

Grand holidays

dad matters

It is hard to keep pace with child growth

'Greycations' are an increasingly popular option for many families, writes Patricia Carswell

If you're one of the scores of expatriate parents heading back to their home countries to escape the heat and you no longer own property back there, the chances are you'll be staying with your parents, or even going off on holiday with them.

You won't be alone in doing this: in fact you'll be forming part of an increasing trend for three-generational holidays – dubbed "greycations". Research by the British holiday park operator Park Resorts suggests that more and more families are choosing to holiday with their parents, partly to allow the children to spend time with their grandparents, but also to save money on the holiday and on that most valuable of commodities: babysitting.

Catherine Cooper, the travel expert and author of *Travelling with Children: The Essential Guide* (and herself a British expat living in France), confirms this: "As more and more young families are finding their finances squeezed, grandparents are chipping in to pay for the family holiday and also coming along themselves."

For some of us, the phenomenon is nothing new. Every summer of my childhood I went away with my parents and grandmother, so it seemed only natural, when I became a mother myself, that I should look to my own parents to accompany us on holiday. I had cherished the indulgent attention and mild rule-breaking that a fortnight with my fun-loving granny involved (we shared a room away from my parents) and wanted my kids to experience the same.

I was lucky enough to have my own grandmother living next door, but the reasons for going away with grandparents are all the more obvious when those grandparents live far away and have precious little time with the youngsters.

Lynley Oram, an expatriate whose home country is New Zealand, is full of enthusiasm for intergenerational holidays and raves about an extended visit "home" with her husband and mother-in-law.

"I would heartily recommend it if you get along with your in-laws," she says. "It's a great way for grandparents and grandchildren to get to know each other."

The benefits go beyond cementing the relationship between children and grandparents. With an extra pair of hands available to help with chores and look after the children, bringing Granny and Grandpa along can give the parents some welcome respite. If



Taking your children on holiday with your parents can be rewarding for all concerned, but it is important to make sure that boundaries and responsibilities are clear to everybody from the outset. Thomas Barwick

the older generation are early risers, they may even be happy to entertain the little ones during the dreaded dawn shift and allow the weary mum and dad a much-needed lie-in.

Oram does sound a note of warning, though. "As with any holiday involving anyone else, you do need to establish ground rules, and have a good idea of expectations."

It's an important reminder that holidaying with grandparents isn't without its challenges. My mother's recollections of the family vacations of my childhood are less misty-eyed than my own.

Although she remembers them fondly, she does recall that they were enjoyable and exhausting in equal measure. An unsteady gait, a healthy disregard for personal safety and a penchant for midnight sea-swimming combined to make my beloved but reckless grandmother as much of a handful as her lively grandchildren; at times my mother didn't know which of us she should be keeping an eye on.

A more common complaint is the pressure caused by spending so much time in close proximity, and for expatriates this can be compounded by not having had the opportunity to iron out difficulties during regular, day-to-day contact.

Arguments often erupt over the distribution of chores; it doesn't take long before the person wearing the rubber gloves feels put-upon. Equally, issues can arise over boundaries and discipline. Many grandparents can't resist spoiling the children, and parents wishing to stick to their usual routine soon become frustrated. With everyone together under one roof and little in the way of privacy, it's often not long before matters come to a head.

One mother told me of a holiday in Croatia with her husband John, two-year-old son Nicholas, and her parents-in-law, who had travelled from New Zealand to spend the vacation with the family. Rebecca knew that her in-laws took a more authoritarian stance than she and

her husband did, but was still surprised by what happened at the end of the stay.

"On the last night they asked John and me, in what I can only describe as a formal tone, to come and sit with them at the table. John's stepfather started off a long monologue about how they had noticed how we had been dealing with Nicholas when certain issues came up, and went on to tell us how we should have done it. John's mother was sitting there nodding in agreement and was obviously dying to tell us what bad parents we were.

"It wasn't their place to tell us how to bring up our child. I was very upset and couldn't wait to get out of there in the morning. It has damaged my relationship with them."

For Cooper, forward planning is the key to ensuring a happy holiday. She recommends discussing the thorny issues in advance to establish everyone's expectations. That way you should avoid swapping one type of heat for another.

the age gap

Catherine Cooper's multi-generation holiday tips

Make sure your accommodation is large enough to allow you all some privacy. You might even want to consider separate but close accommodation.

Duties

Talk about expectations before you go. Who is going to pay for what? How are you going to divide the cooking and chores? Are they willing to babysit to let you go out alone, and if so, how often? Is there anything they expect of you?

Time off

Don't take them for granted – offer to cook dinner for them one night and let them put their feet up.

Discipline

Establish in advance what you think is acceptable in terms of treats for the children and to what degree you want to stick to the children's usual routine.

Independence

Get two hire cars (if appropriate) to give you some independence from each other.

Thank you

If the grandparents have taken on childcare or paid for more than their share of the holiday, send a small gift when you get back to show your appreciation.

Above all, try to ensure that your children enjoy the holiday. After all, if their memories are fond enough, one day they might invite you along to spend the holidays with their own children.

teen life

Santa convention makes for an unconventional birthday

Desperate to escape the raging heat of Dubai, we went in search of cooler climates and found ourselves in Copenhagen. In the preceding weeks, my over-enthusiastic parents had spent hours fiddling around on travel websites, studiously memorising *Lonely Planet* guidebooks to plan a Scandinavian holiday that would cover four countries in a fortnight. Me, I'd adopted a stereotypical bratty teenager attitude out of sheer boredom and was enjoying complaining about how unfair everything was – just to add to their stress levels.

My birthday had been coming up, you see, so I figured there was no harm in moaning about spending it on a flight from Berlin to Copenhagen. The pleasant alternative was spending it at home, where I was sure to be inundated with calls from aunts of fourth cousins twice removed whom I had never met. Pretending to be disappointed about missing this blissful state of affairs was sufficient, I hoped, to guarantee me an extra present or two.

What I had not foreseen, however, was that I would end up being cheerfully wished "Merry Christ-

mas" by 150 Santa Clauses from all over the world. When we rolled our suitcases up to the reception of the Copenhagen Marriott, we were slightly bemused by a hotel attendant marching by singing *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and sporting a pair of elongated ears. We initially passed this off as general Danish eccentricity, but this was not case. It turned out that the annual Santa Claus convention was to be held that day, at the very place we were staying, and fate, beautiful fate, had landed me there on my birthday. Happily, everyone was welcome to join in the celebrations.

The convention, by the way, is the

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official meeting of Santas from all over the world, where they come together in July or August – half-way between Christmases – to eat turkey and discuss important issues like whether Blitzen really rhymes with Vixen.

After putting away our things in our room, we of course headed straight back downstairs. The mind-boggling scene of hundreds of plump septuagenarians decked in fire-engine red and ho-ho-ho-ing was enough to make Mum fish out her camera and start clicking madly.

Leaving the parents to join up conversations with a few Santas and admire their hats, I wandered off to the Christmas feast that awaited me. Shallow I may be, but I was not about to waste an opportunity to indulge myself on gourmet cuisine on the only day I could excuse myself for overeating. Rows and rows of Danish pastries are just the thing to make you feel that your life is complete.

As I chomped my way through a lemon tart, Dad appeared at my side and told me, if I was interested, that if I smiled nicely at a Santa carrying a goody bag I could be the proud re-

ceiver of a Christmas-tree-shaped ginger biscuit. "They're doling them out to all the kids," he whispered, giving me a sidelong glance.

"Please, I'm not a five-year old; I couldn't care less," I countered, then gave in to the sugar craving and went off to smile nicely at a Santa. You would think that the place would be overrun by excited toddlers wanting to sit on a 150 laps at once, but surprisingly enough the Marriott's lobby was mostly filled with suited, booted businessmen and women – along with a few families – holding glasses and gliding around in rhythm to *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*.

There was a big sort of jukebox in the corner, with little clockwork reindeer prancing around it, manned mostly by Mrs Clauses, who were proving rather more popular as photograph subjects among tourists than their bespectacled "hubbies". I not only received a chocolate, but was waltzed around in the sea of crimson by an exuberant Santa as the jukebox struck up *Jingle Bells* and everyone started bobbing their heads as if they were at a rock concert. "You're enjoying yourself," Mum accused me, later. "I

was saying cheese for the camera," I returned gruffly.

We then got talking to this year's official Santa Claus of the US, who had beaten hundreds of other hopeful applicants for the coveted job. "I take my duties seriously," he told us. "You know, smiling at children, posing for photos. It's not an easy job." We discovered that all the Santas, although in the traditional red and white, bore some souvenir from their own countries as part of their costume, like the Danish Santa with his Dansko clogs. A show was held too, in which elves sang and did a comedy routine, though we didn't understand a word because it was all in Danish.

We went to bed as transformed Scrooges that night, full of Christmas cheer instead of as the jet-lagged, weary, quarrelling holiday-makers who had entered the hotel. It's a beautiful feeling to announce: "Merry Christmas to us all!" in the middle of July.

★ Lavanya Malhotra

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★ Robert Carroll