

TheStreet

What's Hot in Family Travel for 2017: Education, Cultural Immersion And Service

Family travel is evolving and tour is no longer a four letter word when it comes to some of the best family travel companies in the country.



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When it comes to family vacations and childhood, Disney certainly has its place. It's a rare child that doesn't want to eventually shake Mickey Mouse's hand, hug Donald Duck or snap a picture standing beside Snow White.

But here's a fascinating idea to consider - the things a child learns between the ages of five and 15 will have a direct impact on the characteristics and decision making skills he will possess as an adult.

Why is this important and what does it have to do with the annual family vacation?

Well, just ask Ashish Sanghrajka.

At a recent family travel conference in Arizona, Sanghrajka spoke passionately about how travel can profoundly impact a child, forever changing his or her life. But he wasn't talking about just any kind of travel.

Sanghrajka, president of Florida-based **Big Five Tours & Expeditions**, spoke of family travel with a purpose that involves and engages children in the issues facing the planet and its people, travel that includes a focus on such things as tolerance, diversity, human rights, conservation and more.

"It's not just about where do you want to go," Sanghrajka said. "It's about why do you want to go. Do you want to see an animal? Great, then just go to a zoo. Are you explaining why poaching is happening? And why poachers become poachers?"

"I want to raise a son who is caring, empathetic and who will have a positive impact on the world," he added, with the key follow-up question being - how about you? What kind of child do hope to raise?

It was with such ideas in mind, or perhaps because of them, that that Big Five last year launched a new kind of trip called "**Precious Journeys.**" Created with the influence of a child psychologist, Precious Journeys are designed for the youngest travelers, those ages five to 11, with the goal of inspiring kids to discover the world's grandeur and also its challenges.

The trips are specifically organized to allow children to experience other cultures, and meet other children, as well as the people working on real-world problems and solutions. Kids who participate in Precious Journeys learn about what the sustainability movement means from a global perspective, and have opportunities to experience various professions - from archaeology to conservation and organic farming.



One of the newest **Precious Journeys'** experiences being offered by Big Five is called "Guatamala's Jungles, Jaguars & Peanut Butter." The highlight of the eight-day experience is visiting a wildlife rescue and conservation association to learn about jaguars and their endangered habitats, as well as going on a jaguar footprint scavenger hunt.

Yet other days on this trip are spent learning how to make chocolate and peanut butter from scratch the Mayan way, and hiking to volcanoes, where there's time to make s'mores using marshmallows roasted over hot vents in the rocks.

Other Precious Journeys take families to India allowing young travelers to learn about saving tigers, and to Kenya to be exposed to the plight of elephants.

"Whenever we go to a country, we ask, 'What is my doing here helping to solve your biggest socio-economic issue?'" explained Sanghrajka, a well-respected voice in the travel industry who was included on Travel+Leisure magazine's "A LIST of Top Travel Agents" in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014. "At the same time, we want our travelers to have life changing experiences...not just the kids, but the parents, everyone."

Before concluding his talk, Sanghrajka shared stories of children who were so profoundly impacted by a single travel experience that they went on to start a foundation to help save endangered species or address other vital conservation issues facing our planet, as well as to give TED talks, all before the age of 18.

"One trip did that," he said. "Get out of children's way and they can save the world."

Big Five's Precious Journeys are just one example of a style of family travel that's emerging, which eschews cruises and sitting on beaches in favor of providing families and children with truly immersive and meaningful travel experiences.

These companies and their offerings will forever alter your impression of what a tour can be, making that fourletter word something that's no longer frowned upon as a travel experience.

Another compelling version of this type of family travel was presented by Leslie Overton, of New York-based **Absolute Travel**.

Overton spoke about the evolution of purpose driven travel and how old school voluntourism does not work anymore.

There's little value, for instance, in doing such things as going to an orphanage in Thailand and painting a wall that's already been painted 1,000 times.

Instead Absolute Travel seeks to offer deeper family travel experiences, and does so by working to offer opportunities that are more cohesive and part of a greater whole, such as engaging in community based projects throughout the destinations the company covers.

"Travel should be inspirational, not aspirational," Overton pointed out.



To that end, Absolute Travel offers trips focused on human rights, artists and traditions and also conservation.

One such trip the company will be offering in the coming year, in conjunction with the **American Museum of Natural History**, allows families to travel to the Seychelles with a curator to learn about conservation efforts and the biodiversity of the tropical rain forests and coral reefs. The trip includes meeting conservation specialists who monitor bird populations and activities created by a museum educator specifically to engage young people.

Absolute Travel also offers opportunities for families to meet orphaned elephants at the **David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust** in Nairobi National Park, or to go to Bali and learn from children at the greenest school on earth.

Known as **Green School**, kids age pre-k to 10th grade who attend the Ubud, Bali school are taught about everything from organic gardening to simply avoiding wasteful plastic bottles.

Families with children who visit are able to participate in such activities as raft building and exploring the jungle in search of bugs. The experience is part school, part travel extravaganza, part camp.

Ultimately, what trips such as these and what companies like Absolute Travel and Big Five are also doing, is dispelling the notion that booking travel with a tour company is a bad thing, that will land you and your family on a tour bus with dozens of other travelers, being herded around a country like cattle.

Quite the opposite. As Overton and others explained, what this particular breed of travel companies does best and specializes in, is creating customized family journeys that take the worry out of traveling with young children, allowing you instead to simply focus on having meaningful, quality, family time while exploring the world.

"It's about having it all organized ahead of time, having a guide and driver," explains Overton, who has been Conde Nast's top exotic family travel specialist for seven years. "You don't want to be standing at an airport figuring out how you will get to your hotel, and worrying about whether you can find a cab that's big enough to take all of your family's luggage."

It's also about the value a personal guide can bring to your family's trip and your child's educational experience, from beginning to end.

"Guides are educational tools," Overton continues. "If you want kids to really learn about these places, guides are amazing resources. Having a guide who can really explain the relevance of what you're looking at, from my perspective, is one of the most important reasons for using a tour operator. We don't get a ton of time off, so we should be spending that time interacting, not figuring where to go or looking for a place to eat and fumbling through Lonely Planet on a street corner in a foreign city."

Global Family Travels is yet another example of a company focused on creating meaningful and fun family experiences.

The company regularly partners with non-profit organizations and works hand-in-hand with communities around the world that have existing projects travelers can contribute to, according to founder Jennifer Spatz. The trips offered by Global Family Travels include economic development activities, conservation and more.

"What we're trying to do is foster young global citizens," Spatz said at that family travel conference in Arizona.



Some of the company's newest offerings include **"China: Learn - Serve - Immerse,"** and **"Ecuador: Photography and Cultural Tour."**

Global Family Travels has also recently begun partnering with Painted Dog Research Trust, to offer trips to **Zimbabwe** that involve learning about on one of the rarest species on the African continent, the Painted Dog, which is nearly extinct.

Participants on this trip are able to help with the Painted Dog conservation effort, and are also given the opportunity to learn about the cultural heritage of the Zimbabwean people, as well as local culture through spending time at Ngunyana Village, and visiting Ngamo School.

The big take away from all of these companies and their trip offerings is that family travel is evolving, according to Spatz. Families are becoming more adventuresome and are looking for vacations that go beyond the all inclusive resort and frolicking on the beach. They still want adventure, but more immersive adventure, with a chance to give back and learn about a country and a culture in a deeper way.



One caveat, however, is that none of these experiences come cheap. Nearly all of the vacations mentioned cost thousands of dollars, and could fairly be classified as part of the luxury family bracket. But in the case of Big Five for instance, you can choose to include a few elements of a Precious Journey on a customized trip, making the overall experience less expensive.

And for those families that do not have budget limitations, luckily, there's a growing segment of travel companies serious about offering trips that will take your family far beyond Disney and Mickey Mouse.

"These trips are about having immersive experiences together, whether that's learning how to make chocolate in Nicaragua or weaving and the artisan industry in Peru - something that's sustainable, interesting and educational - instead of just getting on a tour bus," Spatz says. "The overall goal is to provide families with an opportunity to have a cross-cultural exchange and to allow them to meet people from outside of their world."