

A grand way to travel

Intergenerational vacations attract grandkids and grandparents

By Nancy Thalia Reynolds

DAWN CLARK WAS hoping for an active, outdoor vacation with the grandkids when she signed on to an Elderhostel intergenerational program in eastern Idaho, but she got more than she bargained for. Dangling high in the air, the 69-year-old Wenatchee grandmother successfully completed a tricky ropes course, cheered on by her husband, John, and grandchildren Kayla and Evan McCulley of Bellevue, ages 16 and 14 respectively.

"I was taken out of my comfort zone in a major way," she laughs now. "You're in harnesses; you're totally protected from danger, but it's still a challenge." John, 70, also aced the course. And Kayla adds, "I think having the grandkids encouraging it helped."

The Clarks had vacationed with their grandchildren before, but last summer they decided to let someone else do the orchestrating. Elderhostel (a nonprofit travel and education organization for seniors) offers grandparent/grandchildren trips each year. Like other Elderhostel offerings, this one, held at a rustic university facility, combined classes with hands-on activities.

Although the presence of mice in their cabin took getting used to, they enjoyed the workshops, visiting Yellowstone National Park, canoeing, and horseback riding. The trip was an unqualified success. "When we came home, Kayla wanted to look right away at what was available for next year," says Dawn.

For working-parent households, caring for kids during school vacations can be hard. Increasingly, grandparents are stepping in to help. Because many, like the Clarks, live far from grandchildren, vacationing together is a way to connect meaningfully when time is limited, while offering respite to over-

worked parents. Grandparents also help children weather difficult life events like divorce.

Travel agencies increasingly offer tours for intergenerational travelers. Grandtravel, started by grandmother Helena Koenig in 1987, pioneered intergenerational summer trips to local and exotic destinations and now also offers winter and spring break excursions. Tours generally combine learning, museum visits and workshops led by teachers with active, outdoor activities.

Cruises, which provide activities for differing age and energy levels, are a popular choice among older grandparents; others go for a more rugged experience. At age 64, Oakland, CA, grandmother Aurora Hill took grandson David, 12, on an Elderhostel adventure in Minnesota, where her husband was raised. "He'd always expressed an interest in wolves and his school was studying wolves, she explains. "I saw Elderhostel had intergenerational trips and thought 'that sounds like fun.'" Hill had another objective, too. The grandkids had asked why Minnesota was called the "land of 10,000 lakes."

"I said, it's time these kids knew something about where their grandfather came from."

The trip was a hit: "I thought it was extremely well planned and well thought out," says Hill. "The staff would take the kids and be gone for three or four hours, doing an exploration of some sort. Those of us left in camp were with another group of counselors. We talked about how things were working out; sometimes our assignments had to do with wolves." When the groups reunited, "they'd have a game devised; there was a lot of interactive exchange."

Potential drawbacks to structured programs such as Grandtravel, Elderhostel and the similar Familyhostel include scheduling and age restrictions. Finding dates that work for everyone can be challenging. Some programs require each child be accompanied by an adult. Some have age limits. Another consideration is cost; Grandtravel trips usually run over \$5,000 per person, excluding airfare. Elderhostel and Familyhostel costs are much lower, but also less luxurious.

The Howes family of Shoreline, got around these issues by designing their own intergenerational experience in 1997. Years later, the vacation remains a vivid standout for the kids.

Daniel and Sarah, then ages 9 and 6, flew to California on a carefully planned three-week visit. They first spend time with one set of grandparents in Sacramento, and went to Santa Clara for a visit with the second set. "At the end of our trip, all of our grandparents got together and took us to Sea World," Daniel says. Sarah points out another advantage of time spent with grandparents. "I don't know if it's true with all kids, but my grandparents are a little less stressed out than my parents."

There's no doubt the interest in intergenerational travel is strong. In fact, Grandtravel's Koenig says it's expanding. "We have many more grandfathers now than we ever had; they are beginning to participate in nurturing as well as grandmothers." ☐

Nancy Thalia Reynolds is the author of Adopting Your Child. She lives in Shoreline with her husband and son, 16, and daughter, 12. To comment on this story, or suggest a story idea, contact editor@ParentMap.com.

Resources for intergenerational trips

Except as noted, cost is per person, excluding travel to and from the program site. Children under age 7 usually excluded; other restrictions may apply. All but Elderhostel and Grandtravel are open to parents as well.

Elderhostel (877-426-8056; www.elderhostel.org). Intergenerational programs offered annually; grandparents must be 55 or older. Cost: from about \$500.

Familyhostel (800-733-9753; www.learn.unh.edu/familyhostel). Affiliated with University of New Hampshire; programs similar to Elderhostel including international travel. Cost: from

about \$1,000, including travel to and from site.

Grandtravel (800-247-7651; www.grandtrvl.com). Domestic and international tours. Cost: from about \$5,000.

Rascals in Paradise (415-921-7000; www.rascalsinparadise.com). Exotic, offbeat tours to US and worldwide destinations. Cost: about \$15,000/family of 4.

Sierra Club (253-334-2157; www.sierraclub.org). Domestic and international ecotourism, some trips for families; cost: varies

American Hiking Society (301-565-6704; www.americanhiking.org). Volunteer vacations centered on trail and habitat restoration. Cost: about \$100.