
On Safari with Children

Travelling through Africa with children may be unpredictable but it isn't unmanageable, says Natascha Scott-Stokes.

My son's first birthday came at the end of a thirty-day journey in Africa, just the two of us, which had involved almost every kind of transport possible, from planes (jumbo and six-seater) to 4x4s to sailing boats and long-distance buses.

"We'll take it easy", I thought. Instead the day began at 4am, when Sascha was sick all over our bed. Later, I accidentally got insect repellent in his eye, which was excruciating for him, but not as bad as falling off the bed, which resulted in a deep cut next to his eye. The bed frame that caught his face had mud on it, so the bloody wound was also immediately contaminated.

"Your baby will be fine but I think you should have these", said the doctor, pressing a small packet of tranquillisers into my hand. I had been crying with guilt and worry for most of the morning.

Yet the added worry and unpredictability of travel with children should certainly not put you off considering a journey to Africa. They can greatly enrich your trip, and the key to success is really the same as for journeys without them: to be as well prepared for your journey and informed about your destination as possible, and to expect the unexpected with good grace.

Of course this is harder the longer the trip, but at least there are a few basics always worth considering, irrespective of the age, sex and number of children travelling with you. There are no comprehensive guides to travelling with children in Africa, but you might find Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* useful.

HEALTH

1. Vaccinations

I recommend you contact one of the specialist travel clinics, such as British Airways Travel Clinics, which are located in several cities and airports. In Britain you can also contact the Medical Advisory Service for Travellers Abroad (www.masta.org; tel. 09068 224100), which can provide a personalised vaccination schedule you can take to your local medical practice. Ideally, contact any of the above several months prior to departure to ensure the best schedule for any vaccinations you need.

2. Medical Kit

On the road, your medical kit should also include:

- infant paracetamol (or similar)
- tweezers for removing ticks
- de-worming medication (you can't stop kids putting dirty hands in their mouths)
- antihistamine (for allergic reactions)
- rehydration sachets in case of diarrhoea
- nappy rash cream and teething medication (depending on the age of your child)
- lice shampoo
- an anti-fungal powder for treating anything from athlete's foot to crotch rot (common in children in nappies).

Clearly your medical kit will be tailored to your specific needs: if you are spending a short time in a resort hotel, you are unlikely to need all of the above. In any event sun cream, sun hats and mosquito repellent are essential, and you might consider taking flea powder. I had fleas in my sleeping bag once, which was very unpleasant indeed.

3. Drinking

Never allow your children to drink local water or unpasteurised milk, no matter how many assurances you get. It is just not worth it. Pasteurised milk and infant formula milk can be bought in all major cities, but you need to bring water purification tablets with you. The best are the ones that purify one litre each, to use with standard size plastic bottles. Small children can dehydrate very quickly, so I always have a drink to hand.

4. Eating

Breast-fed babies are the ideal kind of children to take with you, as they only need you. Failing that, you must accept that your children might refuse to eat any of the local food, so bring a supply of their favourite cereal or other nourishing food, so they don't starve. Toddlers and pre-school children can survive very well on a box of Ready Brek or porridge, and sweet and savoury foods can easily be added.

INSURANCE

Travel with children makes insurance essential - not least to avoid the guilt should something go wrong. A good place to make enquiries is Trailfinders in London.

EQUIPMENT

Depending on the weight of your baby, it's best to choose a backpack carrier with good back support or a pushchair. Personally, I try to avoid carrying anything on my back in tropical heat, and the choice of pushchair depends on where I am going. In a modern city a lightweight folding stroller is ideal. Anywhere else a multi-terrain three-wheeler is essential, as are the rain cover and sunshade. (Most large baby stores now sell these wonderful machines, very expensive (£300-400 new) but definitely worth investing in. If you cannot find one, contact PCD (tel. 01822 618077 in the UK), who will post items straight to you. A harness is also worth its weight in gold not only for keeping stumbling toddlers upright, but also for keeping hold of them on boats or open jeeps.

On a short journey, bring nappies and wipes with you, though all large cities will sell them. On longer journeys, stock up in the towns. A roll of cotton wool, to be used with clean water, will last much longer than wipes and weighs less. Washable nappies are fine, as long as the rainy season does not prevent drying - as it once did for me.

In all cases consider the sleeping arrangements relevant to your destination: light cotton is best for tropical nights. Garments must cover the whole body if there are no mosquito nets, in which case you will need to leave the ceiling fan on all night or use mosquito repellent as well. On long-distance overland journeys you should bring your own mosquito nets.

ENTERTAINMENT AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Songs, stories and (lightweight) books, painting and drawing gear, paper, wipe-slate scribble pads, bucket and spade, one special comfort toy or favourite thing - none of these need take up much room and all can be shared with others, which can make for some great cultural exchanges. Children remember things much better if "doing" as well as seeing was involved. For example, swapping songs with local kids or drawing the animals on safari. Making a conscious effort to give time to your children each day is also very important, even though the older the children the less likely it is that your interests are going to match. The loneliest boy I ever met was stuck with his parents on a seven-month overland journey, when all he wanted was friends to play football with.

PARENTAL SANITY

My personal approach is twofold: accept you are only going to do a fraction of what you would have done on your own, and try to access a good bottle of wine to have on your own or with your partner as soon as the kids are asleep.

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