



Suitcases and strollers

Travelling with kids may be challenging, but it is a great experience for the whole family



Tan Keng Yao

Last year, while I was trekking up the 1,141m Little Adam's Peak in Ella, Sri Lanka, with my son and my husband, I started contemplating my mortality. I thought I was going to die from exhaustion.

The path up the mountain had started out promisingly, winding through a verdant tea plantation, but recent rainfall turned a stretch of it into a muddy dirt track that also became increasingly steep.

Meanwhile, my son BBC, who was four years old then, was making me look bad. While I was heaving and panting, he was bounding uphill in a demonstration that gravity did not apply to him.

I eventually made it to the top by sheer willpower and possibly some divine help. It had taken us close to two hours. While I slumped against a boulder, BBC ran circles around me, exclaiming over the view of the plunging green valleys and the gusts of clouds that moved in with the wind.

He wasn't like this at the beginning, of course. He had taken one look at the dirt track and whined to be carried but, really, do I look like a sherpa?

So he had moaned and groaned like he was being forced on a route march until a passing trekker commented that he must have

strong legs to make it that far.

This was when he suddenly became turbocharged and chugged his way up like The Little Engine That Could, but on steroids.

Sometimes, children surprise us – and themselves too.

For a long while after the climb, BBC was high on the boost he got to be self-confidence and kept saying: "I have strong legs, right?"

CHILD-FRIENDLY SRI LANKA

My family was on a two-week holiday in Sri Lanka and, initially, we had concerns about how the boy was going to take to the country – the infrastructure was still developing, so getting around was difficult, and a lot of the activities there appeared to be oriented towards adults, such as nature walks, tea-picking sessions and long safari excursions.

Also, the staple diet there is rice and curry. I love curry, but not BBC who, when asked to try spicy food, would pull a face the way you would if you were asked to sample some nuclear reactor waste.

But the trip turned out to be better than expected.

On top of BBC scaling Little Adam's Peak effortlessly, he also enjoyed doing the things adults did, such as take a four-hour train ride on a third-class local train, or go tea-picking on a tea plantation. And he didn't ask to go home or be given the iPad.

Also, even though he did not eat curry, he ate non-spicy Sri Lankan dishes such as curd and honey, a very thick yogurt made of buffalo milk and topped with treacle, and hopper, a bowl-shaped pancake made with rice flour and coconut milk.

And despite the lack of theme parks and child-oriented resort hotels, the country turned out to be extremely child-friendly, in that the people genuinely love and welcome kids and not in a "you're a tourist and I'm obliged to like you" kind of way.

There was the group of young men we met at the train station, for example, who started a game with

BBC and then gave up their spot by the train window so he could get a better view.

There were also the hotel staff who would pat BBC's head when they walked past him, or the train driver who allowed him to hop into the driver's cabin for a look (I was waiting to be asked too but, no, the party's not open to adults).

So no one died from boredom or starvation during the trip and we had more fun than trouble (except for the time the boy refused to walk along an infrequently used railway track because he was sure the moment he stepped foot on it, a train would rush out of nowhere and mow him down).

GLIMPSES OF A DIVERSE WORLD

The first time we travelled with BBC, he was six months old and we had decided to take the safe route and go to Fraser's Hill in Pahang, Malaysia, which was nice and quiet.

Then we ventured farther when he was 10 months old, and went to Perth in Western Australia, which was nice and quiet.

Then we got bored. Nice and quiet only take you that far.

After which, we decided to go anywhere we felt like going, never mind the availability of baby changing facilities or not.

We have had some challenges travelling with a young child, of course.

Such as the time someone had a meltdown during a 13-hour flight to London with a wide-awake toddler (that someone was not BBC or my husband).

As travel-with-kids newbies then, we didn't think of booking a night flight so BBC could sleep throughout instead of wanting to walk up and down the aisle for about 97 per cent of the flight's duration.

Or the time, when BBC was nearing three, we nearly developed a hernia attempting to push a pram up and down the undulating and often crowded and narrow pavements of central Hong Kong. We gave up after one day and

switched to using a baby carrier.

But travelling with a child has been mostly good. Not only does travelling farther afield shake things up for us, but it has been good as well for BBC to see the world and experience the differences between Singapore and other countries.

Travelling has shown him that the world is indeed a very large and diverse place and hopefully this will expand his horizon and teach him that differences are what make people thrive.

Through travelling, he is, for example, exposed to real-world situations that he may not encounter in Singapore. This is especially important now that he is five and beginning to understand more about things around him.

In Athens earlier this year, seeing the number of people busking for a living on the streets and having a brush with pickpockets in a subway there led to a discussion of economic situations in different countries and how people in that country try to cope with their circumstances.

And when we took him to the Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Central Java, Indonesia, at three years old, he wanted to know why adults entering the sacred grounds had to put on a sarong. So we tried to help him understand the need to respect different religious cultures even if one does not hold the same beliefs.

Travelling to Taiwan last year was a mini Mandarin immersion programme for him, in which he learnt that being able to converse with the Taiwanese in their language quickly endeared himself to them.

Being on the road also gives him a glimpse into areas that differ widely; he saw historical sites, such as the Roman baths in Bath, Britain, and different modes of transport and housing, such as boats and houseboats that float in the vast network of canals in Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Trying street food in night markets in Thailand and Taiwan helped him appreciate different types of cuisine.

He also gets a chance to interact with the locals, especially the children, who are often happy to play with him, language barriers notwithstanding. This helps him with his social skills and also to accept social diversity.

And, of course, he has a lot of fun travelling.

As for us parents, we have learnt that children can be highly adaptable, which has given us the confidence to take him on our more adventurous trips.

But no more mountain treks. Not until I up my fitness levels.

The writer's son (above) with his father on a local train in child-friendly Sri Lanka. A group of young men gave up their spot by the train window so he could get a better view.

PHOTO: TAN KENG YAO

How to stay sane when travelling with a young child

Travelling with a child comes with its fair share of challenges. For example, the kid's need to go to the toilet is inversely related to the distance of the nearest toilet. Fact.

But we found it possible to circumvent some hassles encountered on the road with some planning.

And as for problems that cannot be resolved? Well, that's when you will have a funny story to tell when you come back home.

Here are some of our experiences for keeping ourselves sane.

Food: When BBC was still eating semi-solids, we fed him jar food and also mashed up some of our own food, such as plain rice and steamed broccoli, peas, carrots and fish, for him. Sometimes, we made instant oatmeal or cereal with fresh milk.

It is easier to find food for him now that he is older because some form of rice, noodles or bread can be found in most places.

Also, restaurants that cater to tourists will likely serve Western fare such as spaghetti or burgers.

And there is always the ubiquitous Asian eatery, which may not serve the most authentic forms of Asian food, but will do in a pinch.

Stay flexible: We are often unable to see as many things as we want to in a day because it takes five times as long to get three people ready to leave in the morning when you throw a child in the mix. Mealtimes, too, take longer.

Also, BBC, who is five, hasn't outgrown his naps and skipping one makes him act up. When possible, we return to the hotel in the middle of the day or look for somewhere like a cafe or a seat at a mall for a short rest. The trick is to keep plans fluid.

Activities: We plan activities according to what BBC can do for his age, but we also try to push the limit just a little. Little Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka may be a slightly strenuous climb, but we attempted it because we had done our research and found that the climb can be done by children. However, we had to pass up a hike in Horton Plains National Park in the same country because that trek is much more strenuous.

We have also taken him on adult activities such as walking tours or visits to the museum. To keep him from feeling bored or left out, we explain to him softly what the guide is talking about and, to stop him from disturbing other people, we remind him before each tour why he must be quiet. That, plus bribe him with chocolate milk.

Walking tour guides we met in many countries have also been very accommodating of BBC and often try to engage him as well. But we always ask beforehand whether children are permitted on the tours we take.

We also try to make stops at playgrounds or beaches for him to run around in and use up his excess energy because, as all parents know, when kids have too much energy and nowhere to expend it, it will be converted by the laws of Murphy into mischief of the highest order. Also, those places are where he tends to meet local children.



Trekking to the top of Little Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka. PHOTO: TAN KENG YAO

Stroller or baby carrier? When BBC was still young enough to ride a pram, we found that some places are more pram-friendly than others. Cities such as Amsterdam have wide sidewalks, low floors on trams and trains and train stations with lifts, which make it easy to get around using a pram.

Others, such as London, have tube stations with lifts that terminate mid-way, leaving you to grapple with a long flight of stairs. But London's buses are pram-friendly and travel extensive routes, so if you want to use a stroller, take the bus.

Some cities may have narrow, crowded sidewalks and undulating streets, such as Hong Kong, which make pushing a pram difficult, in which case, it is easier to use a baby carrier.

Opt for a sturdy, backpack-style carrier which will distribute the child's weight evenly between the shoulders and hips to make it easier for you to walk.

When planning a trip, do a Google search with the terms "(name of country), pram-friendly" and you will find plenty of websites offering advice.

Also, BBC occasionally wanted to get out of the pram to explore on his own, so we strapped a child harness with a lead around him, which gave him the freedom that he wanted, but prevented him from wandering off.

Accommodation: Check that the lodging welcomes children; some places cater only to adults or are unsuitable for children because of exposed staircases, for example. Renting an apartment or opting for a room with a kitchenette makes it easier to heat up milk or food.

Miscellaneous: We teach BBC how to say some basic phrases in the language of the country we are heading to, such as hello and thank you. This is good language exposure for him and also shows the locals we are interested in their culture.

Also, to keep BBC occupied, we give him a cheap, old digital camera and let him take photos of things that catch his fancy. It not only keeps him amused, but also heightens his awareness of his surroundings when looking for subjects to shoot.

Parenthood need not mean the end of travelling. Good luck and have fun.

Tan Keng Yao

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