

The New York Times

TRAVEL | Q&A Deborah DicksonSmith's Tips for Family Travel

By RACHEL LEE HARRIS APRIL 5, 2012

AS an editor and travel writer for LittleNomads.com, a Web site about traveling with children, and a contributor to publications like *Holidays With Kids*, Deborah DicksonSmith has traversed the world researching family vacations. But her real education began when she and her partner, Simon Mallender, combined their families and began traveling with five of the most severe critics: their children.

Ranging in age from 9 to 17, the children have joined them on trips to destinations as exotic as Vietnam and as rugged as the Rocky Mountains. They have discovered that a great summer holiday doesn't have to include mouse ears or wands (though a water slide never hurts). And though getting to faroff places is always a challenge, it's worth it for the learning experience, Ms. DicksonSmith said.

Here are excerpts from a conversation about family vacations that aren't built around theme parks.

Q. What's the most important thing to look for when planning a family trip?

A. Make sure the destination is a crowdpleaser. There should be balance between what the kids will enjoy and what you will enjoy.

Q. Should the majority of your budget go to an airline or hotel? A. That's a toughie. A budget airline, especially on longhaul flights, can put you in a bad mood at the start and ruin any restorative effects. But ultimately, you're going to spend more time in the hotel.

Q. Which hotel amenities are essential? A. Laundry and a fridge. A fridge is essential for sandwich making (and for storing beer and wine for you).

Q. How do you manage kids on a flight or in airports? A. The inflight entertainment and services provided for kids are key. Buy premium economy seating; more space, priority checkin and use of the airport lounge are worth a little extra.

Q. Where should families go if they want to skip the theme park?

A. Kanchanaburi province, in Thailand's west. It's best known for the bridge across the River Kwai. We used [River Kwai Jungle Rafts](#) — bamboo huts floating way up river in the jungle. Having the elephants wade up to the veranda each morning was the highlight of the trip. There's no electricity, so no television or Internet. Nearby, [River Kwai Resotel](#) has thatched cabinstyle accommodations, a gorgeous pool and free bikes so you can cycle up to the enormous Lawa Cave.

Q. What would you recommend in the U.S. or Canada?

A. The Badlands in the Rocky Mountain states are rich with wonderful museums and tours that allow you to get your hands dirty digging for dinosaurs. On Montana's famous Dinosaur Trail, kids can get a Prehistoric Passport that includes fossil facts, a section for field notes and space for stamps they get at each of the trail's 15 facilities. The Yukon, in Canada's northwest, is a vast wilderness. We were taught survival skills by Jill Pangman, a wilderness guide and owner of an adventure tour company, before heading up Gray Mountain to see hundreds of wildflowers in full bloom.

Q. What is a good spot for adventure?

A. Rotorua in New Zealand is a giant theme park of extreme adventures and natural wonders.

A version of this article appears in print on April 8, 2012, on page TR3 of the New York edition with the headline: Expanding Horizons for Children.

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