

a mother's days

The Accidentally Happy Traveler

Sometimes you need to see through the eyes of a child to relax and enjoy the ride **BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL**

FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, I've belonged to that unhappy category of travelers who worry about leaving one spot more than they look forward to arriving at another. This attitude, I believe, is a legacy from my father, who worked hard to give his family a comfortable home and could then see no legitimate reason to leave it. He considered travel an expensive way to be discommoded—a point of view that resulted in few family vacations.

My resulting dread of the open road has been reinforced over time by a variety of travel-related mishaps, but nothing cemented it more firmly than the airplane flight I took alone with my 18-month-old son to visit his grandparents in Florida. I spent two and a half hours trying to do the impossible: keep my son quiet, amused, and away from our easily annoyed fellow passengers. I was in tears as I pushed the stroller carrying my exhausted toddler down the jetway, a heavy diaper bag slung over my shoulder, and I promised myself that I'd never take a preverbal child on an airplane again unless Mister Rogers came along.

It was no accident, then, that my daughter was several months past her third birthday when we got on a plane together and made the identical trip I'd suffered a dozen years earlier with her brother. And this time around the trip was infinitely less stressful. In fact, it was a revelation.

The benefits of traveling with a 3-year-old, who was twice as sentient as



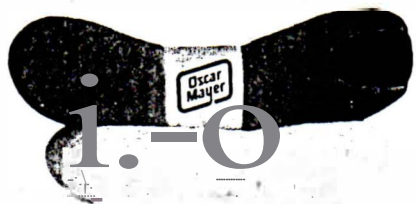
her brother had been at 18 months, were innumerable.

For one thing, she could occupy herself rather than needing me to all but stand on my head to keep her amused. When she wanted something, she could ask for it instead of screaming and writhing around on the floor of the plane. And she could understand and abide by the rules of civilized negotiation. ("If you stay in your seat, you can have a soda.")

Moreover, she was adept in the use of a potty, a cup, and her own two legs.

This allowed us to make the trip without a diaper bag, bottles, or a stroller, so that my arms were a good deal less encumbered than they had been on that nightmare flight with my son. As were my spirits. Indeed, when my daughter and I departed the plane and made our way hand-in-hand into the terminal, neither one of us was crying.

But if my heart was as light as my luggage upon our arrival, it wasn't due merely to the improved logistics. My mood had also been buoyed by watching my daughter's obvious plea-



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sure in the journey. While my son had behaved in the airplane cabin much the way a leopard behaves in a cage, his sister seemed to look upon it as a novel form of playground, complete with playmates.

Throughout the trip she seemed open to new experiences, and she found an array of items and events to afford her delight. In fact, she was an object lesson in what it means to be what I am not: a happy traveler. She could not, however, be coaxed into a rote appreciation of what a fraveler ought to enjoy, such as the view from the airplane window; I don't think she even noticed the takeoff.

Instead, she followed her own interests unerringly. While I fretted about a delay in boarding, she used the time to bond with a fellow traveler, a little girl her own age. The two seemed to gravitate toward each other from across the crowded waiting room. One, I knew for fact, was wearing Pocahontas underpants; the other dragged a Pocahontas backpack. And so they drifted together in the same way that two New Yorkers might on a tour bus full of Germans. It was a matter of like frames of reference: Maybe neither of them could tell time, but they both knew who John Smith was.

Once on board, separated by a dozen rows of seats, they made periodic visits to each other, popping by to say hi and offer tidbits of food—one had lollipops, the other Cheerios-like two tiny emissaries from Travelers Aid. Their forays made for good exercise and good karma throughout the flight.

By the time we left the ground, my daughter had discovered that airplanes come most deliciously equipped with furniture that does one's bidding. The fact that she could pull down a little table from the seat in front of her and push it back up whenever she wanted to—now, that was a 6nd! This activity lost little of its charm after two and a half hours of

repetition. Another lovely discovery: Chocolate milk, a delicacy rationed at home, flows like water at 35,000 feet above sea level.

Enjoyed, too, was the hunk of salami cadged from the man sitting next to us. What a welcome discovery that the very same travelers who have little patience for a whining toddler are happy to pass the time with a chatty, ingenuous preschooler, even one whose conversational gambits can be somewhat obscure, as in, "Mrs. Zuckerman [a beloved nursery-school teacher] likes purple."

With all of these satisfactions, my daughter was already quite pleased with her journey when she bounced into the terminal and spotted the perfect reason for having made it. There at the gate stood Grandma-playmate, baker, and storyteller extraordinaire.

I had promised that Grandma would meet our plane, but in this case reality surpassed expectation. The look on my daughter's face was as joyously wide-eyed as if her grandmother's presence had come as a complete surprise. That look reminded me of the time, years ago, my husband wheeled me into taking a road trip through France. Late one afternoon near the end of our travels, our car came over the crest of a hill and revealed to us, in the distance, Mont-Saint-Michel rising hazily out of the sea. It was our intended destination, but still, in its beauty and mystery, it was a surprise. My heart leapt into my throat at the sight, and for one moment I understood the joy of travel.

I understood it again in the midst of that pastel Florida airport, as I partook of my child's immense satisfaction in a trip well taken to a destination worthy of the effort. She had learned a lesson that would profit us both, I thought, as, still hand-in-hand, we headed straight for Grandma.

BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL is a writer, editor, all mother of Jake, 16, all Rose, 5.