

“Make the effort to go places and see things. Even if you’re living on a shoestring”

Illustration / Petra Eriksson

Taking a family gap year was a brave and, in retrospect, not wholly considered idea. My partner and I made the decision to take our son Jonah, age four, away before he started school full-time. As a journalist, I could write to keep us afloat on our adventure across Asia and the Antipodes, to remote South Pacific islands and California, while my partner took a sabbatical.

For the most part, it worked out pretty well, too. It was fairly cheap to live in Asia, and I would dash off to meet deadlines while the others played on the beach in Thailand, or wandered the streets of Kathmandu. Once, in Nepal, I returned from a work phone call to find that Jonah had befriended a troop of novice monks from a Buddhist temple. They invited him to drink yak butter tea and chanted scriptures with him. A bit different from playing Thomas the Tank Engine with his friends at home.

The best thing was that my partner, son and I were together almost every hour of every day. Seeing our child grow and change in front of our eyes was phenomenal. He was enthralled by adventure, becoming chatty and confident. He befriended everyone, from elderly devotees of an Indian guru to surfers in Byron Bay.

It was a vivid, surprising and life-enhancing 10 months but it wasn't all plain sailing. We were on a tight budget and sometimes arrived to find conditions

weren't ideal for a child – prompting a panicked exit. Nevertheless we developed a travelling groove that involved flexibility, open-mindedness and a willingness to deviate from our plans if we talked to people and discovered better things to do. We threw away the guide books.

So when we returned home I was determined to retain some of that relaxed mindset, and bring some of the fun and freedom from our gap year into our home life. My top tips? Firstly, spend as much time together as possible. I still work weird hours to make this possible and my partner is part-time. Secondly, never lose your spontaneity. Go camping or nip to the coast – don't wait for “better weather” or being less busy. Thirdly, make the effort to go places and see things. Even if you're living on a shoestring, as we were on the road, invest in experiences, not stuff. Above all, appreciate the people and places around you. Be curious and ask others about their lives.

Parents can be sticklers for routine but don't forget how adaptable your child is – and how much they will learn and grow from exposure to new and exciting things.

By happy accident, we spent the majority of our trip in Buddhist countries where we were taught that “yesterday” and “tomorrow” are a fiction. The past has gone and the future is a construct. So shrug it off. Life is the present. If you want adventure then go for it. What's stopping you?



After a gap year with her family, Matilda Battersby is determined to keep the travelling groove alive at home
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the opinion

