



Beat boredom during car trips by packing plenty of toys, books and games. Photo by Traci Harrison. Model: Brianna Harrison.

Hit the road!

A foolproof plan to enjoy your family vacation

By Libby Carty McNamee

Oh, we have such high hopes when we set off on family summer vacation. As we head toward the coastline, we envision frolicking in the waves, making S'mores over an open fire, and singing "Kumbaya."

Then reality sets in as that dreaded question pops up before you've even cleared the subdivision, "Are we there yet?"

Let's face it – summer family vacations can be, umm, how shall I say it, challenging, frustrating, and downright maddening. With these tweaks, we'll help you make it the summer of fun, not a winter of despair. Isn't that the point after all?

Manage your expectations

If you set off with hopes of sipping Mai Tais on the beach while lying in a hammock with a coastal breeze rocking you to sleep, think again. As a friend from Mississippi says, "It just ain't right." And it isn't. It's like expecting cuisine from LeMaire while dining at Hooters. It's not going to happen, so don't torture yourself and your family with lofty expectations of the impossible. That's OK, though, because you're traveling with kids and this a FAMILY vacation, right?

When we were at the Sanctuary Hotel on Kiawah Island in South Carolina over spring break, we traded off so we each got to relax and enjoy a cocktail in the sumptuous lobby. We also took our five-year-old – and his trusty DVD player with headphones – to the fabulous Jasmine Porch where we sat outside without worrying about being too noisy. I'll always have a special place in my heart for our family-friendly waiter and the Berenstain Bears Christmas DVD!

Packing Up

Like it or not, often the success of your trip lies in the preparation.

First, bring lots and lots of Ziploc bags of different sizes. They don't take up much room, and they come in handy for just about any purpose – wet swimsuits, sorting socks and underwear, separating dirty clothes, holding oozing suntan lotion, passing Goldfish in the car, and even earmarking your child's super special seashell collection. They're also great at the beach to keep your wallet, cell phone, and car keys dry and sand-free. (Who wants a gritty cell phone?)

While we're at it, wipes are great, too, for quick and refreshing mini wash-ups on the road and at the beach. Please don't forget your camera, batteries, and various chargers. Children's Tylenol, allergy medicine, and aloe are also key items. Remember, you will pay a premium in time and money for basic items you buy at the beach, so try to stock up before you go.

Oh, and don't forget multiple pacifiers, car keys, and some earplugs. Earplugs? Yes, we had no idea we needed them either until we shared a room with our son in Kiawah, and he grinded his teeth all night long.

The Beach Bag

Pack it first! It will help you remember what to bring. Then once you arrive, you're all ready to hit the beach!

Here are some suggestions, most based upon my own previous oversights: baseball caps, sunglasses, goggles, suntan lotion, and more suntan lotion. Also throw in towels, two bathing suits and rash guard shirts per person (in case one is wet), a frisbee, a ball for catch, a beach pail and shovel, bug spray, and some Band-Aids tied with a rubber band around pain ointment.

The Car

Have each kid pack his or her own travel bag, while you harbor a secret stash of surprises, such as small toys and sweet treats for lightening the mood when Armageddon seems imminent. Have a roll of paper towels, some wipes, and a designated trash bag ready to pass around the car. And how about surprising the kids with some headphones? Of course, this inexpensive gift is really a present for you, so you don't have to listen to Thomas the Tank Engine on the DVD player for hours on end. (That tune will get stuck in your head for days, take it from me.)

Other things to include are baseball caps, suntan lotion, and sunglasses for everyone. Depending upon the time of day, the sun and glare can be fierce. On a long car trip my friend Alexis' daughter recently asked her parents to move the sun because it was shining in her eyes. They did manage to move it, but it took them several hours.

If you are starting off first thing in the morning, force yourself to pack the car the night before with EVERYTHING for the trip. My friend Tricia, mother of six, developed the Pop-Tarts and Juice Box Method for their annual trip to Hilton Head. Here's how it works: The car is packed the previous evening, and the kids sleep in their traveling clothes. When they wake up in the morning, they are only allowed to troop down the hall to the bathroom before being buckled in their seats. Then breakfast is served in the car – Pop-Tarts and juice boxes for everyone as they whiz off down the road! Have an upbeat CD or DVD ready to roll, and you've set an upbeat, organized tone for your vacation.

Be careful of Saturday travel. That is when most weekly beach rentals change hands, so there is often heavy traffic. If that's the best day for you, take a gander at the map ahead of time to see if there are any alternate routes.

Food on the Road

Give up on the idea of eating a perfectly balanced diet before you start the engine. Do the best you can, but it's just the way it is when you're traveling. Have a soft cooler bag

full of cold drinks and individual servings of pretzels, Cheerios, and Goldfish in Ziploc bags at the ready, easy to dole out on the road for a quick pick-me-up. (The key criteria are foods that don't melt.) As a way to bypass a trip to McDonald's without an uproar, my friend Kim suggests packing a lunch box with a new "toy" from the dollar store. Better yet, wrap the toy for more anticipation!

When you do stop for one reason or another, require everyone to visit the bathroom whether they need to or not (including yourself), top off your gas tank, and grab a few napkins. You don't want to have to stop again 10 minutes down the road, plus you never know how far the next rest stop will be.

Activities for the Road

Boredom on the road is toxic to everyone's mood. How in the world do you keep everyone from going stir crazy?

If you're desperate, you can always break out the corny jokes. It's a great bonding opportunity; everyone regardless of age can appreciate some bad humor! Here's one guaranteed to make you all groan: "Why can't dogs drive? Because they can't find a barking space!" Enough said.

There are also group games to play along the way, such as "I Spy." One player says he spies some something starting with a certain letter, and then the others have to guess what that something is.

You can also build a story. The first person starts the story off with its first sentence, and everyone consecutively adds another sentence to it.

And there's always the old favorite "99 Boxes of Juice on the Wall." (In your previous lifetime you knew it as 99 BEERS on the wall.)

That'll keep 'em busy for a while.

When all else fails, tell them you love them – through clenched teeth if necessary. Isn't that what got you on the road in the first place? As my son Sam says, "Last one to the beach is rotten seaweed!" **RPM**

Libby McNamee is a writer and mother who can't wait to head out on the road again toward a sandy beach, ready for a summer of fun.



Photo by Ryan T. Hooley