

1. WHY LIVE ABROAD WITH YOUR KIDS?

"The whole point of this sojourn is to enhance creativity: in our lives, our relationships, our work — in everything. It's about having the space in which to awaken to the possibilities not just in our lives — but of our lives — and developing the skills to engage those possibilities. Establishing ourselves in a new environment with a controlled mixture of the familiar and strange, of comfort and alienation, is a crucial part of this effort. Creativity is simply possibility in action; and possibility is about what happens at the boundary between the known and the unknown."

El Grito #4

You might (rightly) ask, why bother? What's the point of harnessing the energy, saving the money, and coping with the challenges of moving to another country to live with your children? Why wade through the health concerns, the language and cultural barriers, and all the inevitable difficulties of dealing with children and then raise the bar exponentially by doing it in a different country? If your kids are very young, will they even remember living abroad? Why not wait until they're older and you've got more money, more leeway, and more confidence in your children's ability to handle themselves in challenging situations?

Why indeed? Let me start by telling you why Michael and I did it. For as long as we've been a family, we've been trying to figure out how to live more intensely and creatively *as* a family and how to forge the kind of elusive, intimate bonds that seem to us the very essence of *being* a family. We had assumed this bonding would come naturally. But when we looked around for role models, we didn't find them. Amidst

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the corrosive effects of the hectic lives we all seemed to lead, everyone we knew had similar complaints. There was a vague sense that the best of life was slipping away and we were powerless to do anything about it. There was simply never enough time or psychic space to savor the marriages, the children, and the good lives we were all working so hard to make. It began to sink in that we would never find this time unless we created it for ourselves.

We're obviously not the first or only ones to feel this way, but that feeling was the prime motivation for Michael and me to *do something different*. Otherwise, we figured we could easily continue to work at our pleasant jobs and have our pleasant lives while our children grew up, moved away, and . . . that would be that. The unique and fleeting opportunity for intensive interaction with our children would be gone.

After a lot of discussion, we decided to quit our jobs and take what we dubbed a "family sabbatical" to distinguish it from a "mere" break or vacation. We thought of it as a family retreat, a time to concentrate on our own creative projects and to develop more creative and passionate relationships with our children and each other. Quite honestly, it's one of the best decisions our family ever made.

Our kids were seven and two at the time, pretty young for such a big adventure. But we felt that there were as many reasons to do it when they were young as there were reasons to wait until they got older. The reality is that you'll cope with a set of difficulties whenever you go, whatever the ages of your children; it will just be a different set (see below).

Hmmm, you think to yourself. Interesting. But you're probably still wondering why *your family* should undertake such an adventure. Ten of the chief reasons follow, along with comments from other parents who have taken family sabbaticals with their children.

1. Forge strong family bonds by creating a family history and mythology.

Life in the U.S. doesn't necessarily encourage family togetherness. Everyone's so busy at work, school, and various "enrichment" activities that it often feels like we're less a family than roommates wandering

around the house, sharing the same space and refrigerator. Often, the most we manage to do together as a family is sit around watching television or a movie.

Traveling, on the other hand, is not a spectator sport and it creates a bond like no other. Not only do you spend more time together and learn to rely on each other in a different way, you also go through fun, unusual, and occasionally frightening experiences together. These experiences take on a myth-like status and create the heart of a family story that everyone is an indelible part of forever.

Our children will always talk about the beach trip where we nearly lost our lives after the pick-up truck we were riding in veered off a mountain pass and almost flipped over. They'll often bring up the midnight visit of "the *alacrán*," the scorpion that dropped from our palapa roof and decided the back of my leg was a perfect place to snooze. And then, of course, no one will forget the fat, drunk, naked lady snoring contentedly behind the mosquito netting in the bed we were supposed to occupy the first night of our arrival in our new home.

There were difficult moments during our adventure when it felt like it was our family against the world. And there were astonishingly beautiful moments when we turned to each other and shook our heads at the mystery of what was unfolding in front of us. These adventures have become a rich part of our family story, a story we continue to build on and one that each of us now feels exists concretely. We're not roommates who just happen to inhabit the same house. We're a *family*. And that now feels like a powerful entity, indeed.

"I lived in Brussels, Belgium, for four years when I was between the ages of seven and eleven, when our family was transferred there by my Dad's company. It had such a huge influence on our family. It made us more adventuresome, open to other cultures and ways of thinking, and it made us closer as a family. I wanted to duplicate that experience on a smaller scale with my own family."

— Kim with Andy and Derek (9), Kyle (11), and Drew (13), who lived in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, for seven months

2. Spend extended time with your children.

A reason to live abroad for a while when your kids are young is that you actually get to spend a bunch of time with them when they're still genuinely interested in spending time with you. Remember back to your teens. Wasn't there always one cool family on the block where everyone, including their own kids, actually wanted to hang out because the parents were so much cooler than everyone else's? We wanted to be that family and those parents for our own kids.

Before our sabbatical, Michael and the kids and I ran from morning until night doing, doing, doing, and whether working or playing, it was still hard work. The pace just kept heating up no matter how we tried to prevent it. We realized, like so many others, that we saw our kids awake for only a few hours a day. Michael, in particular, was working 50 to 60 hours a week as an architect and rarely saw the kids except on the weekends. And much of that time, the kids begged to be with their friends instead of with these strangers claiming to be their parents.

In addition, despite our best efforts to limit it to the "good" stuff, the U.S. media's inescapable influence contributes to a sense of frenzy. Everything competes for our attention and that reinforces the feeling of living our lives in sound bytes and sidebars — grabbing 15 minutes to eat or chat on the way to the next regularly scheduled program. It isn't necessarily unpleasant. It's just too fast. And it's hard to fathom changing anything specific because it all feels so overwhelming. We figured that the way we were headed, we wouldn't know our kids or they us — much less enjoy spending time together (or even know how to) — when they hit their teen years. The time to spend time together was *now*.

"We loved the slow pace of life and the fact that we had so much time together as a family. We played chess, played cards, talked and wandered together. We strolled to "el jardín" in the town center and ate dinner together. We relied on each other a lot, in a way that drew us very close, especially when we were traveling."

— Julie and Marc, with Kaya (8) and Ari (4),
who lived in Guanajuato City, Mexico, for five months

"We did everything together, which was nice. And the kids liked it too – we were there to help them out, facilitate things, and play with them. They knew they needed us. It's amazing how life in the U.S. just seems to separate people inside a family."

— Marline and Rob, with Lilly (11) and Emory (13),
who lived in Guanajuato City, Mexico, for six months

3. Explore and enhance your own creativity.

Throughout our lives Michael and I have pursued creative projects in music, theater, writing, and film, trying to fit them in as best we could amidst all the other projects and people vying for our time and attention. Michael played his guitar and I worked on a book in fits and starts, but it never felt like we had the large chunks of time required to really dig into our creative selves. It was our own fault, of course. We just never found the time. But we finally decided to *make* it. We wanted our children to see us as creative beings and to learn to value exploring their own creativity as well.

Getting away was the key to making that happen. One of the most empowering aspects of moving abroad with your children is that you start with a clean slate. Your time is largely your own. You can have a life with no commitments outside of those you actively choose. Nobody knows you and nobody expects anything from you. You have the opportunity to throw out the old rules and make decisions as a family about the new ones. Which media will you allow in your house abroad? How many activities will the kids be involved in each day? How many chores will you take on? How many friendships will you cultivate?

We also found that living in an unfamiliar place actively encourages you to touch pieces of yourselves that you simply don't back home. While living abroad, your senses are heightened by the newness and differentness of everything around you. Forgotten or rarely used bits of gray matter can be re-energized and tapped to explore yourselves and your children in more interesting and creative ways.

"We were pleasantly surprised by how much our kids loved the museums and other tourist sites. They were much more curious about the culture and history than we had expected."
— Julie and Marc

4. Create a strong bond between (and among) your kids.

Something that was totally unexpected but, in retrospect, is probably one of the most valuable and long-lasting benefits of our trip is that our kids developed an amazing relationship with each other. Sibling relationships can change drastically when you take kids away from all their friends, activities, and distractions and plopping them down somewhere where they're deprived, quite frankly, of nearly everything else except each other. They suddenly and joyfully discover how wonderful it is to be and to have a sibling.

In our case, there's a five-year age difference as well as a gender difference between our two kids. I'll wager that if we'd spent the years when the younger was two to four and the elder seven to nine at home, they never would have developed the kind of closeness and care they have for one another now. The elder would have undoubtedly spent every moment with her own friends or involved in her own activities; playing the Memory Game with her younger brother would have been as welcome as a trip to the dentist.

In Mexico, they had each other and, for the most part, that was pretty much it. They each had friends at school and occasional play dates, but those were much rarer in Mexico than at home. They largely played with each other and devised games that each could play at whatever level they were capable. An easily packed inflatable swimming pool was one of the best investments in toys that we made. That, along with art supplies, a few computer games, videos, DVDs, soap bubbles, balls, a bunch of plastic animals and little figures, and a couple of colanders that they could use to sift sand, float toys, and fling water around creatively, kept them busy for hours. Kicking a ball together, playing house in a giant box, messing around in the park — they did it all together and, for the most part, had a great time. Asher, our younger, was thrilled

to have his older sister to play with. And while Cleome did sometimes miss playing with kids her own age, she developed such a strong love and real enjoyment of Asher that she rarely complained about having him as her only playmate most of the time.

5. Learn another language.

Numerous studies confirm the advantages bilingual children have in the areas of higher abstraction and concentration. In terms of brain development, optimal language learning happens before kids turn 12. The natural ability of young children to learn a second or third language relatively quickly and without an accent is something you can take advantage of by spending time in another country. Even very young children, who may not do much speaking in any language while they're living abroad, will benefit. Their ears will become finely tuned to the nuances of pronunciation and rhythm so that when they do begin speaking the new language, it may very well be without a strong American accent.

That said, however, it takes longer that you might think to learn to speak another language, even when you are immersed in it. It wasn't until about halfway through our trip that Asher, then three, finally started speaking an interesting mix of English and Spanish. Getting dressed in the morning, he would say "I want to wear my *verde pantalones* and my *playera* with the *potos* on it." ("I want to wear my green pants and the t-shirt with the ducks on it.") I suspect he no longer knew or cared which language a word belonged to. From there it wasn't a long leap to speaking Spanish when he was with Spanish speakers and flipping to English when necessary. By giving your children the opportunity to learn another language relatively effortlessly, you're giving them a lifetime passport to the world.

"We decided early on that the very best thing we could do for our children, over and above piano lessons, ballet classes, and so on, was give them the opportunity to learn a second language and learn it at an early age, so that the learning process was easier."

The little one-hour Spanish playgroup classes we were doing back in Nashville weren't cutting it. Thus we decided to move abroad to really and truly accomplish this. And then we not only accomplished learning a second language via immersion, but we got the benefit of living in and experiencing another culture as well."

— Jody and Jordan, with Conor (13), Kirby (11), and Wyatt (8), who are living in San Miguel Allende, Mexico

Learning another language as a family has a special advantage for parents; it helps motivate us comparatively dim-witted adults to master the language along with our children. Although Michael and I each speak another Romance language (French and Italian, respectively) it wasn't easy for us to learn Spanish. Our brains weren't nearly as flexible as our children's and I, for one, was often tempted to throw in the towel. But being in a place where you need to chat with the garbage man, question the butcher, and find out from your child's teacher exactly what kind of costume is needed for the Mother's Day program provides enormous motivation to communicate.

6. Give your children the gift of self-discovery.

Part of the value of living in a different culture is allowing your children to meet and cope with difficult feelings. Isolation, homesickness, fear, and boredom are an important part of this experience. So is the elation and power your kids will feel when they make a new friend, begin to communicate in another language, and master difficult moments. Cleome was the only *gringa* in a class of 47 Mexican children (and in the whole school as well). She was obviously nervous the first few days but discovered surprisingly quickly how skilled she was at making new friends and operating in a completely different culture and language.

Both our children had the luxury of exploring their own imaginations through the many hours they spent alone reading, drawing, and daydreaming. I know these discoveries have permanently changed their self-perceptions, especially our daughter's. She's much more independent now and less prone to self-doubt and lack of confidence. During

difficult moments here, a gentle reminder of all the challenges she met in Mexico visibly lifts her spirits.

“It did lots for the kids’ self-concept. In Mexico, both girls felt gutsier about asking questions and talking. Something about operating in a different language sort of gave them a cover of confidence. They told us it felt it okay to ‘mess up’ because everyone would know it wasn’t their language. As a result, they seem more outgoing and confident now.”

— Marline and Rob

“One of the things I wanted to accomplish with this sabbatical was to expose our kids to a heavy dose of change. In the U.S. we live in a very sheltered, homogenous, “Leave it to Beaver” type of community. It is so nice here that a lot of kids don’t want to leave. Also I had noticed that some kids had difficulty dealing with change and our middle son Kyle was one of them; he was definitely not thrilled with change. I really believe after this experience that all three know they are capable of dealing with dramatic change.”

— Kim and Andy

7. Experience another culture through your kids’ eyes.

Young children open doors that might otherwise stay closed when you’re living in another country. It’s not always easy to bridge cultural and language gaps with local families and children are often the best ambassadors. Thanks to your kids’ relationships with local children, your family will be welcomed into the local world through birthday parties, soccer games, dinner invitations, and more.

Seeing a new place through your children’s eyes can also be startling and wonderful. “Why are those children begging, Daddy, shouldn’t they be in school?” “Kids have to work really hard here. It’s not like at home.” “I tried a really cool new fruit called mamey. It tastes sort of like chocolate and sort of like an apricot.” “I made a new friend, Mom. We’re invited to their house for dinner.” (Which turned out to be cactus tacos served from the back of their pick-up truck.)

Not only do young children walk around with their brains wide open, but their eyes are open wider than ours in many ways as well.

They don't avoid looking at unpleasant or difficult things as we've been taught to. They want to talk about why the fruit vendor has a withered sixth finger . . . why there's dog, cat, and burro poop everywhere . . . why people live with so little when the churches are coated in gold leaf. They question the treatment of the less fortunate and make sure that every outstretched hand is met with a coin, no matter how small the denomination.

8. Make the world your child's classroom.

There's tremendous value in broadening your children's education beyond the classroom to include other cultures and languages. But it's hard to give kids a real sense of what those cultures are like through books, movies, two-week vacations, and PBS specials alone, no matter how diligently we may try. Without exposure to the real thing, other cultures are too easily reduced to stereotypes and varieties of take-out food. A culture, like a language, contains elements that are untranslatable. To really experience another culture you have to interact with it over time as it unfolds around you and envelops you within it. The lessons of living abroad are both obvious and subtle. There will be those "aha" moments where your kids suddenly understand a phrase or concept they didn't the day before. And there will also be more subtle lessons learned from being at a critical distance from their own culture; moments that can spark a kind of intelligent curiosity about themselves and others in the world.

"We met people from Poland, Scotland, Japan, Canada, the Netherlands, Ireland, and other places. The children are now curious about geography and international relations in a concrete way because they can relate what they are learning or have questions about to specific people they have met from various countries." — Marc and Julie

"Our kids became more aware and sensitive to how differently people can live — they saw people living in shacks made of straw, living in crowded one-room apartments with bathrooms down the block. They learned about how little money so many people

around the world have and what a rich country the U.S. is. I think they began to see ways in which the U.S. is not the center of the world and also ways in which, to many people, it is."

— Rachel and Orin, with Isaiah (9) and Stanley (4),
who lived in Nanjing, China, for two years

9. Prepare your kids to be citizens of the world.

The events of September 11, 2001, opened the eyes of many Americans to the fact that beyond U.S. borders, many people view the world and the U.S. government and its citizens and culture differently from the way we perceive them ourselves. One of the hardest lessons to learn — and absorb — is other people think and do things differently and that difference is okay. Living abroad gently introduces children to points of view that are different from their own, without the implicit threat that's often part of the news coverage of tumultuous world events here at home.

"We think the exposure to the Mexican culture and to Spanish will give our children a lifetime appreciation for things that are different. They will have learned that there sometimes is not a right way and a wrong way but two different ways for things to be done or expressed. We also think our kids have a better sense of how fortunate they are and how most people in our world live with a lot less."

— Kim and Andy

10. Find what you never knew you'd lost.

Leaving home gives you a much deeper appreciation for what you've left. Living in the same place day after day makes the world around you largely invisible. Traveling the same path over and over, thinking the same thoughts, and seeing the same things can have an anesthetizing affect. Living abroad is such a re-energizing experience that you and your kids will be looking at the world around you through different eyes after your sabbatical, whether you go back to where you came from, head somewhere else, or decide to settle down in your sabbatical home for a more extended stay.

"I think our travels gave our children a great sense of self-confidence (if I could survive going to school there, I can survive anything!). I also think that they understand, in a way words alone could never adequately describe, what real poverty is. They know that there are families who live in cardboard shacks and children in rags who beg in the streets to eat. They are also aware of how much we have in the way of material goods and comforts." — Julie

"I loved that my children learned to be comfortable with being on the move, they learned to think about what was most important for them to bring with them — books, pencils, CD player, etc. And they learned how much they would be able to carry themselves. They learned how to make transitions, that change was not something they had to fear, even if in the moment they might feel nervous. They learned how lucky they are. In summary, one of the biggest joys was watching my children grow amidst other lands and turning them on to the amazing world we live in." — Rachel

ARE THE KIDS OLD ENOUGH? TOO OLD?

I'd be lying if I said that living abroad with kids is always one big picnic. But one of the most surprising and important things we discovered during our sabbatical is that when children are young, they're amazingly flexible travelers. They're willing to live in the here and now and they're easy to please as long they're provided with a few basics. Give them a friend to play with (siblings count), some sort of daily routine in terms of waking and going to sleep, a couple of familiar foods that can be had for each and every meal if necessary, and your attention. Toss in an occasional swimming pool visit and a video, and young travelers become amazingly pleasant, at least in the short term.

Obviously, there will be difficult moments and each age brings with it a different set of challenges in terms of living abroad:

- **Challenges with babies and toddlers.** Asher was a very active two-year-old when we arrived in Mexico, and life anywhere with babies and toddlers can be tough. Letting your nine-month-old crawl around in the backyard at home is a bit different from finding him examining burro poop in a Mexican barrio. And it's not as easy to cope with a sudden nighttime illness without a Walgreen's nearby. (But there's probably a *farmacia* or its equivalent on the corner staffed with someone who can sell you — and inject — a shot of penicillin or other extremely cheap antibiotic.) Finding a babysitter for a much-needed night out can be an interesting experience. The first time we did it, the sitter let Asher stay up until midnight and consume an entire bag of candy, so we spent the rest of the night cleaning vomit off his bed-sheets. Also, what we consider basic necessities, such as diapers and wipes, can be expensive abroad. Baby food, juices, formula, macaroni and cheese, peanut butter, and so on, can be either difficult to find, pricey, or filled with added sugar and preservatives. And certainly, it's much easier to actually explore the sights of a new place with slightly older children. (This is probably one of the biggest drawbacks of traveling with very young children, other than babies who will just nap).

For those reasons you may want to wait until your kids are out of diapers and past needing constant infusions of treats and snacks to round out their days. (Does that ever happen?) But the upside is that babies are wonderfully relaxed travelers. And toddlers are so spirited and curious they'll definitely take you to places you've never been before — like the back of every restaurant you venture into and the interior of every bathroom you can imagine. (See *Chapter 10: We're Here!* for a discussion of sanitation issues, basic shopping tips, suggested daypack supplies, and the ups and downs of strollers, backpacks, and other equipment.)

- **Challenges with children in elementary and middle school.** Generally kids this age are terrific travelers. They're flexible, interested in everything, and will usually do what you say. They're also good

at meeting other children and making friends, which, as I mentioned earlier, can be your entrée to meeting their parents. However, older children may focus more on what they lack, instead of what they have. And some would rather walk through hot coals than leave their friends to go on some crazy adventure halfway around the world with their parents.

“Two of our children hope never to return to San Miguel at this point, while the youngest one loved it and would go back anytime. The older two missed their comfort stuff from home. They also missed the American school system and all the bells and whistles that go with it (just the things I wanted them to be without for a while). We do still feel strongly that the experience will ultimately be a great one for them, and we are actually thinking of returning next fall for one semester.”

— Karen and Rick, with Remington (7), Austin (10), and Tyler (11), who lived in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, for four months

- **Challenges with children in junior high and high school.**

Once they hit 13 or 14, it can be really hard for parents to pry kids away from home without subjecting themselves to continuous griping. The child may not be able to appreciate much of anything except a good Internet line to instant message friends all day long. An adventurous teen, of course, might consider spending six months or a year abroad the coolest thing you’ve ever done.

"At 11 and 13, our kids are old enough to do everything with us and appreciate it. They loved experiencing the differences and really enjoyed the 'smaller world' of Mexico. They came to appreciate the new rhythms and basically ignored the lack of modern amenities. Other pluses of this age are that they're old enough to stay home by themselves so we could go out by ourselves. And finally, they're old enough to remember this experience."

— Rob and Marline

Practically speaking, pulling kids out of school and ensuring their place when you return is much easier when they are younger. Not only will your kids miss less academically, but also school administrators are more flexible when specific graduation credits and requirements are not at stake. (See *Chapters 7 and 8: School Daze Parts One and Two*, for more on ensuring your children's place in school back home and finding schools abroad.)

"Both the elementary and the middle school were very supportive. They suggested home schooling in math and making sure our kids continued to read a lot and to try and encourage writing. They said the kids wouldn't miss much and if they did, they could pick it up when they returned, like kids who are transferred in."

— Kim and Andy