



Vacation vs. Trip

With kids, the joy's in the journey,
not the destination

By Kelli Wheeler

Ahhh, the joys of summer. Leisurely days of the kids playing in the pool. Watermelon, peaches and apricots back in season. Warm summer evenings. Packing an oversized SUV with a ridiculous amount of necessities for a week's "vacation" while trying to figure out who's going to count the car seats as their carry-ons on the plane in the midst of deciding if you should take the double stroller or the umbrella stroller, or rent one when you get there. Yep, it's summer.

I'll never forget my husband's and my first summer vacation together as a married couple. His family rented a beautiful two-story cabin overlooking Lake Tahoe, with a magnificent deck jutting out over a rocky cliff. At night we sipped cocktails on the deck while watching the sun go down, later heading off to the casinos until luck or energy ran out first. We'd sleep in after our late night, get up in time for brunch, play a few rounds of Scrabble and let the day decide our course. Leisurely vacation at its finest.

Enter children.

I'll never forget our first "vacation" at the same Tahoe cabin once we were the proud parents of a 20-month-old boy and 3-month-old girl. It began with buying a roof rack for our SUV. Then a baby gate for the top of the stairs. Followed by a Review of Hazards meeting with my husband, where he flagged the beloved deck as a caution zone because he had noticed some rickety railings and potential for some nasty splinters. Plus, the

rocks out front looked dangerous, lots of sharp-cornered furniture, hot barbecue, and falling dangers from the loft railing and stairs. It pretty much narrowed down to leaving the poor kid in his port-a-crib for safety.

After the car was packed with strollers (umbrella and double), port-a-cribs, bouncy seat, booster seats, Baby Bjorn, backpack, favorite toys, favorite food, cans of formula, a half-dozen bottles and enough diapers and wipes to fill two suitcases, we decided we would buy, once we got there, the rest of the stuff that wouldn't fit in the car.

"Well, do you think we're ready for our vacation?" I asked as we drove off, the back end of the car riding low.

"This is not a vacation," my husband replied tersely. "This is a trip."

And boy, was it some trip. The beautiful two-story cabin with the magnificent deck view morphed into a potential death trap at every turn with a toddler zipping around, making sure we did not rest for one leisurely minute. Our days were dictated by the same schedule and need for routine for our children that we followed at home. The only difference was there were some pretty pine trees out the windows and a spectacular view—if you were able to steal a minute to look at it without a toddler trying to lunge through a railing to the chipmunks below.

I remember waving everybody off to the casinos as we stayed behind with the kids. And the night we took my mother-in-law up on her offer to watch the children, the baby was up screaming throughout the night,

dooming any other shot we had at getting out again.

There, of course, had been no sleeping in because the kids were up at the crack of oh-my-God-what-time-is-it thirty. So we spent hours trying to keep them happy and quiet until the rest of the house woke up, smiling and refreshed.

At the end of it, tired, disappointed and just wanting to get back to home-turf advantage, I decided trip might have been too nice a word to describe the experience.

I have to admit, now
that my kids are
older and more self-
sufficient, these trips
are starting to feel
like vacations.

That "vacation" experience and similar stories by our friends with children (i.e., toddler throwing up all over Mommy on plane with no change of clothes, rental car place unable to supply promised car seats, having to return early due to sick children) has led to a healthy debate: At what point do these family trips once again take on the leisurely air of a vacation? And more importantly, why do we keep subjecting ourselves to them until we reach the turning point?

A mathematical theory has been kicked around. The amount of leisure in a vacation is in direct proportion to the age of your children. The younger the children, the deeper you are in the

realm of trip. The older the kids are, the more likely you will be able to find time to actually sit down and think that this could actually be a pleasant vacation. The planning, organizing and executing is constant.

A philosophical discussion has been presented. Summer is the time of year when our bodies' natural nomadic rhythms, in conjunction with longer daylight hours, combine to create an urge to gather our young ones and half our worldly possessions and head somewhere that will require constant activity and supervision, large sums of patience and cash and the bringing home of expensive souvenirs.

But the most widely accepted theory is our own fond childhood summer vacation memories and the need to recreate them for our children. Back when we were kids, we didn't comprehend all the work that went into organizing these treasured family vacations. It never occurred to us that airing out and packing up the trailer, hitting the grocery store to stock up, pulling out all our favorite swimsuits and flip-flops, and getting up at 4 a.m. to beat the traffic was work. For us as children, it was all part of the adventure and the fun.

Now that I have children, I'm learning to change my perspective on what leisure is and its place in a family vacation. Webster's definition: free time during which one may indulge in rest, recreation, etc. Wheeler definition: treasured time during which one may indulge in childhood's free spirit, recreation and more recreation, and the opportunity to step away from responsibility and commitment and enjoy the journey.

I have to admit, now that my kids are older and more self-sufficient, these trips are starting to feel like vacations. The fun and good memories we are all sharing together do, in fact, start to outweigh the headaches of orchestrating it. The joy my children have experienced over our last two excursions has become my own.

Family vacations mimic life. It is not all work and it is not all play. There will be exhilarating times and frustrating times. There will be sacrifices for the sake of others, but there will also be rewards for the effort. There will be high expectations and harsh realities. There will be unexpected bonuses and long-lasting impressions. And it will all be one heck of a journey that you would be emptier for not making. Now that's a trip you want to take.

Kelli Wheeler lives in Arden Oaks and is a mother of two. She can be reached at kellimwheeler@aol.com ●