



WHEN TWO PLUS TWO'S
not you

©Intrepid Travel



There are more parents travelling solo with their children than ever before, but by the way the travel industry markets to families, you'd never know it. Isn't it about time tour operators, hotels and cruises paid more attention to this rapidly growing demographic? Caroline Riches takes a closer look.

FAMILY models in the western world are changing at a pace never before seen in history. Blended families, large families and children with two mums or two dads – it's all become so normal. But the biggest change of all is the number of single parents around – in Australia it's one in six; in the UK and the US, the figure jumps to one in four.

But research family holidays online and you would have no idea this was the case. Do a quick Google search on "family travel" and click on the Images tab. Rows and rows of beautiful white families greet you and 90% of the time, there are two parents – a mum and a dad – and two children, a boy and a girl.

The travel industry should reflect our dreams and also our needs, but in terms of one-parent families, it doesn't appear aligned with either. Marketing purely to two parents and their two kids not only sends the message to solo parents that they shouldn't travel alone with their children, but to some it also suggests they can't.

Holidays With Kids Editor Aleney de Winter says if the travel industry ignores the growing number of solo parents, it will be at its peril, not least because many of them have the desire to travel and the income to make it happen.

"There is a misconception that single parents can't afford to travel," she said. "While some are doing it tough, the majority of solo parents in Australia work and have a disposable income to spend on travel. To not factor them in is losing business."

But while many parents travel alone with their children out of necessity, more and more are also doing it though choice. De Winter is one of them, and she sees it as a growing trend. "It's becoming harder and harder to align parents' working schedules and children's school and leisure schedules. It might be that mum takes one child on a trip, then does another trip later in the year with another child. It's a different world."

De Winter sees many benefits of travelling as a solo parent.

"There's one room, one taxi, a smaller

table in a restaurant. There are fewer choices to make, less decisions to be made, less people to consult, and kids become extraordinarily responsible when they have to help out their mum alone," she said. "They all have to be given tasks. We're a team."

Travelling alone with just one child is for her, even more sacred. "When I get to go on a trip with just one of my children, my relationship with that child is deepened so incredibly. You think you know your kids but when you spend a few days alone with them, there's a whole lot you learn about them."

Back in 2017, the emerging trend for solo parent travel got Dyan McKie, Brand and Product Manager – Family Adventures at Intrepid Group thinking. The company had recently launched solo traveller tours and its sales teams around the world were receiving enquiries about the possibility of tours for single parents as well. As Intrepid's brand and product manager of family travel and a single mum herself, McKie started listening to parents in solo parenting forums and Facebook groups. Time and time again she came across the question: "Are there any tour operators or travel companies that cater specifically for one-parent families?"

McKie scoured the internet and discovered that while tour operators and cruise lines were targeting solo travellers, solo parents were left standing at the dock.

While many one-parent families go on tours, cruises and packages designed for families, they're not always a good fit for various reasons. In hotels, a solo parent must pay the same price as two parents for the same room; many deals, such as "kids eat free" are designed around one paying adult per child;

and many activities offered in resorts rely on an accompanying grown up, which is tricky if you're on your own and have two children wanting to do different things.

Plus, hanging around nuclear families on holiday can be confronting and isolating for single parents and their children. After all, everyone wants companionship and people to play with, no matter their age.

"After spending some time researching, I realised the market was lacking poorly in this space," said McKie. "The way I felt the

“
There is a misconception
that single parents can't
afford to travel
”

Aleney de Winter,
Editor, *Holidays with Kids*

industry was marketing for families was very archaic; there didn't seem to be anybody catering for solo parents despite this demand and I thought, you know what, this has legs."

“
The way I felt the industry was marketing for families was very archaic; there didn't seem to be anybody catering for solo parents despite this demand
”

Dyan McKie, Brand & Product Manager - Family Adventures, Intrepid Group

In 2018 Intrepid launched family holidays for solo parents, which took groups of 16 maximum to six destinations: Egypt, Morocco, Costa Rica, Thailand, Vietnam and India. The destinations were chosen carefully; they promised exotic and colourful adventure but were places parents may feel a little daunted travelling around alone with their children.

Intrepid's solo parent tours follow the same itineraries as the company's family tours, but are slightly adapted to cater for different needs.

"We brief our leaders in a different way," said McKie. "On family trips, families tend to wander off on their own in the downtime. But on the solo parent trips, tour leaders need to be aware that the group will most likely want to stay together or may require more guidance to fill in that free time. Being solo parents in a foreign land, they may not feel confident enough to go off and have dinner with their child by themselves. Leaders on solo parent trips also need to be across how the group is bonding; they may need to work a bit harder to engage the children and the adults as a group at the beginning."

They also need to be prepared for some heavy lifting. "Parents travelling by themselves may need that extra help carrying luggage and getting everything organised, whereas if you have two parents, they tend to bounce off each other," added McKie. "So for leaders, there's a heightened awareness on those particular departures."

Being the first adventure travel tour operator to run trips out of Australia designed specifically for solo parents, the market is watching eagerly to see how Intrepid performs in this space.

So far, the numbers stack up.

While Intrepid's family range saw a 26% increase in 2018, the solo parent bookings saw a 40% increase. From one departure per tour in 2018, numbers are already rising; six solo parent trips will go to Egypt in 2019, eight in 2020. McKie says Intrepid expects to increase both the number of destinations and the number of departures over coming years.

Other tour operators may not be far behind. With everything taken care of, from the safety and organisation to hands-on help and socialisation, formal tours are a great option for one-parent families.

Founder of family travel agency byokids.com.au, Leah Squire says she believes the travel industry is waking up to the needs of solo parents, slowly but surely.

"We've been doing family travel for 13 years and back when we started there was no product for anyone outside the nuclear

family," she said. "We've always had lots of enquiries from solo parents but it's been slow to filter through. Companies have to sit up and realise the value of their demographic before they make a change – in both the marketing and the pricing."

Cruise lines have started giving a nod to solo parents in their marketing campaigns. Norwegian Cruise Line is one of them, promoting the kids activities and youth program, family-friendly accommodation and "dining for all" that make cruises "one of the best holidays for a single parent".

A cruise is certainly a good option for any parent seeking a break from never-ending chores and myriad ways to keep their kids entertained. But there is more that could be done to assist solo parents on board ship, such as large communal tables in dining rooms where single parents can mingle, and in-room babysitting. Some cruises lines,





©Intrepid Travel



©NCL



such as Holland America Line and Celebrity Cruises, already offer this service for a fee.

Solo parent blogger and influencer Barbara Bryan of singlemum.com.au travels extensively with her two daughters, and homeschools them along the way. She recommends cruises as a fantastic way for solo parents to find some downtime. But she says babysitting services are lacking, particularly when it comes to shore excursions; many cruise lines will only care for children if the parent remains on ship.

"If you want to do things like visit cities, it would be great to see some reliable babysitting services so solo parents can enjoy the experience with the confidence their children are being cared for," she said.

Many hotels and resorts could also improve their childcare and activity program to better support solo parents, she adds. "With some activities the parent must accompany the child and if you have more than one child and they want to do different

things, you're outnumbered and you can't do it," says Bryan. "There needs to be better ways to support one-parent families. And often improving those holiday options is a great way for the hotel to make more money."

Family meal packages can also be grating for solo parents. "Kids eat free" deals are usually based on one paying adult per child, which is "cheating a little", says Squire at byokids.com.au.

"Hotels should no longer price their family meal packages based on two adults in a room, but instead 'two kids per room eat free', which seems more fair. Thankfully, many hotels are moving to this model, and we hope it will become widespread."

Making accommodation more affordable for solo parent families, however, is more tricky. Hotels have to have a room paid for and of course it's going to work out cheaper if that cost is shared between two adults. It's not that solo travellers or solo parents pay a supplement, it's just that they have to

pay for the price of the room on their own, which hikes up the rate per person.

"If they're marketing it to a family of four, why would they want to give it to a family of three for cheaper? I understand that," said De Winter at *Holidays With Kids*. "Similarly, airlines simply want seats on a plane paid for.

"But there has to be some way of making it a bit more economical for solo parents. Paying per person or per child as opposed to per seat or per room seems a lot more egalitarian."

Being inclusive to solo parent families is not just in the deals and the prices; it's also in the service. This starts with training, so that hospitality staff come with an inclusive, open attitude. "If I had a dollar for every time someone said to me, 'can't your partner look after the kids while you're doing that?'. It leaves me fuming," said Bryan. "Staff need to make solo parents feel more welcome and supported."

“
Staff need to make
solo parents feel more
welcome and supported
”

Barbara Bryan, blogger,
singlemum.com.au

At the domestic level, perhaps the best way for the travel industry to be more inclusive for solo parent families is to think small. One-off events could be a great way to start.

"Hotels could organise their own retreats for one-parent families," suggested De Winter. "Cooking retreats, health retreats or mind, body and soul sessions – programs like these could work really well for solo parents with fun programs running alongside for the children."

But while solo parents wait for the market to really wake up to their needs, they will do what parents have always done: band together. Many families love holidaying together – to share the load and the good times – and with solo parent families, this makes even more sense. Plus there's always safety in numbers. Social media has made it easy for one-parent families to organise their own group tours.

"Solo parents are rallying together more than ever on social media to form groups of people who want to travel together and do likeminded things," said De Winter. "It makes perfect sense."