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Take a Break, Explore the World, Discover Your Family

For many working parents, the whole idea of “family” can get lost in the shuffle, as they juggle the demands of work and play. Wouldn’t it be nice to take a break, head to some exotic locale where, freed from work, the family could take the time to bond through shared adventures and new discoveries?

For most, this remains a fantasy, but journalist and parent Elisa Bernick knows it can be done, because she’s done it. And without lots of cash or an overseas posting with a generous company expense account.

In her new book, *The Family Sabbatical Handbook: The Budget Guide to Living Abroad with Your Family* (\$15.95, The Intrepid Traveler), Bernick shows how ordinary, everyday families can finance and orchestrate an extended stay abroad for anywhere from six months to several years. And she should know: she and her husband, Michael, and kids Cleome and Asher did just that, living in Mexico for 18 months, without working during their sabbatical, on three years’ savings and the rent from their home back in Minnesota.

Finances are an important part of any sabbatical, but they are just the beginning.

“Living abroad is a wonderful adventure,” Bernick says, “but there are innumerable practical things to deal with, especially when it comes to schooling. I had to learn about a whole host of issues, from dealing with the kids’ schools back home both pre- and post-sabbatical, to enrolling them in schools in Mexico, to language tutoring. The list goes on.”

One of the most common problems for parents abroad, she says, is an overly optimistic assumption about how quickly kids will pick up a new language. “There’s a belief that young kids are language sponges,” Bernick notes. “There’s some truth to that, but even toddlers can find life in a strange language to be frustrating and confusing. Do you enroll your kids in a public or private school? A bilingual, native-language, or English-language academy? It’s not always an easy decision.”

Bernick’s daughter attended a bilingual school for six months and then transferred to a private Mexican school where all instruction was in Spanish. She became an honors student. “We were so proud of her,” Bernick says “and she came home a much more confident and outgoing student.”

Adds Bernick, “You also need to make sure the kids stay on the same track as their peers back home. We brought assignments from Cleome’s teachers in St. Paul, and she worked on them for an hour a day after she finished her Mexican homework.”

Academic triumphs were only one of the rewards of the family’s sabbatical. Bernick’s husband Michael, an architect, took advantage of the trip to work on a novel and write music. And there was the special joy of parenting two kids aged two and seven while trying to introduce them to the art and culture of Mexico. “I once got them to explore two churches, three historic plazas, and a 400-year-old fountain by telling them this was the route to the best ice cream parlor in town,” Bernick recalls with a laugh.

Bernick herself worked on a novel as well as the manuscript that became *The Family Sabbatical Handbook*. In addition to her own experience, she peppers her advice with comments from fifteen other families who’ve lived in South America, Europe and Asia for extended periods, whether for work, volunteering for a humanitarian cause, education, or “just because.”

Bernick's book addresses a wide range of practicalities, including healthcare and insurance, legal concerns, communication options, resources for working abroad and handling business back home, finding babysitters overseas, and the importance of scheduling parent 'alone time' away from the kids.

The book doesn't ignore the downsides of the sabbatical experience, such as marital stresses, homesickness, the problems (and solutions) of traveling in a strange country with young ones, and what to do when your mother-in-law comes to visit for two weeks and stays for two months, as happened to a friend of the author's.

Does she have any regrets?

"None," she says firmly. "We didn't know a soul in the city we moved to. We couldn't speak the language. We weren't sure our money would last. And we'd never traveled with our children for anything longer than a two-week vacation. But we decided to leave everything else up to chance and see where the adventure took us. Quite honestly, it's one of the best decisions our family ever made.

"Above all we got to know our kids, truly know them, in ways that eluded us in our busy lives back home. It's a gift we will carry with us for the rest of our lives."

- 30 -

Elisa Bernick works and lives in St. Paul, Minnesota with her husband and two bilingual children. Prior to living abroad, she was a producer and reporter for Wisconsin and Minnesota Public Radio and Twin Cities Public Television. She is currently freelancing and working on her second novel.

The Intrepid Traveler publishes guidebooks and travel resources for families, budget travelers, and adventurous spirits of all kinds.

To request a review copy of *The Family Sabbatical Handbook*, to arrange an interview with Elisa Bernick, or for any additional information, please contact Alexis Elder at The Intrepid Traveler at (203) 469-0214 • alexis@intrepidtraveler.com • fax (203) 469-0430

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**The Family Sabbatical Handbook:
The Budget Guide to Living Abroad
With Your Family**

by Elisa Bernick

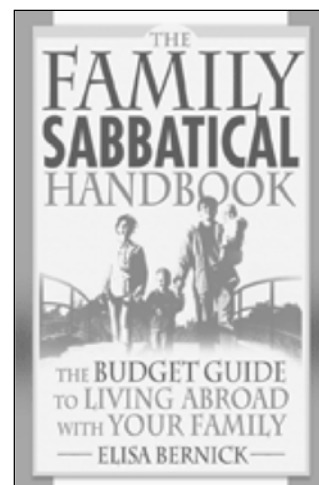
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