



# A PASSAGE TO INDEPENDENCE

A MOTHER-DAUGHTER TRIP TO EUROPE HELPS PAVE THE WAY TO ADULTHOOD

BY LESLIE FORSBERG

Riding the funicular up the steep Swiss mountainside, we ascended into silent clouds, and the world seemed muted and far away. Yet, within minutes of setting off on the fog-shrouded Mountain View Trail, my 20-year-old daughter Kirsten and I were surrounded by subtle, lyrical sounds: Pebble-bottomed streams chattered as they bisected heather meadows on their way to the valley floor. The high-pitched chirrup of grasshoppers hopping away from our footfalls was joined by a softly rasping chorus of crickets. Farther along, the musical sound of cowbells pealing from a nearby herd formed a symphony of its own.

As we settled onto a trailside bench to drink in the view and enjoy a picnic lunch, including cheese, we later learned, from these very same cows, Kirsten said the words every travel-loving parent hopes to hear: “Mom, I love this place. It feels like home to me.”

Hearing these words about a place that was once just a dot on a map is sweet music to my ears, both as a parent and as a lifelong traveler. Exposing our kids to new people and places, cultures and ethos in a way they could never grasp through books, movies or the Internet alone can only enrich their lives and, ultimately, help change our world in positive ways.

While many young adults head out to explore the world solo or with friends, why should they have all the fun? Traveling with our kids as they’re on the cusp of indepen-

dence gives them the opportunity to practice numerous planning and life skills, and maybe learn a lesson or two.

When Kirsten graduated from high school, I promised her a three-week mother-daughter trip to Europe. It took two years for our trip to come to fruition, but was well worth the wait. I knew this would be a trip of a lifetime, offering valuable learning experiences for her. What I didn’t anticipate was that I would learn just as much, if not more.

My education began when I made the bold decision to tell Kirsten that since this was her trip, she could choose where to go, and what to do. I suggested Italy, Spain, maybe Sweden, or the English countryside. Seizing my last suggestion, she ran with it.

“Mom, I really want to go to the Leeds Festival.” “What’s that?” I asked as I reached for my laptop, to Google it. “Really? England’s second-largest rock festival?” While I wasn’t sure just what kind of “education” might be found there, a promise is a promise.

“I wonder why everyone’s wearing rubber boots,” I whispered naively, leaning toward Kirsten that rainy morning as we rumbled through the English countryside on the festival shuttle bus, surrounded by young women who, with the exception of their footwear, looked like they were heading to a nightclub, with loads of makeup, short shorts and plastic flower garlands in their hair.

Then the bus pulled in at a farm field, disgorging us where tens of thousands had already arrived. “Now I get it,” I said, as we slipped, slid and slogged in our tennis shoes





through an ocean of shin-deep mud. The sky lowered and a drizzle set in as we picked our way through the mire, heading for the circus tents on an impossibly distant hilltop. We were surrounded by a parade of humanity dressed in colorful, skimpy garb, no coats in sight. Beside me, jeans-clad Kirsten hunched morosely beneath her (*so* uncool) rain jacket and chunky daypack—complete with a sack lunch and an umbrella. “You never know what you might need,” I’d said, brightly, that morning, as I urged her to take provisions and dress for the weather.

I made it as far as the Beatles revival band tent. “Hey, this is great! I like this!” I said, swaying to the strains of “Let it Be.” “Mom, you can stay here, but I’m going to the main stage.” After making sure she knew how to get back to our B&B, butterflies in my stomach, I watched her join the throngs trudging in the direction of a growling, howling sound, until she was a mere speck. She would have to ride the bus back to the train station and master the train to get back to our lodging late at night; the proprietor at our inn had said it was perfectly safe.

**LESSON ONE:** Determine how safe it is to allow them to head out on their own, and, if all checks out, then let them fly. And try to remember to breathe—without checking the time more than once every 15 minutes. We both survived the concert ... though I’m not so sure about our shoes.

Fast-forward to the London Underground incident. Despite the fact that I’ve been a travel writer for many years, I have never had an internal compass. And as far as reading complex charts with inscrutable inscriptions and names of places I’m not familiar with ... I’m hopeless, especially when in a hurry. Add in the rat-like maze of tunnels in the (aptly named) Tube and a time crunch, and it was a perfect storm of travel oh-no’s as I felt a crushing sense of indecision over which direction to head off in. Pausing at the top of what looked like a steep stairwell into the bowels of the Earth as a crowd swarmed past, I heard Kirsten urging me forward. “Mom, we have to go two floors down and then take a tunnel on the left to catch the northbound Piccadilly Line train.” But wasn’t it down that other stairway? With a shrug of my shoulders, I decided to test her theory. Once again, I had to admit she was right. **LESSON TWO:** If your kid is good with directions and you aren’t, don’t hesitate to let him or her take the lead.

In the coming weeks, our days were filled with moments of recognition, big and small, as I came to fully understand just how capable my daughter was, and ready for the chal-

lenges of adult life. Sharing the same hotel rooms and train compartments, we both learned more about each other than possible in the work- and school-filled days at home. Beyond that, though, I felt like I was given the rare opportunity to see inside a day in the life of a young person with the kind of clarity that comes only from experiencing it together—and to be reminded of what it was like when I was her age.

On a scorching hot day in Florence, Italy, we’d spent much of the afternoon in stuffy, close quarters, exploring works by Leonardo da Vinci in the Uffizi Gallery, and powerful sculptures by Michelangelo in the Accademia Gallery. In the open air again, we strolled to the Ponte Vecchio and were entranced by the view from a popular photo-taking spot on the bridge. A helpful tourist snapped

a shot of the two of us, and, as we were stepping away, a couple asked *Kirsten* if she could take their picture. “Of course,” she said, taking their camera. A budding filmmaker, she has an eye for composition. What started out as one couple swiftly turned into a line of tourists, all eagerly awaiting their turn for Kirsten to take that perfect shot. “You need to put a hat out,” I laughed, as family number 12 readied for their portrait. We walked away from the bridge with a spring in our steps. **LESSON THREE:** Get ready to see other travelers view your child as a grownup—and enjoy the experience.

There were many more lessons learned—for both of us. And many powerful moments shared. Such as feeling the ground tremble beneath our feet as we witnessed the mammoth, thundering Rhine Falls, or seeing the brilliance of London reflected in the inky Thames after an evening performance in Shakespeare’s Globe theater. Adding a grace note to the occasion, a contemplative melody played by a lone violinist in a nearby underpass echoed, then rose into the calm night sky.

Like many of the best things in life, I set out with one thing in mind and found that it was really about another, much deeper experience, with memorable moments stored away like tiny flowers caught for all time in amber. And finally, I realized that it all led up to this: It was now OK for me to let go and watch my daughter set out on her own life’s adventures. Without a “chaperone” ... and probably even without an umbrella. ❶

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Journey senior editor **LESLIE FORSBERG** started her worldwide travels at the age of 14; she introduced her daughter to the joys of international travel at the same age.

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