

S A N F R A N C I S C O

Examiner

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England, Kids in Tow

After the chaos of London, farm stays enchant the youngest of visitors

DIGITAL STOCK



Believe me, there were some lively debates behind closed doors. Would a trip abroad with our two young sons, Avery and Oliver, create fond memories or nightmarish ones? My husband and I had traveled far and often before we had children. We'd watched exhausted couples hauling toddlers through Paris and wondered if we'd ever have the nerve. Last summer, with our kids 9 and nearly 6, we decided to take our chances.

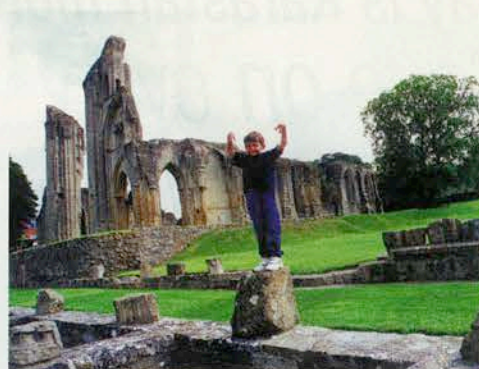
For this first European adventure, we chose England, where we knew we'd find comfort food, no language barrier and enough castles, knights, murder and sedition to keep the guys intrigued. We planned to take five days to tour London, and another eight to experience Bath, Devon and Cornwall. Our friends with kids put down their deposits for Lake Tahoe again, and quietly questioned our sanity.

With the help of Egon Ronay's extremely frank guide, *And Children Come Too*, which lists and describes every kid-friendly hotel, restaurant, pub and tea shop in Great Britain, and judicious searching on the Internet, I planned the trip. A copy of *TimeOut London* (bought stateside) was indispensable. Soon I had an itinerary that promised very comfortable surroundings and lots of opportunity for interaction with other traveling families.

The whole crew fell in love with London before we even left Paddington Station. It was fascinating to watch these innocent eyes try to absorb everything — the sleek black taxis with jumpseats, the double-decker

buses, the sweeping architecture of block after block of brownstones. The boys did not possess what I call guidebook calibration — a street busker was as interesting as Trafalgar Square. The Underground was great, but so was the vending machine that sold a dozen kinds of Cadbury's chocolate. The fat black ravens that make the Tower of London their home were as mysterious and interesting to the boys as the crown jewels. One small corner of the aviation exhibit at the Science Museum, where a virtual helicopter could be remotely launched and landed, was as fascinating as anything else in that vast and impressive building. How far we got in the course of the day ceased to be important. The kids set the pace — slow and in depth, and it made sense to respect that.

Our London accommodations at the Colonnade Townhouse, in Little Venice, were just about perfect. At the end of the day, we were able to exchange the intensity of Central London (Piccadilly Circus was a 10-minute Underground ride) for an elegant residential neighborhood where mothers pushed children in prams and friendly local merchants took the time to get to know us. Rich textiles in glowing colors and overstuffed furniture in this just-renovated double townhouse made us feel like we were visiting well-to-do and thoughtful friends. The management at the Colonnade exhibited a remarkably high level of appreciation for childish shenanigans. They arranged evening childcare, a masseuse for aching parents and theatre tickets, and kept the bright and well-arrayed breakfast room



CATHRYN RAMIN



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Clockwise, from left: London Bridge; on top of the world at Glastonbury Abbey; piglets at Smallcombe Farm.

open when the kids' jet lag made it impossible for them to extricate themselves from the sheets before 10 a.m. Reasonably priced, the Colonnade Townhouse gave us the kind of luxurious surroundings that would cost twice as much in Central London.

After five days in the big city, the boys were ready for wide-open spaces and some kid-oriented social life. When we picked up our rental car, we found we'd been upgraded to a large and extremely comfortable vehicle. Our pleasure in this lasted until we left the M-4, made our first turn into the warren of streets that comprise the medieval town of Bradford-on-Avon and realized that this lumbering automobile could barely squeeze through the lanes. Slowly, we made our way to the great Jacobean stone pile that is Woolley Grange, a comfortable and attractively appointed country house hotel located about nine miles outside of Bath, part of the previously mentioned Luxury Family Hotels, a group of four hostelries run for the pleasure of English families on holiday with children. Woolley Grange has a large swimming pool, two game rooms and ample lawn for cricket or football. (There is also a very popular Nintendo set.) A nursery on the property where the under-7 set can have lunch and high tea if they wish, is well-stocked with toys and provides short-term day care. Although children are not permitted in the formal restaurant, they are welcome to eat with their parents in the Conservatory, where our kids discovered the *croque monsieur*, promptly renaming it the Cheese McCroc. At Woolley Grange, we rested up, finally adjusting our internal clocks to the time change. We took walks along the

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England, Kids in Tow

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River Avon, (where boats and bicycles can be rented), appreciated the splendid sight of four magnanimous Irish Setters bounding across an impossibly green field and spent the better part of the afternoon with a 9-year-old pal from Devon named Jesse, assembling new rubber band airplanes from the Science Museum on the coffee table in the drawing room. When we finally launched the planes, we celebrated with scones, tea and hot chocolate. I looked at our boys, laughing with their new friend, slathering on clotted cream and jam like they'd been doing it all their lives, and concluded we were in exactly the right place.

In the morning, we began several days of happy farm stays, which I'd arranged through Devon Farms Accommodations. By making it possible for farmers to supplement their income through tourism, Devon Farms has helped preserve a quickly disappearing rural way of life. These overnights are priced from \$30 to \$38 per adult, for bed & breakfast. Children pay about \$13, so a family of four can stay in a bucolic and friendly setting for less than \$100 a night. It's very popular with English families, many of whom return to the same farm year after year. Hearty evening meals are provided for a moderate tariff, and often, self-catering facilities are available.

We stopped first to meet Robin and Lindy Head at Harton Farm, where they raise 250 sheep on 53 acres of spectacular Devon landscape. They welcomed us with thick slices of homemade bread and butter, fresh fruitcake laden with raisins, and a punch made of elderberries and lemon, before taking us across Devon's emerald green hills and hedgerows to visit their livestock, accompanied by two enthusiastic border collies that couldn't wait to demonstrate their skills. Back in the farmhouse, Lindy pulled out her spinning wheel and gave each boy the

opportunity to turn fleece into yarn, creating the souvenir that went to school on the first share day of kindergarten.

An hour later, when we rolled up the gravel drive to Fiona and Jonathan Waterer's Higher Biddacott Farm, in north Devon, we fell in love with two bright-eyed, pink-cheeked children, Harry and Tiggy, and the ancient farmhouse they call home. Beseechingly, our kids asked if we could stay the night. Fiona hadn't planned on four extra guests, but she fluffed pillows and duvets, and insisted that dinner would stretch. While the kids raced off to meet the resident ponies and to pick blackberries for that night's pudding, Fiona showed me around and mixed up scones to bake in her enviable Aga cookstove. The rapport was instant: we discussed schools, clothes, riding, gardening and most of all, the extraordinary behavior of first-born 9-year-old males.

Before dinner, 4½-year-old Tiggy, blond and exuberant, escorted my husband and myself through a large pasture, across a cricket field and into the village, where we stopped for a drink at a local pub. We returned through the pasture at dusk, encountering the Waterers' stock-in-trade — four of their Shire horses, enjoying a late afternoon graze. I've ridden horses since childhood, but my heart pounded as we approached these untethered giants. Tiggy threw her arms around the broad chest of a particular favorite. "I love him," she said. "And he loves me." Back in the kitchen, we eavesdropped on a Q&A session.

"What's this?" Harry asked my older son. "A zucchini," said Avery, who knows the vegetables he won't eat. "Not at all," Harry said. "It's a courgette." The game continued with tomatoes and rhubarb, which our kids thought was some kind of baseball bat. Later, we heard voices raised. "My name is *not* Hairy," Harry said, having apparently tired of Avery's short Californian "A."

In the morning, the stable

hand harnessed two agreeable Shires. With Jonathan at the reins, we set out for a cart-ride down the lanes. "Who'd like to drive?" Jonathan asked after a few minutes, and our 9-year-old took over the management of 4,000 pounds of horseflesh. We were sorry to have to hurry off before lunch. There are miles of glorious wild beaches with thick caramel-colored sand just 20 minutes from Biddacott, and we promised Tiggy and Harry that we'd return in the near future to show off the boys' California surfing skills.

Now we were one night overdue at Smallicombe Farm, and Maggie Todd and her husband were waiting to introduce us to their immaculate and sweet-smelling prize pigs. Mrs. Todd showed us to her best lodging, a very charming small apartment with a private dining room and two bedrooms. The pigs were everything we'd hoped — three large litters of piglets, each as cunning as Babe. Mr. Todd was forthcoming with lessons in pig husbandry. The gigantic sows stretched out on their sides to nurse, initiating a hilarious, grunting scramble to the teats. When a mother thought her litter had drunk enough, she stood up, shook them off and resettled herself in a "closed for business" position, instantly starting to snore. Mr. Todd warned us not to touch his adorable charges, or even to approach them in the presence of their very protective mother, unless we wanted to view ferocity unbound. I grabbed both kids by the collars. "I see you're the same way," Mr. Todd observed, lifting a piglet by the hindquarters for our closer inspection.

It was raining slightly, as it had intermittently throughout the trip, when we left Devon for Cornwall. We abandoned the highway a few miles south of Plymouth for our jaunt down the south coast of Cornwall to the village of Fowey. The roads quickly became single tracks, with giant hedgerows eliminating our peripheral vision. The air smelled sharply of salt as we passed through Looe. Glistening inlets fingered their way into villages.

We rolled to the edge of the Fowey River, and pulled the car on to a tiny ferryboat. In less than 10 minutes, we were across and driving up the hill to Fowey Hall, as ideal a place for young families to vacation as I can imagine. Also part of the Luxury Family Hotels group, this Queen Anne mansion was completed in 1899, with central heating and electric lights, the indulgence of a very wealthy man who had made a fortune in the timber trade. Kenneth Grahame, the author of the 1908 children's classic, *The Wind in the Willows*, used the house as his model for Toad Hall, and his sense of whimsy pervades the place. There are nine suites and five sets of room that interconnect, at prices ranging from \$172 to \$400 per night.

Our suite, done in rich bottle green, had a bathroom nearly as large as the bedroom, and just as luxuriously appointed. A full-scale nursery with a dozen riding toys operates all day, and the caretakers are friendly and efficient. A swimming pool, ensconced

in a glass conservatory, was always in use, as was the game room (Nintendo, again, I'm afraid) and the great outdoors. Bicycles in good working order were free for the taking, accompanied by helmets.

I took advantage of the fact I'd finally adjusted to jet lag while my family continued to sleep late. At 7 a.m., my tea was delivered to the room by a courteous butler. After a few satisfying draughts, I dressed, took my camera and went exploring. The first morning, I walked through the town, which was fast asleep save for some early rising weekend sailors and dog walkers. At dawn the next day, I took the passenger ferry across to Polruan, and in broad sunlight, hiked a spectacular stretch of cliff-side trail. On the return trip, I inhaled the smell of fresh Polruan bread, on its way to the restaurants across the river.

Our two days in Fowey were quiet and contemplative. We got out the painting set I'd brought and made some watercolors of the river and the hills beyond. Oliver drew the whole world, trying his best to sort out his new perspective.

On our last night, the boys requested room service and TV, and sent their parents to the dining room for a delicious and elegant meal. When we returned to our room, the boys were fast asleep, snuggled together in the sofa bed. In the morning, we learned they'd watched the popular slapstick *Hello, Mr. Bean* on BBC. The next show, Avery somberly informed us, was *not* appropriate for children.

We'd dreaded the five-hour car trip back to London, and were determined to break it up. So we'd booked riding lessons for the boys at St. Veep's Riding Stables. They spent the last hours of the trip learning to post to the trot, falling in love with their agreeable ponies. I stared across green hills to the sea and wondered if and when we'd be back to this place. So much of the world waited for our sons. ☉

Cathryn Ramin's last piece for the Magazine was on Cabo San Lucas.

Planning Your Trip

In London: **Colonnade Townhouse**, tel.: (020) 7286-1052; fax: (020) 7286-1057; e-mail: res.colonnade@etontownhouse.com.; website: www.etontownhouse.com. Rates are \$180 to \$319, including breakfast.

Farmstays:

Devon Farms Accommodations, tel.: (44) 1404-841651; website: www.devonfarms.co.uk/. Rates are \$30 to \$38 per adult, including breakfast. Children pay about \$13.

Village Life:

Luxury Family Hotels Group: www.luxury-family-hotels.co.uk.

Fowey Hall Hotel Fowey, Cornwall, tel.: (01726) 833866; fax: (01726) 834100; e-mail: fowey@luxury-hotel.demon.co.uk. Prices range from \$172 to \$400 per night. —C.R.