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Travel Advisors Work to Make Once Elusive Round-the-World Trips a Reality

Linda Humphrey, Skift - Feb 25, 2020 9:30 am

Skift Take

Sabbatical travel is in the spotlight, but is a year-long trip around the globe feasible for a family? A couple? Two travel advisors set out for a string of faraway places, showing clients and friends that it can be done.

— *Linda Humphrey*

What does it take to travel around the world for a year, family in tow? Ten months into a year-long, 22-country, seven-continent adventure, the Pierson family is happily figuring it out.

SEVEN-CONTINENT ADVENTURE

The Amelia Island, Florida-based crew includes mom and travel advisor Angela, dad Eric, and daughters Angela and Emily, fourth and second graders.

“We’re a normal family,” Pierson said. “We can’t just take a year off and not think about money.”

“We’re normal-ish,” added daughter Angela.

With a budget of \$90,000, the family is mixing homestays with luxury hotels and cruises. Angela and Eric, who is business manager of their agency, Wallace Pierson Travel, are working remotely and inviting clients to join the family for excursions, such as a four-day Amazon River expedition. This regular income covers “vacations within the vacation,” such as safaris, cruises, and hotels.

“Right about the time I am ready for someone else to take care of everything, we’re going to a five-star hotel for a week,” Pierson said. “And then when we want to eat in our own kitchen and wash our clothes, we’re in a homestay again.”

To pinpoint the best neighborhoods for home rentals, Pierson counts on her local contacts in the **Virtuoso** consortium.

What to pack? “It’s amazing how many places in the world have washing machines and no dryers,” Pierson said. The family brought a clothesline and swears by Beyond laundry detergent sheets, which keep line-dried clothes from getting “crunchy and gross.”

The girls begin each morning with schoolwork, flipping open their workbooks on a Mexican beach or in a Swiss chalet, cowbells clanging outside their windows. The traveling life suits them, as they aren’t yet immersed in after-school activities or SAT prep. Their third-grade teacher back in Florida, recruited as their remote instructor, sets up their assignments and gives feedback.

“It’s coming from their real teacher and not their parents, so that’s been really good,” Pierson said.

Once back home, Pierson plans to help clients tackle their own sabbatical trips. “If you’re at all interested in this, just take the dive and do it. It doesn’t have to be a year. It’s overwhelming and scary, but that piece of it melts away within the first month. It gets to be your new normal pretty fast.”

Indeed, Pierson said she has seen the trend growing.

“We’ve noticed that families, like us, are starting to take extended trips, whether it’s a month or two, or the whole summer. We’ve seen families taking RV trips around the U.S. or adding some front-end and back-end travel to an expedition cruise.”

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEAP

Susie Chau's year-long trek around the world sparked a career change.

"The most rewarding part for me was proving to myself that I could live life off the beaten path," said Chau. "I credit that one leap to taking the entrepreneurial leap and starting my business."

A former management consultant, Chicago-based Chau is now a travel advisor. With the launch of her year-old company, **Carpe Diem Traveler**, she coaches clients and companies on sabbatical travel and work-life balance.

"Workplace burnout levels are rising, especially in the U.S.," Chau said. "We're always accessible, always on. But there hasn't been a huge shift in vacation policies or other benefits to counteract the additional hours that people are working."

For clients who can't put down their phones, Chau points to Antarctica.

"Antarctica is a forced digital detox. Although there is Wi-Fi in the polar region, it is barely functional."

The White Continent was also the best part of Chau's own journey. "Antarctica is the most pristine, otherworldly place. It just puts things in perspective."

Chau had convinced her husband, Jan, to take a year off when his company relocated. The couple, both in their thirties, climbed sand dunes in the Gobi Desert, hiked to a rural homestay in Sapa, Vietnam, and lived with a nomadic family in Mongolia for nine days.

Their \$45,000 vacation cost less than their annual living expenses in Chicago. They traveled at a dizzying pace, zooming through seven continents, 23 countries, and 22 states, averaging three-and-a-half

nights per destination. But Chau cautions her sabbatical clients to travel slow.

“The natural inclination, especially for Americans, is ‘Let’s go, let’s see as much as possible. We’ve got to maximize this time,’” Chau said. “That is our usual mentality when looking at a week or two. On a sabbatical, you’ve got to fight that urge to keep adding things to the list.”

FOCUS ON GOALS

Chau’s clients start their travel planning with goals, not destinations.

“Rather than just checking a bunch of places off a list, flip-flop that and focus on what you want to accomplish,” Chau said. “What are you missing in your day-to-day life? Is there something that you’ve always wanted to do or learn?”

And keep in mind that “as you travel you’ll meet people, and you won’t want to be boxed in to whatever you thought you wanted when you left a year ago,” Chau said.

One of Chau’s tricks is Skyscanner’s Everywhere feature. “Sometimes unexpected flight deals can pop up. This is how we ended up going to Australia.”

Looking at a Thailand-to-Laos jaunt, Chau grabbed flights from Thailand to Australia to Vietnam for the same price.

PLANNING EN ROUTE

The Piersons, meanwhile, have been crafting most of their trip en route.

“I got a little bit tense, because we didn’t have it planned all the way through, and that’s what I do for a living!” Pierson said. “But as we met people, things just started to evolve and open up for us.”

On Halloween, a local contact led the family to Seville, Spain, where Isla Magica amusement park had been decked out as a spooky wonderland. The family rode the log flume in their costumes, “and the girls thought that was amazing,” Pierson said. “We don’t ever need to really trick or treat again.”

HOME COMFORTS

Eventually, around-the-world travelers will begin to miss the trappings of home.

Leah Smith’s client brought a Bunsen burner on a \$1.7 million global holiday to cook some familiar food in his five-star hotel rooms.

“I didn’t even know that he had the Bunsen burner until he left it at a hotel and I had to track it down,” said Smith, founder of **Tafari Travel** in Denver and New York.

A recently retired executive in his seventies, Smith’s client traveled solo for 15 months, meeting up with friends and family for a few weeks at a time.

He had not vacationed much and wanted to make up for lost time, Smith said. Not wanting to linger in any one place, he checked into over 250 hotels and took four cruises.

Given the chance to plan this whirlwind trip again, Smith said she would have “looked into more cruising, more tours, or an around-the-world cruise — opportunities for him to be with other people.”

POST-TRIP ADJUSTMENT

One pitfall to watch out for, Pierson said, is reverse culture shock once the trip ends.

Angela and Eric have been preparing their girls for life post-trip, talking to them about what to expect once they're back to normal life.

Two years ago, after a monthlong family vacation to French Polynesia, their daughter Angela had cried herself to sleep for three nights.

"She said, 'I feel like something's wrong. I feel like you're going to die,'" Pierson recalled.

She had gotten so used to spending every minute with the family, Pierson said, and now that they were splitting up for school, extracurricular activities, and work, something felt off.

For now, the most rewarding part of their around-the-world trip, Pierson said, is "just being in the moment with each other," without the distractions of their busy home life.

"It still hasn't completely set in for me that it's real."

Photo Credit: The Pierson family at Elewana Camp in Kenya, a stop in their around-the-world trip. Tim Leperes / Courtesy Angela Pierson