



Make winter vacations fun for the entire family

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"Are we there yet?" These four words have mangled the nerves of moms and dads traveling with their children since the dawn of time. Family vacations don't have to be stress-plagued outings. With a little advance planning and some advice from the experts, your next trip together can be an exciting and unforgettable adventure.

Birmingham residents Beth and Scott Rubin heard the dreaded question on more than one occasion when they took a seven-hour road trip to visit a relative in Fond Du Lac, Wis., with sons Jake, 3, and Eli, 14 months.

Beth, a Southfield physician, and Scott, a mortgage processor in Livonia, brought along their niece and nephew, ages 15 and 13, for the ride.

"We had tons of CDs for the teenagers," Beth Rubin said. "They had personal CD players so they could listen to their music when we were listening to Barney."

Rubin said traveling with children has given her a new appreciation for her parents.

"They had a few food fights and paper fights, but they were all great," she said. "The kids slept a lot on the way."

The family minivan offered one benefit: Rubin's mom and dad didn't enjoy.

"We have captain's chairs so they can't reach each other," she said.

Advance planning helped keep the peace on the road.

"We distracted them. We'd pick different things — who's the first to see the American flag, who's the first to see a cow. Fond Du Lac is cow country," she said. "I brought some electronic games for them and we played 'I Spy.'"

Many experts advise parents to put together a travel kit for younger family members. It could include puzzles, books, finger puppets, comic books, eras, stickers or bubble wands. Ready-made travel kits are available at local bookstores or on the Internet. For teens and tweens, a basketball, jump rope, football or Frisbee will make welcome

diversions at rest stops and parks along the way.

"Before each vacation, I go out and buy a bag full of toys that my children have never seen before," Rubin said.

"They're new and exciting for them to play with." At age 3, Jake is a veteran traveler with several plane trips under his belt, including one to San Diego this summer. Jake didn't leave home unprepared.

"We pointed to airplanes we saw in the sky and said we're going up there," Rubin said. "Later, I'd overhear him talking to his toys and telling them they were going to San Diego."

RENTING EQUIPMENT

Many parents aren't aware of conveniences airports offer families with young children.

"You can take your stroller right to the gate of your airplane where they will check it like a wheelchair. Then it's waiting for you when you get off the plane," Rubin said.

"Once, we rented a DVD player and a few movies at the airport in Florida and we watched them on the plane. They came with a postage paid envelope you could use to send them back via UPS or at your arrival airport's drop-off box."

Some airports and resorts will even rent strollers and other baby and child necessities.

Moms and dads can enjoy some quiet moments, even if they bring their youngsters along when they travel.

"My cousin was a concierge at the hotel we stayed at in San Diego. His hotel had a couple of grandmotherly-type women who came in to the hotel to baby sit," she said.

"It was wonderful, it gave us the best of both worlds. We saw all the sites and when the kids conked out, it gave us the chance to have a romantic dinner. Do your research to make sure the hotel is offering a quality service, and then take advantage of it."

Rubin found some vacation spots — including cruises — were more kid-friendly than others.



FAMILY DESTINATIONS

Terry Rotenberg, owner of Gemini Travel in West Bloomfield, lists cruises and resorts among the top choices for family travel.

"You don't have to get up and think, 'What will we do now?'" Rotenberg said.

"Families can do things together or one can go to the movies onboard and another can lay in the sun."

Rotenberg followed her own good advice during one of her family vacations.

"My husband and I took a cruise to the Caribbean with the kids and grandkids to celebrate our 50th anniversary. There were 15 of us altogether," she said. "My kids brought walkie talkies. When they wanted to know where their kids were, they just went on the walkie talkie and asked."

There are several nearby winter resorts that offer exciting family diversions.

"Northern Michigan has so much stuff going on in the wintertime. There is snowshoeing, snowmobiling, ice skating, skiing and other winter sports," Rotenberg said. "Many resorts also have full-service spas. At resorts like Shanty Creek and Boyne Mountain, there are snowboard obstacle courses, inner-tube snow runs for kids and sleigh rides."

Wolf Lake Resort in Baldwin offers 600 miles of groomed and marked snowmobile trails and plenty of opportunities to enjoy downhill and cross-country skiing.

Sometimes, getting there

really is half the fun.

"On a plane or in a car, kids have to be sitting still. A train gives them more mobility."

Rotenberg said. "Trains are exciting for children. It's not something they usually do. They have a mystique about them."

The Canadian Snow Train from Sault Ste. Marie to Agawa Canyon is only one of the panoramic winter rail trips families can enjoy.

Rubin said moms and dads shouldn't be afraid of traveling with even the youngest children. "My husband and I both work full time, so vacations are a time for us to be together," she said. "We have memories that will last a lifetime."

Travel-proof your kids

Try these tips when you travel to make vacation fun for everyone in your family:

■ Bring CDs with headphones or game players for each child or teen. Taking along extra batteries can save you from a frantic late-night search for a drugstore in an unfamiliar town.

■ Make sure the resort or cruise you are going to has plenty of separate activities for teens and younger children. On your own, remember one big activity a day is more than enough for the youngest children.

■ Keep younger children on the same schedule they enjoyed at home. If they normally nap

twice a day, they should nap twice a day on the trip. Well-rested children are happy travelers.

■ Plan your rest stops on car trips, so you can enjoy visiting local amusements along the way.

■ Make sure your youngsters have their favorite snacks, with both healthy and fun treats.

■ Bring a first-aid kit along to treat minor cuts and bruises. Don't forget copies of important prescriptions. Discuss with your children the importance of not wandering off in crowded places and make sure to have recent photos of your youngsters in case they don't listen to your advice.

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