit like 5. Tours of course can be excellent, interesting and sometimes a way of seeing something otherwise hard to get to. On the other hand, they're unbelievably restrictive. Once on, you can't get off, and if someone's bored, it's a recipe for disaster. Much better is hiring a private guide where you're in charge and can basically do whatever you want, or try doing it on your own. If you have doubts that your children can sit happily through, for example, a one day boat ride admiring the scenery don't do it. And always, always remember – if your kids are bored or miserable so will you.

#7 Involve Everyone!

Let your kids have an equal say in planning and activities especially as they get older. It's their trip too, even if they're not paying for it. Your family experiences will be so much richer and wonderful if you make your children a full part of every aspect of the trip. And it's a great way of keeping older kids - who may not be too happy about family travel – engaged and enthusiastic. Let them research places, guides and hotels. The excitement of getting to a place researched and planned by your children is truly amazing (In Hanoi in 2007, Ilan Nurick virtually coerced Philip's family into going to Angkor Wat – we are eternally grateful.). Have them keep blogs, take photos, videos. Just keep them engaged. They'll remember these family vacations forever, and you will all have shared something really special. If they think they can do something really challenging, let them try (thanks to our kids, we jumped out of a plane at 12,000 feet in New Zealand – we would never have thought of doing that.) Remember too that kids are not good at meandering, something adults often love to do. Our kids need to know the goal of the exercise, the 'where are we going to land up?', the 'what are we actually doing?' question. So have a goal, an ending point. This also arouses curiosity and can keep them engaged. Of course, some places are made for wandering: Cartagena, Barcelona, London, Antigua (Guatemala), Lijiang come to mind.



Incredible Angkor Wat.

#8 See through your children's eyes and go with the flow

Some of the best laid plans just don't always work. In Bogota, Benjy Nurick was bored in the Gold Museum (#1 must see sight in Bogota) after 10 minutes. However just outside we found a little market and a street full of shops selling soccer shirts. And what a good time we had! Many, many times we've been in a must see or do place and the kids have become bored. Quickly. Don't force the place on them. Just take it in stride – you're not traveling solo, and everyone is entitled to a good time. The great thing about travel is that in a foreign place with a different culture you're always just minutes away from something fun and interesting. It could be a market, shop, house of worship (often far more entertaining for kids than one would think), anything. Usually this entails walking the streets for 5 minutes. And enjoy seeing the world through their eyes – our kids noticed that children of similar ages in Cambodia were far shorter than them, and that people in China have inordinately long nose hairs! You can learn a lot from your children!



Markets – Always a fun activity.

#9 Try relaxing and enjoying yourself!

If you're like us, you may just be a travel perfectionist who wants everything to run smoothly, according to plan. And sometimes it just doesn't go that way. Things happen in life, and they happen in foreign countries too. Sometimes it's big stuff (flights getting cancelled), sometimes not so big (overnight fevers). You have to keep reminding yourself that it's never as bad as it seems and can be dealt with. Often, when I'm really upset by something, I'm buoyed to see that nobody else really cares – they're just carrying on, not worrying about it. Just put it all down to experience. And don't try doing too much – this can be a common failing. People want to do and see everything possible, no matter how tiring. I've learned over the years that it's not so much how much you see but the quality of the time you spend together. So sitting at a coffee shop in Guatemala together as a family doing Spanish homework, or strolling through indigenous markets in Asia and Latin America may not necessarily be in the guidebook, but it's these kinds of experiences that can provide a family with fabulous memories.



The joys of family travel!

#10 Keep traveling as a Family!

This is harder than it sounds. As all of our kids get older and busier, the days of family travel are somewhat limited. But it's really important to try traveling as a family for as long as possible. As they get older, they may strongly resist the notion of family travel, but you should try keeping them engaged. In our planning we use books, videos and maps. Look for activities that may appeal to older kids (we studied Spanish in Antigua, Guatemala) Like we said, you'll learn a lot from your kids, and your travel will be a rich source of family anecdotes years later. And you'll be closer as a family.



Kids will have fun anywhere!