

Agent@Home Magazine - March 2010  
Cover Focus

**Mission: Families**

By Kate Rice



**Expert advice on selling family travel from agents on the front line**

You sell what you know, and that applies to family travel as much as it does anything else. When you, the agent, are the one schlepping car seats and strollers, grabbing for air sickness bags, changing diapers in airplane lavatories, and discovering that kids clubs offer playtime for parents as well as for children, you learn the ins and outs of the niche on a whole new level. Following are recommendations from some agents who specialize in family travel:

**Build in extra time.** "Traveling with kids takes on a whole different logistical nature," says Barbara Oliver, CTA, ECC and owner of All Together Now Travel, a home-based agency in Valencia, Calif. It's one thing to catch an airport shuttle when it's just you and your laptop and carry-on bag. It's an entirely different matter with kids and their paraphernalia in tow. You can't wing it when traveling with kids.

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Jake Hauptert, founder and chief escape officer for Explorers 3 Adventures and EverGreen Escapes LLC, in Seattle, points out that it can be as tough to get the troops out the door first thing in the morning on vacation as it is at home. Advise your families to allow for that by scheduling morning departures accordingly or planning an early-evening flight the night before.

**Create a vacation that works for kids as well as adults.** Oliver finds that all too often, families plan a vacation that's too heavily weighted toward one extreme or the other—more adult-oriented or more child-oriented. Too many kid-centered activities may drive parents crazy. And doing too many adult-focused activities can do the same to children. The trick is to vary activities so that everyone gets to enjoy themselves. Oliver makes sure that parents taking their children to Disney know that they can put their children in a kids' club at night and go out for an adult-only evening. Or parents can put their little ones in kids' camps for all or part of a day. Hauptert suggests alternating activities to accommodate more adult interests one day, more child-focused ones the next.

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**Go for nonstop flights and other kid-friendly strategies.** Minimize driving time, in part because it's tough to navigate unfamiliar territory with your entire family in the car. And, of course, children can get bored with a too-lengthy drive. To keep children engaged, try to stick to small groups and shorter outings.

If you're using a guide, make sure the guide works well with children and knows how to hold their attention. Many of the guides Hauptert uses for each of his companies—Explorers 3 Adventures is a retail travel agency, EverGreen Escapes LLC is a tour operator—are naturalists who have worked at children's camps. They're committed to the type of nature travel that is Hauptert's specialty.

"The guide is really going to be the pivotal person in providing that family with the well-rounded experience that everyone will enjoy," says Hauptert. In addition, the guides he employs—"escape artists," in the lexicon of Explorers 3 Adventures—are all wilderness-trained first-responders. Safety is always paramount, but in the family market it is even more so.

**Remember that children's ages make a difference.** The approach that works with a toddler is obviously not the one to take with a teen. The needs of infants and toddlers vs. older children can be very different, according to Michelle Mangio, CTA, DS, LS, owner of Magical Escapes Vacations, in Attleboro, Mass. Traveling with infants can sometimes be easier than with older children because their very size can make them more mobile. At the same time, you have to make sure that the cruise line or hotel you're reserving for the family has programs that cater to very young children. Disney Cruise Lines has infant programs on all of its ships. Newer ships also tend to have them, such as the new Oasis of the Seas, says Mangio.

**Devote time to planning.** "Have clear directions, and know where you're going and what you're going to do," says Oliver. She also encourages her families to have a Plan B. You may know what you're going to do Tuesday, but if it's an outdoor activity and it rains on Tuesday, have an alternative in the works. Or a child may be under the weather. That's why it's important to build in alternatives so that families can be flexible enough to roll with the inevitable surprises.

**Know your suppliers.** Oliver leans toward cruise lines simply because they offer so many options for different ages and tastes. She also considers Disney World "fabulous," but not everyone is a Disney fan.

Mangio finds that cruise lines and all-inclusives are good for families. Pricing is attractive—her families know what they'll be spending before the vacation begins. And there is a wealth of programs, aimed at every age, from small children to teens. Teen clubs have younger counselors and can be a place to simply hang out, or to dance or enjoy music. One of Mangio's favorite teen club activities is a DJ club, in which kids can work with a professional DJ to design their own program. There are fitness programs geared for kids as well.

Mangio likes resorts such as the Omni Mount Washington Resort, Bretton Woods, N.H. It offers a variety of experiences—skiing at neighboring ski resorts, ice skating, sledding and a spa—so that all members of a family can find an activity that works for them.

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**Qualify the consumer.** This is as important with families as it is with any other client. Some families are very active and "outdoorsy," while others may be less so. Mangio often sends clients looking for a tropical destination to Beaches because of its kids program and because it can handle smaller children. While in Jamaica, she and her family (her children are 6 and 3) tried the Franklyn D. Resort and Spa, where each family is assigned a nanny for their entire stay. Since Mangio and her husband, John, had never had a full-time nanny, they weren't sure what to expect.

"It was fantastical!" she says now. She's also had success with Club Med.

Oliver sends some of her clients overseas, finding London a good "starter" overseas destination for families. She starts families with a "Hop On, Hop Off" bus tour, because it gives them a good overview of the city. Moreover, it's flexible and not too physically demanding. She cautions against underestimating the effect of jet lag on families, particularly children.

**Do your homework.** Oliver is constantly on the prowl for destinations and activities. She starts her day with Travel Pulse, the all-encompassing daily email newsletter that's a sister publication of Agent@Home. If something intrigues her, she promptly researches it to save for the appropriate trip

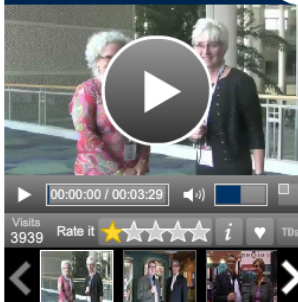


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and customer.

Mangio has nearly two-dozen specialist certifications, including Premier Aussie Specialist, a South Pacific Destination Specialist and South Africa FUNDI Expert, and is a graduate of the Disney College of Knowledge. She finds tourist boards a great source of information about activities for families. On trips to Australia she has booked surfing lessons, spa treatments and Aboriginal experiences. She's found other agents to be of enormous help as well. When one family came to her looking for snowmobile sports in New England, something she knows little about, she reached out to her fellow agents and found a tour that her clients enjoyed. Finding that on her own would have taken forever, she says.

**Get to know your clients.** "Every family is unique," says Mangio. And it's worth it to get to know them. Repeat business is built into it—families take short breaks as well as longer vacations over the years. Families celebrate anniversaries and graduations with travel; kids grow up and start their own traveling lives.

Do a good job for a family, and you've got a cheerleading squad selling you. "Families who have a great time on vacation are very vocal about it and make great advocates for you," says Mangio.

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**Market family travel on social media.** Oliver uses Facebook, posting the experiences she's enjoyed, rather than the cost. Hauptert, too, markets by using Facebook, Twitter, a blog and a website. He sends out a newsletter about once a month and occasionally will shoot out an email if a supplier has compelling offers. He's building repeat business.

"Once we get families to be believers in who we are and what we provide, it's just easier for them to keep coming back to us," he says, adding, somewhat ruefully, "you don't have any time when you have kids. I think families are more apt to use travel agents because of that." Hauptert knows whereof he speaks; he and his wife, Jessica, have a 2-year-old as well as another child on the way.

And booking family travel is a good thing to do. "Families want to have a lot of great memories," says Mangio. "Many of us today have fond memories of family vacations. Today's parents want to give something like that to their children."

Oliver, who has a bachelor's degree in psychiatry and formerly ran a teen suicide-prevention program, turned to travel after she burned out. While traveling with friends she theorized that one reason their families were so healthy was because they discovered the world together. Now her business is helping families stay healthy through travel.

"I'm in travel," she says, "but my mission really is families." @



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