



A LEARNING JOURNEY

Words Charlotte West

GET AWAY FROM IT ALL AND SPEND THAT PRECIOUS FLIGHT ON A CROSS-CULTURAL, HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

MY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF SUMMER CAMP ARE STILL VIVID: roasting marshmallows by a bonfire, floating down the river in an inner tube and contemplating how to circumvent our counsellors long enough to lob water balloons successfully at the boys. Our journey to Camp Sawtooth consisted of a four-hour ride on an old yellow school bus, and all I needed was a sleeping bag, a flashlight and a good pair of shoes.

Today, summer camp often requires a passport. The variety of summer – and even school-year – programmes for youth is greater than ever, and they are available in a growing number of locations. Many of these courses now help kids and teens connect with the local culture by developing new skills.

Educational travel is not new, but travellers are getting younger and destinations are increasingly far-flung. Part of a larger concept known as creative tourism, a term coined by tourism consultants Greg Richards and Crispin Raymond, the focus is on introducing young people to traditional values through actively experiencing local customs.

Whereas a traditional tour might involve a guide leading a group through an art museum, creative tourism focuses on getting to know the local artisans and craftspeople, and hands-on learning opportunities.

'This emerging form of tourism allows travellers to explore the culture of the place they are visiting in a more interactive way ... It is linked to the new wave of the discerning and responsible traveller,' says Denise Raymond, manager of Creative Tourism New Zealand, which offers a range of workshops given by local tutors. These courses mainly reflect traditional

Maori skills, including weaving and carving, but can also be directed at newer aspects of the regional culture, such as wine or olive-oil production.

Raymond says that creative tourism offers young people a chance to go beyond their guide books. 'Many young travellers tend to follow the well-beaten path shown them by the guide, see as many sites as possible and make sure they have not missed any of the "must do's" of the adventure-tourism challenges. Creative tourism gives them the chance to discover more about other cultures through "hands-on" experiences. This experiential learning is more demanding and also facilitates cross-cultural exchanges,' she says.

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ROBIN MALINOSKY-RUMMELL, AUTHOR OF *Bring Your Own Children: South America! A Family Sabbatical Handbook* (2007), planned a trip to Guatemala with her 9-year-old son Christopher where they studied both Spanish and traditional weaving. She organised the weaving classes by contacting the Weaving Center and Museum run by the Cojolya Association in Santiago.

Christopher seems to have enjoyed the immersion in Mayan craft, although he says it was challenging: 'The weaving was a little tricky. It requires lots of hand-eye coordination as well as some strength. I believe weaving is a big part of the Guatemalan culture, so by doing the lessons, it was an active way to really be in the culture and have a piece of their lifestyle. You learn a lot about the world by travelling, and I think parents should travel with kids more often.'

For kids not travelling with their families, creative tourism can include organised expeditions on another continent, or residential camps a little

closer to home. US-based Where There Be Dragons in Boulder, Colorado, operates summer youth trips, as well as semester or gap-year programmes for older students, to developing countries in Asia, Africa and South America. Activities include community-service art projects, home stays with local families in remote villages and lessons in dance, weaving and drums.

Other programmes focus on developing students' abilities within a particular creative discipline. The Centre Stage Summer Drama Holidays, for instance, runs a theatre camp for kids from eight to 16 in Glens of Antrim, Northern Ireland, with classes such as improvisation, mime, choral speaking, movement and dance. Some tour operators, such as Equestrian Escapes, also offer youth the opportunity to learn multiple skills. In addition to horse-riding, kids from age 11 receive instruction in a variety of foreign languages at the Royal M Equestrian Centre, located outside Dublin.

'The programme came out of the fact that parents have become more aware that their kids have certain advantages if they learn other languages. But I think it's quite difficult to persuade kids that they want to go and study because they've just studied all year, so if you can tempt them with something that they are going to be interested in – and in Ireland that is a culture of horses – it just seemed to be the perfect combination,' says Sarah Caplan, who founded Equestrian Escapes two years ago. She says kids are more likely to learn in an informal environment, and the interaction between students and staff from different countries encourages them to use their new-found linguistic skills. The horses also help put the kids at ease. 'It's a less stressful way of practising language because I think the kids are more relaxed when they are riding horses, and being around the animals also encourages them to communicate,' Sarah says.

CHEF DORETTE SNOVER AND HER HUSBAND RICK OPENED THE DOORS TO THEIR cooking school, C'est si Bon, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina after Hurricane Fran destroyed their kitchen in 1997. When the family completed rebuilding the kitchen the next summer, they invited some of their son's friends for a week of cooking.

'We combed the nearby woods for blackberries for luscious pies, and took [the kids] on adventures to goat-cheese farms ... The last night we invited their parents to come to dinner and enjoy a meal cooked from scratch. Eleven years later, we teach over 160 young people in the Kid-Chef day camps and over 50 in the Teen-Chef tours,' Dorette says.

In addition to residential and day camps in North Carolina, C'est si Bon offers three culinary tours for teens in Provence, the Loire Valley and Paris. Students attend cooking classes with local chefs, shop for ingredients at open-air markets and visit local cheese artisans and beekeepers. They learn how to prepare dishes such as aioli, pâtés, terrines, rillettes and tartes aux pommes. 'We want them to see, taste, hear, smell and touch the regional specialties,' Dorette says.

But the students learn more than just how to cook. The school encourages them to leave technological distractions behind in order to absorb the local culture. 'For teens to unplug and walk without the trappings of iPods, cell phones and computers is huge indeed,' she says.

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Parent Grace Cooper chose the C'est si Bon teen tour in Provence for her son Elijah because they were looking for a summer camping experience that would give him a fusion of language exposure and stimulation of his interest in the culinary arts. 'I think it's a fantastic idea to nurture teenagers' natural curiosity about the world and willingness to savour the tastes and culinary techniques of different cultures. The world was opened up to [Elijah] by this hands-on experience,' she says.

WHILE C'EST SI BON EXPLORES CULINARY LANDSCAPES BY TEACHING TEENS HOW to whip up French pastries and fish soup, other programmes encourage teens to define their own projects. The Global Education and Action Network (GLEAN) is a San Francisco-based organisation that provides expeditions, training and support to teenagers researching world cultures and issues.

Students between the ages of 13 and 18 create their own trips by selecting a topic they would like to study, doing background research through reading and interviews, and then documenting lifestyles when they arrive in the country. Trips have included a road trip through the western states in the US, as well as expeditions to Mali, Bhutan and the Peruvian Amazon.

Corina Cerovski-Darriau, a recent graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, participated in a GLEAN trip to Bhutan in 2006 as an assistant guide. While she was there, she researched the environmental impact of development, interviewing farmers in the rural Himalayan communities where they were staying. The trip allowed her to experience the culture firsthand while she developed her own project, which she continued to work on once she returned to California.

'I had never truly immersed myself in the local culture when I had been travelling before ... So often people seem to vacation to get away from it all, but end up doing the same things, eating the same food and expecting the same things at their vacation destination that they left at home. Hotels try their best to make you feel at home, just with a different backdrop. For me, that can be nice, but I wanted to leave my home behind completely and be immersed in someone else's,' she says.

Corina says her experience with GLEAN has changed the way she approaches travel. 'Now, when I travel, I want to get to know the place beyond what is set up for tourists.' ■

- CREATIVE TRAVEL NEW ZEALAND creativetourism.co.nz
- COJOLYA ASSOCIATION OF MAYAN WOMEN WEAVERS cojolya.org
- WHERE THERE BE DRAGONS wheretherebedragons.com
- CENTRE STAGE SUMMER DRAMA HOLIDAYS summerdrama.co.uk
- EQUESTRIAN ESCAPES equestrian-escapes.com
- C'EST SI BON COOKING SCHOOL cestsibon.net
- GLOBAL EDUCATION AND ACTION NETWORK (GLEAN) gleansworld.org

