

Travel and Adventure: Tips on taking a teen to Europe

by Roger M. Showley

Taking a toddler to Europe can add extra stress on top of unfamiliar money, new languages and exotic foods - what with strollers, car seats, diapers and sleep schedules to juggle.

But going with teenagers can be even more challenging, unless you let them set the pace and tone.

HAMPTON COURT - Charlie Showley, 15 1/2, explores the medieval world of Henry VIII at Hampton Court, outside London. The castle was home to several other monarchs and later, a free retirement home for kings' and queens' retainers. CNS Photo by Roger Showley. ALNWICK CASTLE - Alnwick Castle in Northern England has taken on additional interest because of its role as a setting for several scenes in the 'Harry Potter' movies. Here a group of visitors enjoyed a performance by a castle magician. CNS Photo by Roger Showley. HISTORICAL MASK - The British Museum includes this seventh century Anglo-Saxon helmet from the ship burial at Sutton Hoo. The bronze eyebrows are inlaid with silver wire and garnets. CNS Photo by Roger Showley. ALNWICK GARDEN - Alnwick Garden adjacent to Alnwick Castle in Northern England includes the grand cascade, the largest water feature of its kind in the United Kingdom with 7,260 gallons a minute tumbling down a series of 21 weirs. CNS Photo by Roger Showley. In 1992, my wife Carol and I took our son, Charlie, then 18 months old, to Europe for three weeks. On *Travels With Charlie: The Toddler Years*, we visited the Louvre and Versailles, to be sure, but he was happiest at the playgrounds and sandboxes we found in every town.

Last summer, he and I went alone on a 15-day trip to Great Britain. The question was whether both of us could have a good time together, now that he had a say in what we were going to do. *Travels With Charlie: The Teen Years* required less equipment - a Game Boy. (Charlie: Yeah, that's pretty much it. You don't need much else on long plane/train rides if you've got "Advance Wars.")

This time, at the age of 15 1/2, he carried his own luggage and made few food demands (the occasional ice

cream and Starbucks Frappuccino). But there was still that late-to-bed, late-to-rise teenage sleep schedule to consider, even after he had adjusted to the eight-hour time difference.

When we arrived in London late at night, we took the tube from Heathrow Airport to South Kensington and stayed with friends from San Diego. But the next morning, it took Charlie until noon to wake up - after 12 hours of sleep. Playtime didn't require slides and swings, but it did mean finding parks to walk in, lakes and fountains to stop by and changes in schedule when something fun popped up unexpectedly.

For instance, we might have taken in a West End play when we were wandering around Covent Garden one evening, but instead we stopped to enjoy a street magician, who entertained a growing crowd with tricks and banter.

To prepare for our trip, I spent untold hours researching in travel books and on the Internet for places to go and things to do. Charlie's only demands were two: Go easy on the art museums and visit the five-year-old National Space Centre in Leicester.

Here's what rang a bell with Charlie and what didn't:

London: The Tower of London with its dungeons and weapons fascinated him, St. Paul's Cathedral didn't. We spent hours at the underground Cabinet War Rooms and Churchill Museum. The high-tech presentation of the World War II prime minister's public and private life was well worth the \$22 admission (free for students). The Museum of Science and Industry was a hit, while the British Museum was only so-so. We breezed through the Victoria & Albert Museum in 10 minutes, skipped the National Gallery and Tate but spent some

quality time at the Museum of London. A permanent exhibit, "London Before London," covers the prehistoric period, illustrated in part by a computerized time-lapse film showing how the geology of the region changed over thousands of years. Like many museums in the city, this one was free to all.

Outside London: We took two day-trips by train from London, one to Henry VIII's Hampton Court Palace and the other to Warwick Castle and Oxford University. Self-guided tours, costumed figures and taped commentaries brought each space to life. At Warwick, the highlight was watching a demonstration of a trebuchet catapult a flaming cannon ball several hundred yards to its target.

Stonehenge and Bath: On the way to Wales, we joined a London Walks tour to Salisbury and Stonehenge. (See details at www.walks.com.) The crowds were not so big that we didn't get a good feel for the majesty and mystery around us. (Besides, it's Stonehenge! How could you not like it?) At Bath, the highlight for Charlie was "Bizarre Bath," a hysterical evening walkabout led by Noel Britten, who mixed magic tricks with satirical stories about the city's history. (Correction: "History" is an overstatement; the only "historical" information he told us was stuff he read posted on various walls of buildings.) (See www.bizarrebath.co.uk.)

Wales: While guests of my wife's Welsh cousins, Charlie bonded with their grandchildren who were his age, but his great discovery was Waterstone's bookstore chain and the last volume in the "Darren Shan" vampire book series, not yet published in the U.S. He stayed up way past midnight reading it. (Wow, Britain sure is lucky. Book 12 of "Cirque du Freak" doesn't come out here for another few months, but it's been out there for more than two years.)

Northern England: We went out of our way to visit the National Space Centre in Leicester but arrived near closing time and had to race through the exhibits and hands-on demonstrations of space travel. (I feel gypped that we spent so little time there, but had we been there longer it would have been awesome. As it was, my favorite exhibits were on the planets, aliens and the universe.)

Scotland: With only two days available, we spent the first exploring Edinburgh Castle, shrouded in fog in the morning, and shopping for souvenirs on Princes Street in the afternoon. Charlie's great find: a sword shop where he purchased a pair of samurai sai blades. (The number of weapons in Scotland in general was ridiculous. Even drug stores had a small collection of claymores and long swords behind the counter.)

Charlie's return to Europe introduced him to beer (for all the people that love it, it sure tastes pretty lame), World Cup competition on TV in the pubs (they sure swore a lot when the opposing team did something good), changing dollars to pounds sterling, and a whole new world of new friends and places to explore.

The trip represented perhaps our last opportunity to bond as father and son before Charlie gets wrapped up in jobs, college, girls and life on his own. Happily, there was no generation gap but a lot of yucking it up and silliness. By remaining flexible, we both had a good time - and only lost our way a few times. (All in all, the trip was a success. Having the same interests as my dad - like castles and technology - made the trip less of an argument and a lot more fun.)

IF YOU GOGet a BritRail FlexiPass that lets a person under 16 ride free with a paying adult. Our eight-day, second-class pass cost \$405 (www.britrail.com).

Hostels and bed-and-breakfast inns are the most economical, as little as \$20 per person per night. The Lonely Planet "Great Britain" guide offered great suggestions, especially the lively Castle Rock Hostel around the corner from the Edinburgh Castle in the Scottish capital (\$26 per person per night, www.scotlandstophostels.com).

Charlie quickly took to Cornish pasties, a filled buttery croissant, and bought sandwiches from groceries. Pub food hit the spot, as did an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet in Nottingham. Our big splurge was at the 16th-century Witchery restaurant in Edinburgh. (Charlie surprised me when he ordered steak tartare served with fries and fried quails, \$40, www.thewitchery.com.)

Besides the many free museums available, admission to some 500 historic sites are included with the Great British Heritage Pass. We bought the 15-day pass for \$96, but it would have been cheaper to buy only one for me, since Charlie could get the half-price student or child rate. Join guided tours, whose leaders often exhibit a great sense of humor, and take advantage of wireless audio tours.

Shopping: I gave Charlie \$100 for spending money, which he splurged on books and swords. Good thing Harrods wasn't on his must-see list.

Useful Web sites: www.visitbritain.com for general tourist information and www.visitbritaindirect.com to buy tickets and passes online.

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