

Making the Most of Your Family Vacation

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For several summers during my childhood my parents packed the kids into the station wagon and took off for a friend's very rustic summer camp off the coast of Maine. For one week we skipped rocks on the ocean surface, gathered shells, played badminton and whiffle ball in the back yard, and learned about the value of indoor plumbing, which we didn't have. On Sunday, my grandparents invited their extended family members to visit us and we hosted a family cookout. Once during the week we would treat ourselves to fresh lobster. Although we were young, my sister and brothers and I fondly remember those family vacations.

Perhaps our vacation weeks were fun because our expectations weren't too high. We got away from our usual routine, using an outhouse and pumping water from an outside well wasn't bad if it was only for a week, and we had each other for company.

Today's vacations are usually much more planned, more expensive and have much higher expectations. Our lives are more complicated on a daily basis and we look to our week or two to reduce our stress, unify the family, strengthen family relationships and have a good time. Pretty big goals—and lots of chances for disappointment.

Here are a few suggestions to consider when planning your own family vacations.

Plan but don't over-plan. Leave time for everyone to enjoy the area. One of my own family vacations had a memorable side trip when we noticed a sign indicating a local glass artist. We were treated to a beautiful showroom and he gladly showed us how he cut the glass designs on blanks. We bought a beautiful crystal bowl that still has a place of honor in our dining area.

Expect the unexpected. If you are traveling by car expect flat tires, road construction and bad weather. Airlines can lose luggage and weather problems can change your plans. You need to be flexible enough to make adjustments to your vacation plans. You might also be the recipient of unexpected upgrades. Think of any of these experiences as part of your traveling adventure.

Make kids part of the planning process. Vacations usually involve long range plans. Get your children involved in planning your itinerary. There are lots of resources available today so that everyone in the family can research the local area and make some plans either using brochures, books, or the internet. On one vacation we wanted to see waterfalls. We booked a guided tour that took us to several out-of-the way locations that we would have missed otherwise. On a family trip to Ireland my son wanted to see the JFK Arboretum and Gardens in New Ross. We were treated to a wonderful memorial park with a research area for over 500 species of rhododendrons, a silver fir forest and a jaunty cart ride around the grounds with a knowledgeable driver.

Encourage kids and adults to keep a journal of the trip. My daughter always brings a notebook on her trips and writes wonderful tales of the events of every day. If you dropped your ice cream cone, expect to see it included in her journal. You can use these writings as a starting point for a handmade picture book when you return home. As an alternative, there are some online picture sites that can take some of your photos, let you put in your own captions, and create a professional looking memory of your trip.

Family vacations should focus on family, family relationships, family adventures, and family activities. They don't have to be expensive. They don't have to be long. What is most important is that family members get a chance to share experiences, create memories and just be together.