

Swimming with Whales

by Amy Yelin

The plan was this: We would take our first vacation. My husband and I would take our 2 ½-year-old son Ethan and 13-month-old son Jonas to Mystic, Connecticut, a 90 minute drive from our home outside of Boston. We would stay at the Hilton, which was right near the Aquarium, and we would have breakfast with Ollie the Octopus. We would go swimming in the indoor pool. I would buy some floaties for the boys who were (obviously) not yet able swimmers and we would all have a good time, and come back well rested and nourished and full of wonderful stories to share.

This was the plan. And although I was looking forward to it, for some reason, as the date loomed closer, a part of me felt like throwing up

Ok, so I am not a world traveler. When friends took off for spring break, I worked. When they took semesters abroad, or hiked overseas after college, I wondered, 'what's the big attraction-' But one needn't look far to find the roots of my apprehension. Growing up, my parents were not big on family travel. The word "Schlep" was thrown around a lot, as in "Oy, what a Schlep that would be." If you're not familiar with the word schlep, in its noun form, it means arduous journey. For my mother, depending on the day, even a trip to the supermarket might fall into the schlep category. Gradually, I must have absorbed this association: leaving the house= schlepping. I remember as a teenager watching the Go-Go's on MTV. They were singing about vacation being "all they ever wanted." They were water skiing and I would think, well, *that doesn't look like much fun. Someone will probably fall and break a leg or drown or something.* Even at 13 or 14, I knew I preferred to stay stay rather than go go.

We did, however, take two trips together as a family. The first was just after my old sister Jackie's scoliosis operation. There are pictures of the four of us at SeaWorld and Disney world looking hot

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and uncomfortable—particularly my sister whose plaster body cast jutted out from beneath her Springsteen t-shirt. I was ten on this trip, and it was my first time on an airplane, a lovely experience during which I became intimate with the little white barf bag. Five years later, we went to Florida again. While I did not throw up on the plane, my mother proceeded to get seasick on our day cruise to the Bahamas. She threw up in the ship Casino and spent the rest of the trip in silence, staring at the horizon.

So perhaps it should have come as no surprise to me when Jonas threw up all over me the day before we were supposed to leave for Mystic. “It’s a family tradition,” I said to my husband.

I schlepped Jonas to the pediatrician, paid my \$20 and was given the standard pediatrician answer: “It’s a virus.” Although I had mixed feelings about going on vacation in general, the moment I considered that we might be staying home, I wanted it more than anything.

Please...I *need* this vacation,” I begged quietly to no one in particular. It was the way my 2 ½ year old phrased everything these days, replacing want with something much more dramatic: I *need* that truck mommy.’ Or ‘I *need* ’(insert here whatever is in Jonas’s hands at this very moment).’

Fortunately, my prayers worked. The virus disappeared, and we packed up the family Subaru and headed south.

According to my copy of the American Heritage dictionary, a vacation is defined as “a period of rest from work.” What my husband and I experienced in Mystic was definitely *not* a vacation. What we experienced was basically the work we do every day, but in another location and with other, interesting characters inserted, such as Ollie the Octopus, who we met the first morning at breakfast.

“I want to knock him over mommy,” Ethan announced, and then hit him.

This was not the endearing moment I had imagined.

Nor was our outing to the hotel pool, when I tried to insert Ethan into one of the floatie toys I had bought. He screamed as though I were inserting his legs into a tub of hot wax. "But it's fun!" I demanded. He screamed again.

The highlight, however, occurred at the aquarium. We were there for less than five minutes when Ethan insisted on swimming in the tank with the Beluga whales. We laughed at first, thinking he was joking.

"You can't swim with the whales, honey," I said. Wrong answer. A complete meltdown ensued, the aquarium was abandoned, and we carried our little octopus-hating toddler back to the hotel room for a three hour nap.

Shortly after we returned from what I can no longer refer to as our vacation, I spoke to my friend Rachel. "It was the trip from hell," I said. She laughed. Her children are older than mine, so I trusted her when she said "It'll get better." She also commended me for surviving a vacation with two toddlers. "Climbing Mount Everest would probably have been more relaxing." She said.

I suppose it was an accomplishment. We could have played it safe, stayed home for another couple of years. But what I've realized is this: Now that I have kids, I want to be careful not to squelch their sense of adventure. As they get older, I want them to feel free to get on a plane without worrying about vomiting or crashing. To get on water skis and not think they'll drown. To go on Spring Break, or see the world, or even swim with whales one day. If that's what they want.

I like to think that our little schlep to Mystic, despite its faults, helped plant a tiny seed in that direction.

