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On A Family Vacation, I Recommend Letting Your Kids Take The Lead

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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It is, to understate the obvious, hot in Rome in the month of July.

Luckily, there are public fountains every few blocks spewing forth cold, clean water with which to cool down. My children taught me this. They also showed me that if you block the flowing water with your hand, it shoots out of a tiny hole on the top of the nozzle turning it into a water fountain.

For our first overseas holiday since 2019, we let our children be our tour guides.

Is 'Benign Neglect Parenting' the best parenting style of them all? This mom thinks so. (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/benign-neglect-parenting-is-the-best-parenting-of-all>)

Kids: Take The Wheel

They got the water tips from the *Lonely Planet Kids* guide to Rome. They flipped through the pages of the book and decided what else they wanted to see. We then pored over a map at the kitchen table at our Airbnb rental in Rome and marked the locations with red X's.

Sonia, our eldest (11), wanted to see Trajan's Column, a 35-metre column that tells the epic story of a series of wars in one long, spiral etching.

"Originally it would have been in full colour, like a comic book," read Sonia from the book as we sat on the pavement in front of the monolith.

"There are 2,662 figures carved in it," she continued, "...and Trajan appears 60 times, which makes sense because he's the hero."

Elizabeth (9) wanted to see St. Angelo's Bridge with its 10 angel statues. We made a game of finding the angels based on their descriptions: the angel with the dice, the angel with the lance, the angel with the sponge.

"Maman, why does she have a sponge?" asks Elizabeth, not finding the answer in the book.

"To give Jesus vinegar to drink," she responded.

"We didn't see any though, much to their disappointment."

"Why would they give him vinegar?" she sounded shocked.

"Um, I think it's a metaphor," she said quietly.

Walking over another bridge into the Trastevere neighbourhood, the girls ran to the edge and started scanning the water of the Tiber river.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"The beavers," they said.

"There are no beavers in Rome," I said, laughing.

"Yes, there are," said Sonia flipping open the book. She was right. They're called *nutria* and they are descended from rodents brought from South America in the 18th century for fur. In Italian their name is *castorino* — little beaver.

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Reality: You Can't Do It All

After a couple of days of sightseeing, the reality set in that we couldn't see absolutely everything. To complicate things, my wife and I also added things we wanted to see to their growing list.

We also sometimes acted as the dictators we are

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/parenting-democracy-dictatorship>)

when a final keep-it-or-leave-it decision was required.

They also soon realized that travelling takes an enormous amount of planning.

Some of the sites on their wish list required tickets, some required a subway ride and some we vetoed outright because they were too far away.

This kind of thing is way more boring than pointing at pictures you like in a travel book, but we tried to show them how important it was to plan properly (especially if it's 40 degrees outside, and you've got three children and no data plan).

Maria, our youngest (who celebrated her sixth birthday in Rome by stuffing her face with pizza), loved the pictures in the book of the statues of the Vestal Virgins with their flowing robes.

"They seem cool. I'd like to try that place," she said.

"Sometimes my wife and I forgot what the different X's on the map stood for."

So we bought tickets online and showed up the next day for a tour of the Roman Forum and the Temple of the Vestal Virgins.

Her older sister read to her about the fire the girls had to keep going for 30 years.

Maria also liked the fact that there were no males allowed in the Temple. "No boys allowed!" she said with a grin.

"In fact," said Sonia reading from the book, "if they had a secret love they risked being buried ali...."

"OK, OK, I think that's enough for now!" said my wife quickly, directing their attention across the Forum to the Temple of Romulus. "His mother was a wolf!"

Sometimes my wife and I forgot what the different X's on the map stood for. The kids would guide us through the cobbled streets toward the X, and we would stumble upon an obelisk or an ancient temple they recognized from the book.

Once we rounded a corner and found a disembodied marble foot.

Making mistakes and getting messy are all part of growing up. Which is why this mom isn't a snowplow parent.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/snowplow-parenting-kids-failure>)

Going Beyond The Book

"Oh! This is something I wanted to see," says my wife.

“Why?” says Sonia. “It says here it’s the size of a Fiat 500. That’s a car, right?”

“Yes,” said my wife. “But this is way smaller than a car. How disappointing.”

“I like it,” I said. “It’s just sitting in the middle of an alley in Rome with Vespas zipping around. No one even notices it.”

We stood there and contemplated the foot. Then went to eat more pizza.

The three of them ended up doing an enormous amount of research and reading for our walks around Rome.

Not only did it entertain my wife and me, but it also gave them a sense of ownership over the trip.

When we returned to Canada, they put together a PowerPoint presentation for my mum to show her what they saw.

~~SHARE~~ So now my mum, too, knows about the beavers in the Tiber River.



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