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Travel tips for adventurous solo parents

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(*Australian Associated Press*)

A chance to relax on holiday is golden, but what trumps even that is watching your child discover new places and make new friends.

During our week-long adventure in Egypt, my nine-year-old daughter Emmeline bonded tightly with the British, American and Australian kids in our tour group.

They played cards until late on night trains, tried local delicacies in souks, giggled on camels as they bumped over Saharan sand dunes, and acted out the parts of pharaohs and queens in mini-plays at the Pyramids of Giza and the Valley of the Kings.

They've learned how different Anglo cultures say different words, of course, while us mums have delighted in spending a week with other fun, hard-working and inspiring solo parents.

I feel excited to have discovered Intrepid Travel's Solo Parent trips. Life as a single parent isn't easy and in a cruel twist, it can even be hard to have a holiday.

Travelling by yourself with little ones can be intimidating. With holidays geared around two adults and two children, you're often paying for an adult you don't have, while feeling lonely on packages or in resorts geared towards nuclear families. It's as if the travel industry just can't be bothered to evolve.

It's a mistake. Around one in six families in Australia today have just one parent; in the US and the UK, the figure jumps to around one in four.

Intrepid Travel, with a strong focus on family travel, is one operator that has taken notice of the trend.

The Melbourne-based operator launched its Solo Parent trips this year, in response to solid market demand – and is delighted with the uptake.

"We started getting enquiries from solo parents in the US, the UK and Australia so I started to research this," says Dyan Mckie, head of family travel at Intrepid, and a single mother herself. "I discovered there was almost nothing in the market targeting solo parent families."

She started to look at the feedback from solo parents on Intrepid's family trips. "They really valued their child having other children to talk to and play with, and them having adults to talk to, but often this is hard when you're surrounded by couples," she says.

"I also came across single parent Facebook groups where people were always asking about tour operators doing single parent travel.

"It all fell into place for me," says Mckie. "I realised that this genre of travel has legs."

This year Intrepid ran six solo parent trips, to Vietnam, Thailand, India, Morocco, Egypt and Costa Rica; in 2019 they have 33 departures on offer, which are already selling well.

"It will be a big year, and we're looking to expand to more destinations in 2020," says Mckie.

Whether or not you take a tour or travel independently, here are Mckie's tips for solo parent travellers:

PLAN

Sit down with your child and brainstorm interests and activities that you may like to do on holiday. This will help you decide on a destination that's right for both of you.

FLY EASY

You're not a backpacker anymore; the cheapest flight isn't always the best. Once you've decided on a destination, research flight times. "Try and avoid layovers where possible, which can be tiring for your child," says Mckie. "And aim to arrive at your destination at a

decent hour for him or her.”

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Don't pack too much in. “If you're going for two weeks, stick to one country, maximum two,” says Mckie. “Spend at least two nights in each place so you get to see it, you aren't constantly travelling and unpacking, and you get that downtime together.”

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

If you're travelling independently, you're the tour leader, the planner and the organiser. Don't expect too much – of yourself or your child. An organised tour, which allows you to arrive and explore without having to navigate all the finer details of travel, may be a great option.

SEEK OUT COMPANY

“As much as we love our children, we love talking to other adults,” says Mckie. “And for a child it's nice to experience a place with other children.” A tour is a great way to go, because it offers you and your child ready-made playmates and gives your child exposure to children from other places. If you're not on a tour, spend time at the hotel pool or in family-friendly restaurants to create opportunities for meeting other families.

BE ADVENTUROUS

Flop and drop holidays are an enticing option for tired parents, but Mckie believes they're also a wasted opportunity. “At a young age we can expose children to different cultures, religions and people, and help them to become global citizens,” she says. Many parents, particularly solo parents, are put off by exotic places. “They worry if they are safe, whether their child will like the food, whether he or she will get sick,” says Mckie. “But while they are valid concerns, they shouldn't stop you from exploring far-flung destinations.”

TAKE TIME TOGETHER

Travelling alone with your child can be a huge confidence boost for many solo parents – and also offer an incredible bonding experience. At home life whizzes by so fast, often not allowing much time for connection. “On holiday you can sit and talk and get to know each other a little bit more,” says Mckie. “You'll always share the memories of travel.”

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Emirates and Qantas fly from most Australian state capitals to Cairo via Dubai.

STAYING AND PLAYING THERE: Intrepid Travel's Egypt Family Holiday for Solo Parents trip starts and ends in Cairo. The nine-day trip costs from \$1,560 per person twin-share and the minimum age for children on this trip is five years old. A discount of 10 per cent applies on this trip to children 17 years and under at time of travel. Intrepid offers small group adventures on more than 1000 itineraries worldwide. For more, visit www.intrepidtravel.com

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