

Traveling Abroad with Tykes

By April (Atkinson) Perry, Ph.D.



* Stock photo showing a child whose parents do NOT know how to pack.

UCO alumni April and Lane Perry have extensively traveled internationally, as well as lived in New Zealand from 2008-2012, where they each completed doctoral programs. Amazingly, their travel, particularly international travel, has not slowed with the addition of children — Prescott, born in 2013, followed by Penny Lane in 2017. Not yet age 5, Prescott has traveled to 10 countries, and Penny Lane will have three stamps in her passport by the end of 2018. Because of their international travel experiences — particularly with small children — we asked April to share some of her favorite travel tips with Old North readers.

Note: UCO played a role in international travel becoming a part of the Perrys' professional careers. Their first study-abroad experience came in 2008 when they were UCO employees who led a group of 48 leadership students to Italy. They are now at Western Carolina University in North Carolina where April (BA '05; MEd '07) is an assistant professor and director of the higher education graduate program, and Lane (BS '05; MEd '06) is director of the Center for Service Learning. Both lead study-abroad experiences regularly.

For me, the minimalist approach always works. We don't like to lug around a lot of bags, bulky items and kid stuff that can make international travel exhausting. So, my travel tips are rooted in the "less is more" approach. It amazes me how much we don't need.

First, here are some of my packing hacks, specifically for international travel, possibly involving multiple destinations.

- Pack in gallon zip-close bags. It keeps everything organized — especially when packing for multiple people and small items for kiddos. Squeeze the air out of the bags to make

them as compact as possible.

- If you will have access to laundry, less is definitely better. I pack outfits for about five days regardless of how long our trip will be. We once traveled Europe for five weeks with a toddler, and I still only packed clothes for five days.
- Pack in layers, and mix-and-match to feel like you have more outfits than you really do. For example, pick a favorite scarf to keep you warm in cool weather, then double as a swimsuit cover-up or beach mat when it's warm.
- Kiddo still in diapers? Just pack the amount you need to

get you there and settled. Then, buy locally — especially important if traveling for more than 10 days.

- Depending on the age of your children, a travel bed may not be needed, but for us, this was an essential item for ages 6 months to 3 years old. Unlike the traditional pack-n-play, we invested in a compact (slightly larger than a brief case), lightweight, travel bed. Although the child doesn't know the difference, this was a game changer for us, especially since we were changing accommodations regularly. The travel bed also doubles as a safe play space in homes/hotels that aren't always kid-proof.
- Bring a lightweight, easy stroller. We use a cheap umbrella stroller. It does the job, and if it gets worn out on the trip or ends up in lost luggage, we're not out much.
- Invest in a good baby carrier. I am sold on Ergobaby™ products, ideal for those age 2 and under, which can be worn as a front or back carrier with the child facing in or out. On our recent trip to Ireland, we decided against taking a stroller. With Prescott being 4-1/2 and feeling "too old" for a stroller, and Penny Lane being only 3 months and too small for a compact umbrella stroller, we opted to let Prescott walk everywhere and carried Penny Lane in the Ergo. It was a risk, but it worked beautifully, and saved us the hassle of toting around a stroller.
- A cloth, foldable highchair is a handy device that folds up to the size of your hand and will clip onto any chair for an instant toddler seat/high chair — perfect for those under age 2.
- We also have an item called a Monkey Mat. It, too, folds into a pouch about the size of my hand. Unfolded, it's a 5-foot-square

piece of ripstop nylon with loops on the corners. It dries quickly, shakes off sand and dirt easily, and is great for picnics, the beach and more.

- Pack lightweight, easy snacks — stuff that doesn't get smashed or expire. Although our girls eat whatever we eat at meals, having a few snacks on hand can be a lifesaver. For example, I always pack a handful of instant oatmeal packets. This way, no matter what time zone, hotel or Airbnb we wake up in, I can make a quick breakfast.
- Pack only a few toys, primarily for the plane ride and restaurants, as they find new things they like along the way. We generally let the girls pick a few small toys or books to purchase during our travels. Not only does it give them something to play with while we are traveling, but it doubles as a souvenir to help them remember their experiences. (Think about an easy-to-read children's book in another language).
- Being minimalist travelers/packers, I don't pack a lot of "just-in-case" items. That said, I always pack a change of clothes in our carry-on. It never fails that there are diaper explosions, overnight long flights, delayed/canceled flights — we've seen it all. That extra set of clothes has been a life saver.

In-the-Air Tricks

Long, international or overnight flights can be stressful when traveling with small children. We have two secret weapons: movies and melatonin.

Most long-flight planes have TV screens, and/or most people have their own electronic device such as a phone, tablet, etc. Pick up some over-the-ear headphones for children, as I have found the standard earbuds don't usually fit or feel comfortable to kids.



The Perry family traveled in September to the National University of Ireland in Galway, where they attended a week-long conference. The academic half co-presented research.

With a good movie, comfortable headphones and some plane snacks, you can buy yourself at least a few hours.

And when it's time to go to sleep, melatonin is the magic trick! Melatonin is a natural sleep aid that releases endorphins to tell you that you're tired. Most adults use a pill form, but melatonin also comes in drop form, perfect for children. (Of course, check with your doctor first!) Another tip: We take the melatonin at 'bedtime' according to the time zone of the destination. This helps tremendously with jetlag and getting our bodies on the right time zone.

On-the-Road Tips

Although many of the sightseeing activities we do are for adults, we always do some special kid activities, too, such as a

children's museum, aquarium, etc. We also make it a priority to stop at public parks daily.

Generally, filling our days with busy sightseeing and lots of walking is exhausting for small ones. For that reason, we splurge on special treats daily. If it's ice cream they like, use that as motivation — or reward — for good behavior.

Also, we have found that managing our kids' expectations of each day's activities helps tremendously. Before we go to bed, we reflect on what we did and saw that day, and we talk about the next day's plan. They then know not only what to expect, but we can prepare them for any strenuous activity, i.e., lots of walking. It also helps get them excited about the next day's attractions.

Life Tips

Lane and I have decided that in life, we'd much rather have experiences than things, and that's why we travel so much. We lead a modest life in North Carolina, but we still recognize our extreme privilege to explore the world the way we do. People often ask how we travel internationally so much with a kiddo — and now two. Most of our international travel (at least in the last five years) has been for work. Luckily, we have incredibly fulfilling jobs that allow us to strive for a work-life balance and to bring our girls along to conferences and study-abroad experiences.

If you have the opportunity to travel internationally with children, it's mind over matter. The logistics are possible. You just do it! Yes, you will move at a slower pace, but it is so rewarding to see the world through their eyes.

I pray that my girls never take for granted these experiences, and they become increasingly self-aware, reflective, appreciative and respectful of all races, religions and cultures — understanding their roles and responsibilities as globally-minded citizens.

For more information or contact details, check out April Perry's website at aprilperry.weebly.com.