

Baby abroad

Lessons learned from traveling to Puerto Rico with an infant in tow

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Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — We were in paradise, surrounded by lush trees and waterfalls in El Yunque rainforest.

But the pint-sized traveler on my husband’s back was more concerned about our dwindling Goldfish supply than the marvels around us.

“Look, Hunt, a waterfall!” I pointed. He responded by touching his pinched fingertips together and saying, “More, more, more.”

I slipped him another cracker and repeated our mantra that this trip would be good for him.

Seventeen months after my first son was born, my husband and I were itching to go abroad. We love travel and experiencing new cultures. And because we hope to instill that love in our offspring, we decided to bring him along.

Some friends and family were perplexed. “You know he won’t remember it, right?” they asked.

Sure, we knew. But we also knew that what kids experience shapes their brains and futures, whether they remember those experiences or not.

And we knew we’d miss the bugger like crazy if we left him behind.

So we set some parameters. We wanted a spot that was affordable, wouldn’t be a nightmare to fly to with a toddler, had plenty of kid-friendly attractions and would expose him to another language.

Puerto Rico fit the bill.

Our passports are colored with trips abroad, but although we didn’t need passports for Puerto Rico (it’s a U.S. territory), we did have to toss out all we thought we knew about traveling.

We were no longer a (somewhat) low-maintenance duo, sharing two carry-ons and one checked bag. No, this was a four carry-on, two-checked bag endeavor, plus a gate-checked kid carrier.

Necessities from previous



Elijah Van Benschoten carries his 17-month-old son Hunt Van Benschoten while visiting Castillo de San Cristobal in San Juan, Puerto Rico. No matter how experienced a traveler you are, an overseas trip taken with a baby or toddler requires changes in planning, expectations and itineraries.



Hunt Van Benschoten drinks from a bottle as he stands in the water at a beach in San Juan, Puerto Rico.



Elijah Van Benschoten carries his son while hiking through El Yunque National Rainforest in Puerto Rico.

trips — like laptops and pro photo gear — were nixed to make room for baby supplies like swim diapers. For photos and surfing the Web, we used our iPhones.

As with parenting in general, we prepared well on some fronts, but flubbed others altogether.

Things we did right:

- We brought things to

keep the tyke busy on the plane and beyond: books, crayons, paper and even annoying noisemakers we’d cursed relatives for giving us but which ultimately proved invaluable.

- We researched San Juan well enough to know that a stroller would be a pain. We opted instead to bring a hiking-style child carrier.

This made our jaunt through the rainforest easy and it was a great conversation-starter with locals. One woman literally stopped traffic to tell us how cool she thought it was.

- We got a two-room suite. It cost \$50 more a night and felt strange for me — my first trips abroad were hostel-hopping budget

feasts. But having two rooms let us keep Hunt on his normal sleep schedule, while letting us talk, read and more between his bedtime and ours.

- We stuck with his nap schedule, too, by tackling one outing in the morning, then returning to the hotel for a noon break before going back out. That

limited our itinerary, but we knew skipped naps would be a hell we preferred not to endure.

- We did things that weren’t kid-friendly like San Juan’s historic forts and the Arecibo Observatory, just as we would have without him. We walked miles a day to see how people on the island live, and we shopped at a farmers market. When Hunt got impatient, one of us broke away with him and let the other finish the experience.

Things we did wrong:

- We broke our don’t-disrupt-the-baby’s-routine rule by booking a late flight on the way home, and, oh, did we pay for it. While we managed to mostly shield fellow travelers from our anguish, my husband ended up with a shiner from a tiny, flailing fist during one particularly potent tantrum.
- We didn’t ask the hotel about noisy scheduled events. Big mistake. We loved our hotel, but didn’t love the bar-style thumping on our second night.
- We occasionally expected our toddler not to be a toddler. We never overtly lost our cool when, say, Hunt threw himself on the ground for no apparent reason as we went to show him his first view of the ocean, but we did catch ourselves snapping at each other from the stress. What it taught us: Time-outs are good for adults, too.

But once he reached that beach, his eyes widened, his jaw dropped and he was more ecstatic than I’d ever seen him. He rushed to the water’s edge and stopped to let the waves lap his little feet, then reached willingly — for the first time ever — for my hand to guide him. I’d been studying Spanish for the trip, so when another little boy approached with toys, I was able to ask in Spanish if my son could play with him. The two played in the sand with no language barrier — toddlers don’t need words to understand meaning.

I don’t know if the trip was as good for Hunt as I’d hoped. But one thing is

Quesadillas make quick meal of heap of veggies, or leftovers

Weeknight cooks love the versatility and ease of quesadillas. Construction is simple — two flour tortillas sandwiched around a bunch of fillings, then skillet toasted — and they can be made with just about any ingredients you have on hand.

In fact, quesadillas are a great way to use up an abundance of produce or any leftovers you have kicking around. The trick is just to make sure that none of the ingredients are watery. Leftover roasted vegetables, for example, should be drained in a mesh strainer before being added to a quesadilla. Watery raw vegetables, such as tomatoes or the zucchini used in this recipe, should be lightly salted and briefly drained.

We’ll even throw the occasional leftover cooked grain into a quesadilla. Cooked quinoa or rice go great with canned beans and some chopped drained tomatoes. But whatever you do, don’t forget the cheese. It is the glue that holds this delicious dish together. We like cheddar, but Jack or Gouda are nice, too.

QUESADILLAS

- Start to finish: 45 minutes
Servings: 4
1 small zucchini
Kosher salt
1 tablespoon cumin seeds
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
1 teaspoon chili powder
1 cup canned chickpeas, drained
Four 10-inch (burrito-size) flour tortillas
1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
1/2 cup pitted black olives
1 cup shredded cooked chicken
Salsa, to serve
Guacamole or sour cream, to serve
- Use the coarse side of a box grater to shred the zucchini. In a colander, toss the shredded



Chickpea, zucchini and chicken quesadillas, a recipe by Allison Ladman.

zucchini with a generous sprinkle of salt, then set over the sink to drain.

Meanwhile, in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high, heat the cumin seeds until fragrant and toasty, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the vegetable oil, smoked paprika, chili powder and chickpeas. Continue to cook, stirring regularly, until the chickpeas are lightly crispy, 6 to 8 minutes. Transfer the beans to a bowl and wipe out the pan.

Squeeze out any remaining liquid from the zucchini and pat dry with paper towels. Return the skillet to medium heat. Place a tortilla in the middle of the pan and sprinkle with a quarter of the cheese. Top with half of the zucchini, half the seasoned chick-

peas, then half the olives and half the chicken. Sprinkle with another quarter of the cheese, then top with another tortilla. Cook until the bottom tortilla is lightly toasted and the cheese is beginning to melt, about 6 minutes.

Place a dinner plate on the quesadilla and flip the whole pan upside down. Remove the pan and slide the quesadilla off the plate and back into the pan, with the toasted side up. Cook for another 5 minutes, or until all the cheese is melted, everything is hot, and the second tortilla is toasted. Slide onto a plate and repeat the process with the remaining ingredients. Cut into wedges and serve with salsa and sour cream or guacamole.



(AP Photo/Matthew Mead)

VEGGIE BURRITOS

- Start to finish: 45 minutes
Servings: 6
1/2 large head cauliflower, cored and cut into very small florets
8 baby bella or button mushrooms, sliced
2 teaspoons olive oil
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon ground cumin
Kosher salt and ground black pepper
1/4 cup cider vinegar
1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 teaspoon sugar
1/2 small head red cabbage, finely chopped
1/2 red onion, thinly sliced
1 tablespoon nutritional yeast (optional)
Six 8- to 10-inch whole-grain tortillas
1/2 cup purchased tomatillo salsa (or any favorite salsa)
1 small avocado, pitted, peeled and cubed
1/4 cup plain Greek yogurt
- Heat the oven to 400 F. Line a baking sheet with kitchen parchment or foil, then mist with cooking spray.
- In a medium bowl, toss the cauliflower florets, mushrooms, olive oil, garlic powder, cumin and a hefty pinch each of salt and pepper. Arrange in an even layer on the prepared baking sheet and roast until the cauliflower is golden brown and the mushrooms are cooked but not dry, 15 to 20 minutes.
- Meanwhile, in a medium bowl, use a fork to mix together the vinegar, red pepper flakes, 1 teaspoon of salt and the sugar until the salt and sugar are dissolved. Toss in the cabbage and onion, mixing to coat, then set aside.
- Once the cauliflower and mushrooms are cooked, remove from the oven. Sprinkle the yeast flakes over the veggies (if using) and toss. If not using, give them another sprinkle of salt.
- Place the tortillas between 2 damp paper towels and microwave for 15 seconds to make them pliable. Divide the vegetables among the tortillas and top each with a sixth each of the pickled cabbage and onion, the salsa, avocado and Greek yogurt. Roll up into burritos, leaving one end open.