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The Middle East with Kids

By Michael Ungar



A few months before terrorists attacked New York and Washington we spent seven weeks traveling as a family through Egypt and Turkey. We had pre-booked nothing except our plane tickets and carried only four small backpacks. In my wife Cathy's pack was a budget travel guide and in mine a very long wish list of places to visit that our 5-year-old daughter Meg and 7-year-old son Scott had helped to write. With the playpens and diapers behind us, we were eager to become travelers again.

Backpacking through developing countries with young children is a great way to help them understand the world and their place in it. It also gives adults an introduction to other peoples and their cultures that they are unlikely to get without children as their ambassadors.

We purposely chose to rely on public transportation, small hotels, and restaurants where locals eat. Not only did we spend less money in seven weeks than we would have spent for seven days at a Caribbean resort, our children met people who embraced them as they would their own extended family. In Cairo's impossibly crowded minibuses, our children were passed from lap to lap by older women in patterned headscarves who smiled and waved away our anxiety. They settled our children on their knees while feeding them sticky sweets from their shopping bags.

For our first trip together we wanted a destination with sites that could easily be identified by the children. In Egypt and Turkey we found that perfect mix for children: ancient ruins, aquarium-like waters, deserts and camels. Even better, we found two cultures that value children in public places. It is best not to preplan the itinerary for such a trip. Pack lightly and trust in the hospitality you will find along the way. You are much more likely to meet and get to know people when serendipity guides you.

Use Public Transportation

Public transportation proved the best way to meet local families and experience the sights and sounds of everyday life. Not that we didn't want to take in the many wonders of the world as well. But guided tours are expensive, and they don't work well for kids. The one time we were forced to take a tour was in Luxor, the ancient city of Thebes, from which we went to visit the Valley of the Kings. We prepaid the night before for our seats on an airconditioned minibus for the drive into the desert. But the next morning our son announced he wasn't feeling well. After that, we opted to go by ourselves and to be content with seeing fewer sites on our own

schedule, using public transportation.

After the challenge of getting from place to place, food and bathroom details were our next biggest issues. Though Meg was content to fast on bread and bottled water for the first three days of the trip, we found that many places we visited had local foods that resembled pizza, hamburgers, fish sticks, and spaghetti. Elongated Turkish pizzas come piping hot out of brick ovens, and were actually voted better tasting than anything back home. Shwarma (a pita stuffed with hummus, vegetables, and a meat sauce) proved tastier than fried burgers. Kushari (Egyptian lentils with pasta) was a good substitute for spaghetti, if one left off the blackened onions. And fresh-squeezed fruit drinks with yogurt were an amazingly healthy way to have a refreshing snack on almost any busy street corner.

As for bathrooms, our children were so impressed by squat toilets, which proved much more sanitary than Western ones.

The same flexibility was needed when it came to sleeping. On buses, trains, and planes our children used their polar fleeces as mats and bedded down under our seats. This had the added advantage of ensuring they didn't wander off while we adults slept. In our budget hotels we found that with some practice we could all cram into a double bed.

Though there were moments of homesickness and times when we were all cranky, hot, and tired, it's our children who are now pushing us to plan our next travel adventure.

Family Travel Essentials

Packing for such an adventure takes a great deal of planning. What you bring must be absolutely essential. We had to be sure we always had a hand free and that our load was light enough to carry a 45-pound 5-year-old on our shoulders. In the developing world it is important to be able to compress yourself into small taxis, small minibuses, and small hotel rooms.

If you go as a family with young children into the developing world, consider bringing the following necessities and leaving the rest behind:

- **Packs:** Small 30- to 40-litre packs are best (smaller ones for children) with lots of outside pockets and an extra zippered carry-on size bag that can be folded and stored away.
- **Clothing:** Three complete changes will be plenty, including long pants, and shorts, along with a polar fleece, bathing suit, raincoat and pants, two small towels for the whole family, and a mesh laundry bag.
- **Safety Gear:** High quality 2-way family radios with a 3-mile range, whistles, and identification to pin on the children, money belts (not for the children), sun screen and powerful bug spray, duct tape, a well-stocked medical kit with antibiotics, antihistamines, motion sickness medicine, bandages, iodine, and lots of antiseptic wipes (consult your local travel health center at least six months before traveling).
- **For the Kids:** One long book to read, one stuffed animal or small toy, journal and pencils, headlamp-style flashlight, and identification (their own passport is better than being listed on a parent's).
- **Essentials:** Passports, debit and credit cards (travelers checks are rarely accepted), health insurance, shortwave radio, one special food treat for when homesickness sets in, sewing kit, spoons, sturdy plastic knife (and a pocket knife, if you are checking baggage), lots of large zip-lock plastic bags, souvenirs like pins and pens to give away, and a few special gifts for people you will meet.

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