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Globe Trotting

Gaining a Deeper Sense of Family Through Travel

By Jenn Director Knudsen

For most families, sharing a bathroom with 40 Tibetan monks is no idea of a vacation. Guess you've never met the Sager family – and others of their ilk – for whom extended family travel is more about the real world than versions of it found at resorts.



Families tend to return from such trips with a yearning to make a difference in the communities they visited and the desire to embark on lengthy travel again and again. They also gain a deeper sense of family. "We overcome things – being cold in a hut in a village in the middle of winter," Bobby Sager, 51, says. "You develop an ability to adapt to people, to food, to situations, to life."

Walking the Talk

Sager, wife Elaine, 50, and their two children, Tess, 14, and Shane, 11, had taken month-long trips together before September 2000. But it was in that month the family left its Boston home and didn't return to it until July 2001.

In those 11 months, the Sagers visited some of the poorest of Third World nations: Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, Pakistan. They went not to ogle the horrid conditions in which many people in those countries eke out a life, but to develop programs for them "and make our hands-on impact," Sager says.

Sager says his family's personal mission mirrors that of the foundation he founded and for which his wife works, the [Sager Family Traveling Foundation and Road Show](#): "Being eyeball to eyeball with the people you're trying to help."

In Nepal, where he serves as consul general to its government, a monarchy, Sager says his foundation helps develop trade. In Dharamsala, Tibet, where he and his family share a toilet with myriad monks and sleep – on the floor – in others' sparse homes, his foundation is spearheading efforts to teach the locals chemistry, biology and genetics.



And in Rwanda, a country so ravaged by war in 1994 that it's believed one million people died in 100 days of gruesome fighting, the foundation has paired the wives of the dead with the wives of the murderers to get small businesses – dairies and textiles – off the ground.

Sager says it's important that his children see him and his wife "walking the talk" – truly helping people in need, worldwide. "My kids don't have the advantage I had of growing up without a lot of money," Sager says. "I'm not against taking a trip for pleasure, but in the end, pleasure is derived from helping people who need it."

Changing Your Perspective

Dick Simon, of Newton, Mass., feels similarly about his kids' impressions of the lengthy adventures he's taken his family on. Simon and his wife, Patty, both 51, and their three children,

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Alex, 15, Katie, 13, and Ben, 11, have traveled extensively together since their first long (10-month) [globe trot](#) in 2000.

Simon, who works in real estate development and runs the Peace Action Network of both the Young Presidents Organization ([www.ypo.org](#)) and World Presidents Organization ([www.wpo.org](#)), is quick to acknowledge his children are lucky. "We're fortunate that our kids are growing up in certainly a very privileged existence, but it is also a very sheltered existence," Simon says.

This is part of the impetus behind exposing his family to those in the Third World on the opposite end of the privilege scale. As a result, all three of his children today are interested in fields like ecotourism, microcredit and education and community development abroad, Simon says.

Those interests were sparked from experiences like one in a small town outside Arusha, Tanzania, an eastern African country. There, the Simons toured Sakila Elementary School and learned each local family had to pay \$350 for a child who graduates to attend a middle or junior high school. Without that kind of money – and the majority don't have it – parents must pull their kids out of the school once elementary education is completed and put them into the only alternative available: subsistence farming on family plots.



Goaded into action by what they saw, the Simon family, once back in this country, created scholarships so the Tanzanian children could get more than a primary-school education. And Ben, then a first-grader at a public elementary school, spearheaded a penny drive. He and his classmates collected 100,000 pennies; the kids' money went toward installing windows and fixing the roof at Sakila Elementary School.

The Simon children also saw leprosy victims while traveling through India and landmine victims in Cambodia. You can imagine, Simon says, how such experiences "change your perspective a little bit."

Simon's eldest, Alex, now a high school freshman, says traveling extensively and to the far-flung places he's gone with his family have indeed enriched his life and taught him to take very little for granted.

The family returned in April from a 10-day trip to Morocco. While there, Alex was particularly struck by just how fantastic a ball could be to the very underprivileged. "I was throwing around a ball with some Berber kids that lived in the small village in the Atlas Mountains I was staying in," says Alex, who now runs his own catering business with a friend. (His business venture is partially inspired by the various cuisines he's sampled around the world.) "These kids were genuinely enjoying playing with this one little ball more than I had seen people who had just received a multi-thousand-dollar computer or TV. I feel much more aware of people's situations in the rest of the world, and I also feel that it is my responsibility to do what I can to help people in less-fortunate situations around the world."



"Through traveling, I have encountered many children, about my age, and whenever I took the time to get to know them ... I realized that they weren't all that different from me, on the inside," says Alex's sister, Katie, now a seventh-grader, poet and linguist studying for her bat mitzvah. "If we are all alike, how could we refuse to help another person?"

Others' Lives

Extensive travel also opened the Dodson family's eyes to how other people around the world live. Inspired by her long-time friends, the Simons, Stephanie Dodson, 44, says she is so glad her family, too, planned for and embarked on a nearly four-month journey.

Dodson, her husband, David, 44, an investment banker, and their three daughters, 14, 12 and 9, last fall visited Nepal, Bhutan, Vietnam, Tanzania, Bangkok, South America and Antarctica.

In Bhutan, a tightly controlled country ruled by a king, the Dodsons observed people very happy with their lives, despite tight government control of them. They also were struck by the central

role spirituality – as opposed to materialism – played.

Dodson, from Weston, Mass., says now that the family is Stateside, her kids aren't "donning

sack cloths or getting up at 5 a.m. to pray or anything," but her daughters' perspectives certainly were changed. "I think they're profoundly effected for the rest of their lives," says Dodson.

The Dodsons spent one and a half years planning for their trip. The Sagers and Simons, too, carefully plan well in advance for all their lengthy treks. The parents study up on not only where to go and what to do once there, but how to finance the journey in the first place and keep their kids up-to-date in school while abroad.

Finances and Schoolwork

Each family says keeping up with schools' curriculums and financing such lengthy travel are easier than you might think. In fact, Dodson says the hardest part of long trips with everyone in tow is getting yourself – and your kids – to "extract" yourself from your work-a-day lives. "I definitely think that many more people can do it than think they can do it," Dodson says.

The traveling families featured here found little to no resistance from their children's teachers. "The biggest, most enthusiastic supporters of this are the kids' teachers," says Simon. "They comment, 'This is the best education these kids can get. Can't we come?'"

The Sagers hire two teachers to accompany the family on their trips. The teachers are not associated with their kids' private schools but know the children's academic requirements. "They follow the curriculum as if they were in school, but they're not in school," Sager says of Tess, an eighth grader, and Shane, a fifth grader.

Dodson met with her girls' teachers prior to their trip, November 2004 through February 2005. Her children toted textbooks on CDs and completed special projects that would substitute for in-class work. They also frequently e-mailed their teachers and spent two hours every day on schoolwork.

And though Dodson is reluctant to reveal the amount her family spent on their continent-hopping trip – they did indulge in some luxuries, such as an organized safari in Tanzania – she believes a four-month trip to fewer locales could be done for \$50,000 or even half that. "Your trip could be as plush or as lean as you want it and still have a fantastic experience," she says.

Booking hotels, activities, tickets and side trips via the Internet or while in the host country – instead of arranging everything via an agent in this country – would save lots of money. But doing so would require "a little more legwork and a little more leap of faith," she says.

Family Bonding Abroad

Unlike the Sagers and Simons, Dodson says her family won't travel in more than month-long chunks any time soon "to avoid missing entire quarters at school." But, she says, "I would do it again in a heartbeat."



If for no other reason, for the family bonding.

Simon says he knows no better way to fortify a family than to globetrot to the remotest, poorest corners of the earth, together. As a "floating island," he says, the family is only and totally reliant on itself to get through the toughest times and enjoy the best ones. Being isolated as a family unit for so long "creates a reservoir of shared experiences, and it ends up drawing the family together more," Simon says.

"Does that mean we never have siblings fighting with one another?" he says.

"No, of course not. We've so learned to

savor the just-our-family piece, we do whatever we can to make that happen."

"Traveling as a family is appealing to me because it brings us closer as a family," says the youngest Simon, Ben, now a fifth-grader in public school and baseball player. "I don't want to travel solo because I would worry about all the things my parents have to worry about, which is a lot of things."

Photos courtesy of www.SimonFamily.org.

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About the Author: Jenn Director Knudsen is a Portland, Ore.-based senior contributing writer for [iParenting Media](#) and a mother of two.

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