



Have tribe, will travel

Multi-generational trips are on the rise among families, as is taking friends along for the ride

WORDS SUE WHITE

Like many of us, my mental image of the perfect family holiday usually includes beaches, culture or beautiful bushland. But, until recently, I'd never considered adding a wheelbarrow to that list.

Yet there I was, huffing and puffing my way up a steep dirt track on the edge of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park in Sydney, watching my two-year-old chatter happily from his position on top of a wheelbarrow full of bags.

Even better: I wasn't the one doing the pushing. That kudos went to a friend who, channelling his inner superhero, did laps with the wheelbarrow while I shared luggage-dragging duty with the other adults.

Our group of seven families and one brave single had booked the entire Pittwater YHA for three nights. I'd visited with the same girlfriends in our 20s, but today partners and kids were in tow – 25 of us in total.

We'd divvied up the rooms and created a roster, which meant each family needed only to cook and wash up once, leaving the bulk of our time to be fed, wine and dined with some of our oldest friends.

The wild success of our experiment was in part due to, not in spite of, the size of our tribe. The kids played endlessly; the adults had hours to socialise, relax or soak up the setting; and there was no pressing schedule other than deciding if we could be bothered heading back down »





the hill for a kayak. “The most relaxing trip we’ve had since our honeymoon,” one couple declared more than once.

We’re not the only families to have thought of travelling with friends. Families have been camping together since someone figured out that ‘built-in playmates’ usually equals ‘relaxed parents’. But today’s families are upping the ante: they might rent a house together, book a campsite or head overseas for a milestone birthday.

If friends aren’t available, the grandparents often are. Multi-generational trips are trending within the travel industry: according to a recent study by finder.com.au, one third of parents often take a member of the extended family on holiday.

A home away

Renting a holiday house is popular among large groups of family or friends. Even researchers have noticed the shift. When University of Tasmania’s Dr Louise Grimmer ran a small pilot study on locals using Airbnb, she noticed a growing segment she labelled ‘socialisers’, which included friendship groups travelling together.

It’s a good description of Kim Fitzpatrick. She recently spent a long weekend on the Sunshine Coast with not one but three other families as a ‘tester’ to see if they were all on the same page before heading off for a longer trip. Their Airbnb rental included eight adults, three toddlers and a preschooler. While it was a hit, and those longer trips are in the works, she learned a lot.

“We had our own separate family times out of the house, and planned and cooked meals in advance to share the load. We looked out for each others’ kids, and then enjoyed a few drinks and board



CLOCKWISE: An Airbnb pad in Japan, Vivienne Pearson’s mob at the beach, on tour with Intrepid Travel.



services like Airbnb make it easier for multi-generational groups

games together when the kids were asleep,” she says.

Kim suggests not skimping on spaces, and thinking about your travelling companions’ parenting style in advance. “[We found that] our group parents in a similar fashion [to one another], but it may put a strain on the group if, for example, one set uses gentle parenting and another a more authoritarian style,” she says.

Louise acknowledges groups like Kim’s could easily have rented holiday houses together in the past but says services like Airbnb make it easier for multi-generational groups. “Research shows grandparents – and grandmothers in particular – do a lot of the travel planning for multi-generational holidays.”

It’s an art Vivienne Pearson’s family has honed to perfection. Three generations of her family have holidayed together annually for so long she’s lost count. “My parents started it when we were teenagers,” she says.

Fast-forward about 25 years and the experience continues to evolve. »



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Travelling as a family gives grandparents invaluable experiences with their grand kids. BELOW: An Intrepid tour group at large in Vietnam.

Go with Gran



“There were little kids and babies for a decade. Then we reached a delightful new stage where all the cousins were old enough to largely look after themselves. We’re back to a fabulous dynamic of resting, reading, playing card and board games, eating, and only the occasional trip away from the house,” she says.

Vivienne’s crew usually aims for a rental with plenty of space, a pool and sometimes a tennis court. They take lots of games and ban

It’s the one time of year they all know they’ll see each other

screen time to promote socialising at “Nanna Helen’s beach house” (even though the venue changes annually, the name doesn’t). “The kids now range from nine to 20 and they all love it. It’s the one time of year they all know they’ll see each other,” Vivienne says.

Touring with grandma

Sometimes, it’s nice to have someone else do the organising, and multi-generational family travellers are no different. Dyan McKie from Intrepid Travel says the number of departures with three generations travelling together has doubled each year since 2013 (Thailand, Borneo and Vietnam are the most popular of their trips).

Dyan believes there are lots of reasons behind the boom. “Grandparents are

having experiences with their grandchildren that they may not have been able to have with their own children. They’ve retired early, and have the time to do it,” she says.

She’s also noticed multi-generational travel peaks when the kids hit late primary-school age. “Both the parents and grandparents realise that once kids get to high school, time goes fast,” Dyan says.

It’s likely fitness plays a role too. World Expeditions CEO, Sue Badyari, believes today’s Baby Boomer grandparents are far less sedentary than their predecessors. “They love to walk, trek and swim ... and want to share the physical, emotional and intellectual challenges with their grandchildren,” she says.

While Rhi Stanley didn’t book a tour, she found hiring a driver in Ho Chi Minh City was perfect for her recent multi-generational trip to Vietnam, a destination she chose for its combination of culture, relaxation and affordability. »



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Group adventures can help old friends reconnect.

“A private driver helped us work around our toddler’s nap times. Plus, he took the grandparents to places like the floating markets while we explored the many local parks,” she says.

Rhi planned these separate days in advance, but also scheduled in days alone with her dad while her husband stayed with their son.

“I think that helped Dad feel like he wasn’t just there for the babysitting,” she says.

Roadtripping

Many parents enjoy a good road trip, but chances are that few would have taken it as far as Marina Nicholl. An Australian of South African descent, Marina recently took a month-long trip with two other families to explore her home continent.

“They kept mentioning how much they’d like to visit Africa but didn’t want to do it by themselves ... I spent hours planning because I wanted them to love it,” she says.

Marina arranged a mix of apartments, Airbnb rentals and parks, and each family travelled



We did a lot together but having our own cars was perfect

in their own car. “We did a lot together but having our own cars was perfect to regroup as a family between places or on daytrips when kids can get cranky and tired,” she says.

The parents made a rule that kids couldn’t swap cars or rooms unless circumstances dictated, and the trip was so successful that they’re considering embarking on round two in 2019.

As for my group? Despite that brutal hill, there have been repeated calls for a second trip. While this time my son should be old enough to walk the hill himself, I’ll still be keeping an eye out for the wheelbarrow – and my trusty friend. ✈

Journalist and travel writer Sue White is the founder of community Facebook group, Kids Who Travel.

Tips for travelling with the grandparents

Be realistic.

Are the grandparents coming on your trip the hands-off or hands-on types? If they’re not highly involved with the kids when visiting your house for a long weekend, it’s unlikely they’ll turn into Mary Poppins the minute you’re in a tropical locale.

Have the conversation.

What do grandma and grandpa expect from the trip? Are they imagining you’ll all be hanging out together 24/7? Or will they be doing their own thing and joining you on occasion?

Avoid meal-time traps.

Let’s face it: meal times with kids can be tricky, let alone when you add in extra requirements and opinions. Talk through the reality in advance. Will you all eat together? If you are self-catering, who’ll do the cooking? Are you all on a similar dining budget? If so, is everyone happy to eat at a kid-friendly hour and location?

Sleep soundly.

You know your kids best: are they still waking up crying during the night? Will their first move each morning be to race down the hall to play with Grandpa? If so, perhaps avoid interconnecting rooms to give the older generation a sound night’s sleep. Many rental houses have a self-contained flat out the back: these can be a great way to give everyone a little more privacy. When in doubt, opt for a bigger space.