

ICELANDIC ADVENTURES

Two Action-Packed Days Strengthen a Mother-Son Bond

BY JILL BROOKE

Working parents dream about travel wish lists with their kids but rarely take them. Why? The rationale of course – though flawed – is you need the vacation time and finances. However, here's a road map back to reality. You can be resourceful and pack a lifetime of memories in just two days!

Try to schedule business trips on Thursday and extend your stay till the weekend – with your paid airfare baked into budget – and then fly your child over. Or arrive early before a Monday meeting. In fact, Icelandair has hatched a clever plan to help with this caper. Without any extra charge, you can have a stopover in rollicking Reykjavik and then fly to and from another destination – as long as the trip doesn't last more than 10 days.

Which is exactly what I did to get my son, Parker, forklifted from his iPhone, video games and beats headphones and reunited with his mother. We wouldn't do what I love – shopping, reading, sipping a Gin and Tonic on the beach – after all working moms are exhausted - and instead I created an itinerary that would dazzle any teenage boy.

And what better place to break the ice and create a lasting truce than Iceland, the country the Institute for Economics and Peace just named the most peaceful in the world?

After calling Eliza Guomundsdottir from Reykjavik Concierge – one of the most connected and helpful women in Iceland – we mapped out a plan. We would have adventure. Gulp. We would have non-stop activities. Groan. We would break speed limits. Gasp. We would reconnect.

AN ADVENTURE BEGINS

We arrive from our overnight flight with Icelandair from New York and are picked up by Jon Bergs, a tour guide and driver who offers us snack bags.

"Aren't we going to the hotel, Mom?"

"No, it's a surprise."

An early morning arrival at ATV 4x4 in Grindavik has my hard-to-impress teenager's eyes widening in amazement at the ATV cars lined up in a cavernous garage. We are instructed to put on yellow protection suits and boots. My eyes widen in fear. Handing the keys to my panting son, Andri asks if I want to drive my own ATV. "No," I sheepishly say, "I prefer to sit behind you while you drive." Time to buckle our seatbelts.



For an hour, we drive along – zoom along – go too fast along – a landscape that NASA astronauts visit to simulate what being on the moon would be like. Grateful I am holding on to Andri, we twist and turn on bumpy, crunchy, ebony stones for miles and miles of rugged terrain until we stop on top of a hill to witness nature at its most breathtaking. Parker flashes me a smile.

After our exhilarating morning ride, a soothing soak is in order in the Blue Lagoon's warm geothermal waters. Undeterred by brisk weather, hundreds in bathing suits luxuriate, sipping cocktails from the in-pool bar or just standing in awe as natural steamy water shoots up like fountains against the mountains. The gushing fountain sprays captivate and my son is amused by the roaming Viking mermaid who comes around and offers mud masks. What acne prone kid could refuse that? He accepts and finds the experience hilarious. I am humbled by the natural beauty which explains why this is the most popular tourist destination.

A LIQUID LANDSCAPE

Of course, most people soak for hours instead of speeding through, but we travel onwards along the coast to the south of Iceland to see the spectacular Gullfoss waterfalls and the hot springs in Geysir. Waiting for the springs to shoot is like a human hiccup; it happens in predictable intervals. We have lunch in a local restaurant where he eats a hamburger and pizza. "It's different here, different seasoning," he says. Any other observations? "Everyone here is really tall. They really are Vikings." Anything else? "Mom, this is awesome."

Although some go scuba diving, we choose to go river rafting in Hvita. It's drizzling and becoming chilly but the instructors say it makes the ride more fun, like a roller coaster. I don't mention I hate roller coasters and am scared. Parker is eagerly getting on the next set of gear – wet suits that are exactly as labeled. Wet. A bus takes us to the river and we take an adrenaline pumping ride that whips us around the rapids that are bookended by canyons that soar in the air. The guide explains that Icelanders believe that the stones are the habitat of elves. Some building projects are even altered to prevent damage to stones where



the magical creatures are believed to live. Though invisible, you can't help but feel their presence in these canyons when you are not focusing on the rush of riding through a level 3 of 5 river. I can't help but giggle as we ride the rapids. At the end of the ride, my son gives me a hug. "You did it," he said. I feel triumphant.

We drive onwards to Reykjavik with a stop at Thingvellir National Park, where people hike and scuba dive amid two submerged rifts in the stone. Although the waters are pristine, there are no fish here unlike the Caribbean and I am glad I chose river rafting.



A WHALE OF A DINNER

Upon our evening arrival in Reykjavik to Apotek Hotel my son utters words I rarely hear. "I don't" even want to play a video game. I just want to get some sleep before we go to dinner." I need a nap, too, feeling tired but exhilarated thanks to this jam-packed day.

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Post-nap we dine at Fishmarket, considered the best restaurant in Iceland for its fresh fish selections and inventive cuisine. The presentation is as sophisticated as any restaurant in New York. Although my son's eyes light up when attentive waiters pour a broth that makes the bed underneath mussels steam up like a hot spring, the whale is the take home anecdote. "Mom, we ate whale! Where else can you say you did that?" Where else indeed. During our animated dinner conversation we talk about the "greatest day of his life." As well as mine.

The next morning our spread at Apotek Hotel includes fresh salmon and a selection of fruits and cereals along with bottles of fish oil. We are encouraged to take a spoonful for our health and endurance. Before finishing my coffee, Parker is raring to go on today's first adventure – buggy adventures.

A boy's equivalent of a store full of Manolos, the buggy cars are massively big CFmoto 800cc seated for two passengers and are equipped with safety harnesses, automatic transmission and certified roll cages. Again we are given protective suits but this time with goggles and gloves. In less than 48 hours, I've become more adventurous and agree to drive my own car. Now I know why you need the goggles. I



also know why "Game of Thrones" was filmed in this mystical landscaped terrain. We drive full speed into a river, splashing water all over ourselves and on the windshield, navigate bumpy roads while climbing up a steep mountain slope and see black beaches and lava fields. Jon Borgs, who also runs this company, will take groups anywhere around Iceland. But this choice was sublime. An unforgettable experience that will be etched in our memories forever. Thrills without danger.

AFTERNOON THRILLS

After a three-hour drive through snowy terrain via monster truck, we cool down from our thrilling morning with a hike through the Ice Cave, the world's second largest glacier. Entering inside the cave, we are momentarily startled because of the contrast between the bright light of the outside and the cave's dim bluish light. Given crampons to put on shoes

to prevent slipping – it's slushy – we go through the manmade tunnels where innovator and tour guide Signurdur Skarphedinsson explains environmental challenges and how this ice cave helps create a sophisticated water system that helps not only Iceland but other countries. Along the tour, narrow crevices of ice sculptures with jagged spears hug the walls ominously. "Most people who see those have fallen and are too busy hoping to survive to appreciate this beauty," he says, knowingly. "Few people have lived to tell the tale of seeing it." My son is fascinated. The tour mixes history and adventure –



View of Iceland's Natural Blowholes

the perfect experience a parent seeks for their child.

We head back to Reykjavik and split up. I want to see one of the many artist galleries and Reykjavik Concierge manages to procure a coveted ticket to a World Cup qualifying round for Parker, where Iceland beats Czech Republic 2-1. "Epic," Parker says. While in the stands, locals ask him how he got the ticket since it had been sold out for months. Advantage goes to hiring Eliza, who like a real life elf, makes magic happen.

During a final dinner at Apótekió restaurant in the Apotek Hotel we recap how the trip was the best two days of our lives. Reykjavik is bustling with people and activity. The sun still shines at 11 p.m. They party till 4 a.m. here with people spilling out of bars at all hours. We finally go to sleep beneath pillowy comforters and leave the next morning. Before turning in, Parker gives me a hug. "The most adventurous trip of my life. Can you believe we did ALL this in two days?"

Weeks later the euphoria still remains. Several pictures of the trip are prominently displayed in his room and even on his iPhone's wallpaper. A true coup. His friends reveal he talks about the trip as the adventure of a lifetime and - drumroll please - how much fun he could have with his mother. Because of those two days, our relationship has noticeably improved. Makes me wonder why according to the Travel Industry Association of America only four percent of parents extend business trips to include their kids. Which is why for *Premier Traveler*, we're now planning a two-day adventure around my next business trip. Can't wait. Our next reconnecting with your kid caper on the agenda after Iceland which you can also do? Amsterdam.