

40 FAMILY TRAVEL TIPS

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Urban Travel:

1. Split the gang up into age-appropriate activities that will reduce sibling rivalry and give everyone something to talk about at dinner: while mom takes the younger kids to see the dinos at the museum, dad can take the older ones to a ball game. That way, everyone is happy.
2. Make museums and galleries fun by stopping first at the gift shop. Let each child pick three postcards of artifacts or works of art. Then hunt them out as if you were on a scavenger hunt. Another good game: cover the title of the painting and have everyone guess. The one closest wins a penny.
3. Make sure that kids know the name of your hotel, and its street address, just in case they get lost. For little ones not in a stroller, pin their name and hotel address, cell phone nos., etc. into the inside of their clothes with a safety pin.
4. Hunt out special family days with discounts or special programs. Many art galleries and museums offer free art workshops, child-friendly tours, free admission or special discounts.
5. Let each child pick an outing of their choice in each city and let kids research choices on the Internet or in guide books. You'll be surprised at the facts you learn. Everyone else must abide, although parents can sometimes veto choices.
6. Ditch the fried, fast-food family restaurants for more interesting neighbourhood ethnic eateries like East Indian, Korean, Greek or Italian restaurants. You'll find child-friendly ambience and healthier, tastier food. To help with good manners, have kids stand outside to "put on their restaurant behaviour" in mime. If they start misbehaving, remind them, "I thought you put on your restaurant behaviour." It works.
7. Look for high views, short rides along canals, rivers and streams or tours of the city with knowledgeable local guides. Many large cities such as Toronto, Melbourne, New York and Chicago offer free neighbourhood tours by resident parents with appropriate age-related facts and activities. Toronto guide Paul Oxley's strangest request (www.toronto.ca/tapto) from a visiting American family: to hunt out a safe tattoo parlour for their young teenagers.
8. Many large cities are featured as movie settings. Before you visit a particular city, hunt out one or more films featuring buildings, streets and customs of the place. My kids were thrilled when pulling into Washington, D.C. They couldn't stop shouting out the various buildings, all from goofy political comedies.
9. You can't beat a good hotel pool for letting kids let off steam. Search out hotels that feature water slides or great pools such as West Edmonton Mall, Delta Meadowvale in Mississauga, ON or Blue Mountain's Westin Trillium House in Collingwood, ON.
10. Often, you don't have to travel far to land an exciting urban vacation. If you already live in a city, it's an easy drive downtown to a family-friendly hotel, and a good chance to explore your own city.

Driving Tips

11. Position a soft bag filled with toys or puppets between the kids, or switch car seats from time to time.
12. Have mom or dad take turns in the backseat to play cards or tell a story.
13. Stop a lot. Both driver and passengers need to stretch their legs and get out of the car.
14. Bring along a Frisbee or hockey sticks and a puck for an impromptu sports break in a local park.
15. Bring along a special bin with crayons, colouring books, or stickers to be magically produced when you sit down in a restaurant.
16. Gift wrap a couple of toys, games or books and reward your children with a surprise if they've been patient or helpful.
17. Small bags filled with a treat to eat, some stickers and a toy can go a long way toward passing extra miles.
18. Pack an assortment to keep the kids from getting hungry or thirsty between meals. Think about edible crafts such as stringing ring-shaped cereal or small pretzels onto a licorice strand.
19. Give each child a survey of where you could stop along the way or what activities they might like to do at the destination and they can tick off their choices.
20. Story tapes or CD's are great for the car tape deck or for the kids' individual players.
21. Bring along a tape recorder so kids can play disc jockey and make their own recordings of wacky music or game shows while mom and dad are driving.
22. Road games. Resurrect some old standbys such as 20 Questions or License Plate Bingo.
23. Try Travel Alphabet. Everyone can look for something starts with "A"-an apple tree or an alligator-then move on through "barn" and "cow." The game ends when you've found a "zipper" or a "zero" on a sign.
24. Are We There Yet? Let the kids mark off the journey with a marker and a map. String a bunch of beads along an elastic and hang it across the back seat. After every 5 km., they can move a bead across.
25. Even the worst road trips will be memories to laugh about later so bring a camera along and let the kids take some pictures.

Flying Tips:

26. Do dress in layers, parents as well as wee ones. It's amazing how fast one can go through an entire wardrobe.
27. Don't forget something for baby to suck on during take-off and landing when the pressure on the ears is intense. Even if you're breastfeeding, bring extra water or juice. If everything is gone, baby can suck on a finger.
28. Do book ahead to get non-peak days and hours, your best chance of getting a spare seat and not having to fight the crowds. Reserve seats away from the busy galley or put in a request for special meals for older babies.
29. Don't necessarily book a Bulkhead seat. You'll get extra leg room and a Sky Cot bassinet can be attached for babies weighing under 20 pounds. But the armrests don't fold. You're often directly underneath a distracting movie screen. A sleepy baby may be more comfortable nestled beside you on an empty seat.

30. If you have to make connecting flights, inquire about airports with nurseries and playrooms or museums like the space museum in the Calgary airport. Check out the excellent www.flyingwithkids.com or ask the airline. Vancouver International for instance has a Children's Play Area and nursery; Philadelphia has a great hands-on Aviation Play Centre with tiny toilets.
31. For safety's sake, inquire about booking a second seat for baby and FAA-approved carseat. Some airlines charge 50 percent of a full fare ticket, others more. British Airways has its own safety-approved infant seat. If you do have to sit with baby on lap, think about investing in a Baby B'Air baby travel vest that attaches your child in flight to your seat belt. It comes in infant and toddler size and can be ordered at www.flyingwithkids.com.
32. Don't forget to ask about frequent flyer points for baby. Our three kids have been Air Canada Aeroplan members since they were little; even infants can collect, at two years, they become card-carrying members. After all, chances are that baby's first flight won't be his or her last.

Tips for Buying Souvenirs:

33. Visit the post office for interesting stamps, the bank for coins and colourful paper money (the kids will spend hours with such collections), shells from the beach and other found objects. My sons were ecstatic in Holland collecting artsy beer coasters and wrapped sugar cubes at every café.
34. For presents for folks back home, visit local grocery stores where the items may not be gift-wrapped but are so much less than at expensive airport shops or specialty stores. In Brussels last summer, we found wonderful Belgian chocolates at the local supermarket at half the price of those in the elegant windows of chocolatiers. We've brought home coffee and ginger beer from Jamaica, crepes and mustard in fancy jars from France and hot sauces from the southern States—all purchased locally. The recipients (even kids) were thrilled.

Tips for Eating while on holiday:

35. If you're a gang, it's often cheaper to employ a cook than to eat at a restaurant. We've had delectable meals delivered to our accommodation by locals who are proud to serve up their national dishes.
36. Don't forget to pack jars of peanut butter, dried fruit, crackers and other non-perishable staples for impromptu snacks.
37. Once at your destination, sprint to the grocery store to stock up. Bring plastic bowls, cups, plates and extra utensils as well as a Swiss army knife for cutting up bread, cheese or fruit. We've had great picnics in many foreign places and even airports.

Tips for Budget Travel:

38. **Time it right:** Forget the Caribbean at Christmas or Europe at the height of summer. Plan to visit during off-peak times for the best rates. We once flew to London at the beginning of February and paid \$45 each night for all five of us in two large hotel rooms near the British Museum. We had the city and top floor of double-decker buses to ourselves. The weather was balmy and we didn't have to fight for tables in trendy restaurants. Similarly, prices in the Deep South are slashed during summer. If you love heat, you're set. Resort properties on exclusive islands like Nevis or Anguilla (with winter rates up to \$1,200) slash their rates by half or more between May and September.
39. **Take public transit:** We've had the most entertaining (and most eye-opening) tours on local public transportation. You can ride around town for hours for only a couple of dollars. Ask the tourist offices for scenic routes or the routes where you can stop off with the kids to visit music stores, toy stores or attractions. On the #506 Streetcar in Toronto for example, you'll travel from Little India in the east end to Little Italy in the west end and finish with a romp in High Park. Or, hop a local ferry in Toronto, Vancouver or Victoria, BC. In Hong Kong, an Octopus card will let you ride the inexpensive local transportation with the kids such as the two-story

Star Ferry between the Kowloon Peninsula and Central District. The skyline views are impressive, especially when lit up at night. First class costs about HK\$2.20, or 30 cents, while a child under 12 yrs is HK\$1.30, or 20 cents. The ride, perfect for little ones, takes about ten minutes.

40. **Ride the train** during summer when VIA Rail offers such bargains as kids travel free and half-price discounts on some routes. Check <http://www.viarail.ca> for details.
41. If you really can't fathom life in a tent with three children under five, opt for **alternative park accommodations**. Some parks such as MacGregor Point Park near Port Elgin on the Lake Huron shore or Gatineau Park near Ottawa rent six-sided cottage-like structures called yurts with bunk beds and wooden floors. Algonquin Park offers ranger cabins; Awenda-Provincial Park near Penetanguishene, ON rents a rustic Stone Cottage—just steps from the beach. All these deals are much cheaper than a motel or hotel. Visit www.OntarioParks.com for other options.

And just in case:

Photo Tips When Kids Get Hold of the Camera and start recording the Vacation:

42. Forget the rules for now. Take photos at any time of day, even when the sun is at its peak. Tilt it, zoom it, try taking photos straight up while lying on the grass or straight down from the top of the monkey bars.
43. Go for close-ups and fill the entire frame of the camera. If you get really close, your dad's toothy smile or the eye of the fish you just caught might be the whole photo.
44. Take as many photos as possible. Even top photographers take rolls of film or tons of digital shots for that one super photo.
45. Take whatever you think is cool—whether it's the hair around a horse's eye, the waves crashing on the beach or the tallest statue you've ever seen.
46. Humor makes for photo fun. How about a T-Rex dinosaur coming out of your brother's head? Or your sister squinting into the sun? Or your toes painted purple with nail polish?
47. Seize the moment. If you see a good shot, snap it. It might be fantastic; it might not. But at least you've captured the experience.
48. Have fun with the camera. A tree branch may not look like a Hobbit. But you can make it look like one! Tell a unique story of your road trip adventures through the camera lens or screen.
49. Ask your parents to buy some inexpensive underwater cameras to take pictures in the pool or under the waves. It's a whole new look at what's beneath the surface of the water.
50. Pro photographers always make sure to be up early to catch the early morning sun. So ask to set the alarm one day and catch the family searching for shells before anyone else wakes up.
51. The more color the better. Bring along some bright colored T-shirts or hats to make things pop out from your pictures.

Kate Pocock has travelled the world with her three kids for 28 years. As one of Canada's top family travel writers, her family adventures have been featured in numerous North American publications including *Reader's Digest*, *AARP The Magazine* and *Miami Herald*. For ten years, she wrote a family travel column for the *Toronto Sun* newspaper. She is the author of *Fodor's Around Toronto with Kids* and wrote 14 chapters for *National Geographic Guide to Family Adventure Vacations*. As a freelance writer and photographer, she's won many awards including Best Family Travel Stories from NATJA and a National Magazine Award.