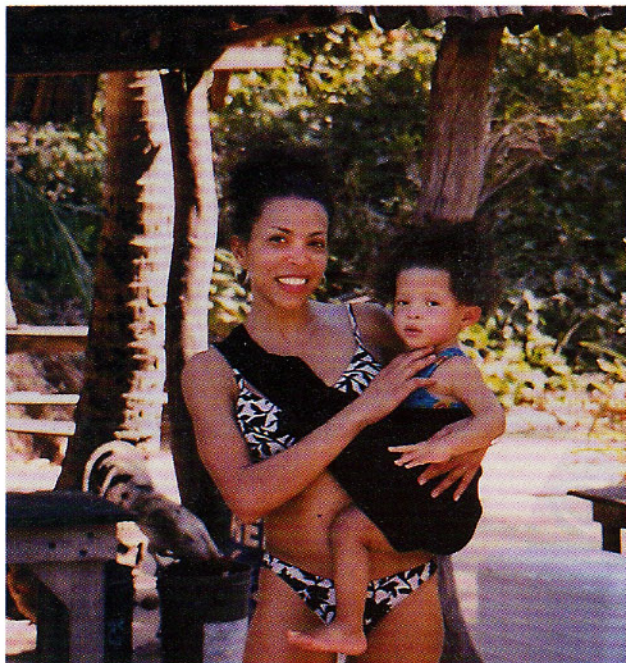


Have Toddler, Will Travel

Take a 2-year-old into the Costa Rican rain forest? No problem!

BY JEANNINE AMBER



The idea of taking a trip with my child came to me in the dead of winter, after days of sitting at my computer, pretending to work while Niko, my 2-year-old daughter, made a game out of jamming thumbtacks into my printer. I was on deadline. She was stir-crazy. One of us was always in tears.

I love my child; I'm thrilled to be her mother. Still, I was spending an awful lot of time fantasizing about my former freedom. I reminisced about sangria in Spain, sailing in Cuba, shopping in Paris. "Is it all over?" I moaned to a friend. "Am I going to be trapped in my apartment for the next five years listening to Elmo?"

This is the central choice every single parent must make: Do you live your life cataloging the things you've given up? Or do you embrace parenthood and find a way to make your child a part of the life you desire?

I choose the latter. My daughter and I can really use the quality time. I decide we're ready for an adventure.

REALITY CHECK #1: YOU CAN'T GO JUST ANYWHERE.

Suddenly I'm seeing every aspect of the trip from a child-safety perspective. White-water rafting? Out. Safari? Out. Hot-air ballooning? Out. Any place that held a high likelihood of my child's falling, crashing, drowning or catching an intractable disease—also out. That quickly eliminated most adventure trips and most of the world. And then someone suggested Costa Rica.

Costa Rica is famed for its lush rain forests, undisturbed coasts and active volcanoes that rumble through the night. "Think we'll have fun?" I ask my child. She ignores me like a diva. I take that as a yes.

REALITY CHECK #2: AS LONG AS YOUR BABY STAYS QUIET, YOU CAN PUT UP WITH JUST ABOUT ANYTHING.

As soon as we get to the airport, I'm told that I can't board the airplane without a signed document from the Costa Rican Consulate that confirms I have permission as a single parent to travel with a minor (see sidebar). It's four-thirty in the morning.

The next 36 hours are madness. But through it all—the trip to the consulate, long waits at the airport, a mad dash to catch a connecting flight—Niko stays miraculously, mercifully calm. On the plane I give her animal crackers and let her hold the airplane phone. She spills juice and food all over the seat, takes off her clothes and pats the head of the man in front of us. But not once does she cry. We create a Zen loop of tranquillity: She's calm so I'm calm; I'm calm so she's calm. (When traveling alone with a child, breathe deeply and repeat that mantra 10,000 times.)

REALITY CHECK #3: YOU CAN'T REALLY DO IT ALONE.

On our first night we stay at the Holiday Inn Auroa Hotel in San Jose, the bustling capital of Costa Rica. Too exhausted to explore the city, I take Niko downstairs for what I hope will be a quiet dinner before bed. But she's wound up like a top, >

The author and her 2-year-old daughter, Niko, relax on the beach in Costa Rica after a week of adventure travel.



“One minute someone is flirting with my child, the next they’re helping me out.”

whirling around the restaurant, banging into tables, colliding with waiters. I chase after her a few times but finally give up.

Suddenly, there she is spread-eagled on the service counter. In New York they kick people out of restaurants for behavior like this. But here, the cashier, a young girl with long brown hair, just waves at me to sit down. She pulls Niko off the counter and plays with her until I finish eating. It seems that in Costa Rica children are doted on by everyone.

Niko loves the attention, but no one benefits from this surge of affection as much as I. One minute someone is flirting with my child, the next they’re helping me out: folding up her stroller, holding my bags or chasing after her as she takes off down the beach. Any single mother will tell you this kind of community parenting is borne of necessity. This is what mother’s intuition is for—knowing whom to trust when you really need a hand.

REALITY CHECK #4:

IF THIS IS AN ADVENTURE, YOU CAN’T JUST LIE ON THE BEACH ALL DAY.

There’s no point in flying all the way to one of the world’s premier ecotourism sites just to lounge around (although I’m mighty tempted). Determined to see the sights, on our second day we meet Héctor from Costa Rica’s Temptations tours for a private day trip. He drives us into the hills to the Poas Volcano, where he details the region’s foliage and gives me a primer on geology. On the way, Niko and I look out the window and fiddle with our sunglasses. Occasionally she bursts into song.

In the afternoon we visit a butterfly conservatory and a hummingbird garden, hike through a forest and see a waterfall. Niko, it turns out, is afraid of butterflies but finds throwing pebbles at her shoe the height of entertainment. The excursion takes almost 12 hours.

Back at the hotel, we shower, order room service and eat dinner in bed, watching *The Simpsons* en español. “Having fun?” I ask. Niko smiles and flings a spoonful of tomato soup in the air.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 180]

The daring duo explored sights like the La Paz waterfall (top).

DON’T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT THEM

Sensible shoes, diapers and animal crackers are just the tip of the iceberg. If you’re planning a trip alone with your toddler, these are the essentials:

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS There are strict regulations governing international travel alone with a minor. Unless you have sole legal custody (in which case you should bring your court order with you when you travel) you will most likely need a notarized letter from your child’s father stating you can take your child abroad. This is especially important if you and your child have different last names. If you can’t contact the father, Brenda Elwell, founder of singleparenttravel.net, recommends getting a letter from a minister or lawyer familiar with your situation that explains the father has not been involved. Contact the consulate of the country you are visiting and ask about its requirements well in advance of your trip.

PASSPORT While there are a few countries that do not require passports (like Canada and some places in the Caribbean), “Most countries will require a passport for you and your child, no matter how young,” says Trisha Chandler from MacNair Travel/American Express in Alexandria, Virginia. If you have sole custody, or if yours is the only name on your child’s birth certificate, you can apply for her passport on your own. If the father’s name is on the birth certificate, he is required to appear with you at the passport office or provide you with a notarized letter stating that he gives his permission for you to get your child a passport. For more information, visit travel.state.gov/specialreq.html.

VACCINATIONS Visit the Centers for Disease Control Web site (cdc.gov/travel/), or talk to your pediatrician or a travel-medicine specialist to find out which vaccinations you will need. For infor-

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REALITY CHECK #5: YOUR CHILD WILL EMBARRASS YOU IN UNTHINKABLE WAYS.

The next week is a blur of surprisingly child-friendly activities: Two days at Tabacón Hot Springs, where we lounged in a pool carved out of rock; a night in a cabin at the base of a volcano; and an afternoon on a catamaran in the Pacific. Everything's been Breathtaking! Spectacular! Amazing! But I'd be lying if I said traveling alone with a child doesn't take its toll.

Niko's poor little face is covered in giant pink mosquito bites, and her bottom lip is cut from falling off the bed. Her hair (which I stopped combing as a timesaving measure) looks like Don King's. And we're both tired, which may explain what happens next.

One morning during a tour in an open-air tram, Niko, with a child's impeccable timing, drops to the floor and starts to cry. I pick her up and she jackknifes out of my arms. Her flinging about has the tram swaying from side to side. There's nothing for me to do except close my eyes and pretend I don't know her.

When we finally get back to our hotel, the first thing I do is cancel our afternoon plans. We're supposed to take a three-hour bus ride to Punta Leona, a beach resort, but there's no way we'd survive the trip. Instead, Niko and I curl up on the bed, like a cat and her kitten, for a five-hour nap.

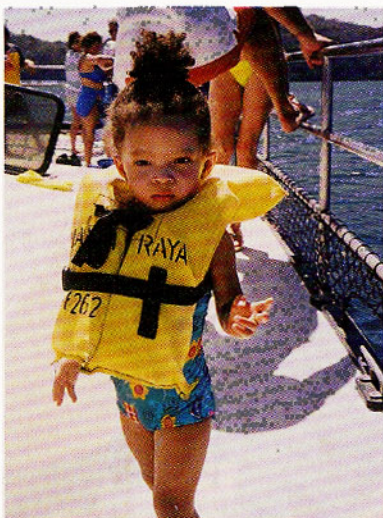
REALITY CHECK #6: THE SURPRISES MIGHT BE THE BEST PART OF THE JOURNEY.

When I remember this trip it won't be for the sights, the sun or the beach. It will be for this: The night after our five-hour nap, I took Niko for dinner at a candle-lit restaurant. After our meal I pulled her into my lap to discuss the day's events. She doesn't have much of a vocabulary, but I'm captivated by her impish smiles and excited inflection and the way, midbabble, she suddenly gives herself a round of applause. It had been so long since I'd had a moment with my child undisturbed by work, chores, phones or stress. Niko stroked my face and I realized how much I missed her.

Since our trip I've implemented a new policy: Once a week I take Niko to lunch. I don't bring work or a friend. It's just the two of us with our purses and sunglasses, spilling food everywhere. These mother-daughter days are a disaster for my budget, but I don't care. It took an adventure for me to remember that the person who makes me happiest is right here beside me. □

Jeannine Amber is a contributing writer at ESSENCE.

“At Tabacón Hot Springs, we lounged in a pool carved out of rock.”



Niko takes in the local scenery somewhere on the Pacific.

mation about a travel clinic in your area, visit cdc.gov/travel/travel_clinics.htm.

MEDICAL INSURANCE Accidents happen, especially with kids. Check with your medical-insurance company to see if you have overseas coverage. Or for a nominal fee per year, you can join the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (iamat.org), a nonprofit organization that provides a list of approved English-speaking doctors around the world who will see you at a reasonable rate. For more information, read *Safe and Sound: Healthy Travel With Children* (Globe Pequot Press).

SOMETHING TO CARRY BABY IN You only have two hands and, if you're traveling alone, you will need them free. For hiking trails or a walk on the beach, try a sling, which can fold into your purse and comfortably hold a child from newborn to toddler (I got mine from mayawrap.com). Baby backpacks are also an option, but can be cumbersome. For getting around the airport or strolling city streets, an umbrella stroller is a must.

ODDS AND ENDS

- Rain slicker
- Favorite blanket
- Plastic bags for dirty diapers
- Children's cold medicine
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent
- Antidiarrhea medication
- Calamine lotion
- Vaccination records
- Plenty of snacks that don't spill or stain
- Laundry detergent for washing clothes in the sink
- Something for your child to suck on during takeoffs and landings, like a pacifier or a bottle. (Do not give young children hard candy or gum because they may choke.)

For more info on traveling alone with your tot, including trips and tours for single parents, visit parentswithoutpartners.org, familytravelforum.com, relationtrips.com and singleparenttravel.net. —J.A.