



# WAY BEYOND VACATION

BY EILENE ZIMMERMAN / CORRESPONDENT

SAN DIEGO

On the way home to New York from a London visit with cousins, Rainer Jeness's sons, Tyler and Stefan, were raving about the city and how great it would be to grow up in a place with both Big Ben and double-decker buses. That got Rainer and his wife, Carol, thinking about traveling. Not just vacation travel, but ditching their suburban life – quitting their jobs, selling the house and

cars – and traveling the world with their kids for a while.

It's the kind of escape lots of people fantasize about, and Rainer and Carol had mused about it when he worked as an executive at National Geographic – a job that teased him with the idea of far-flung travel. But the Jenesses' careers got in the way – Carol was media director at an ad agency – and then their kids were born, and all talk of traveling stopped, supplanted by school, homework, sports, and sleepovers.

"It seemed irresponsible," says Rainer, "like running off to join the circus." But the idea percolated, and a year later, in 2004, it seemed possible – maybe even necessary, he says, recalling what felt like a bleak zeitgeist at the beginning of the Iraq war. Having traveled a lot as a child and professionally as an adult, he valued the open-mindedness of engaging with other cultures: "I wanted my kids to learn about the world through their own experiences."

That was the start of four years of preparation: The family began living off Rainer's salary and saving Carol's. In July 2008, Rainer, Carol, and their two sons, then ages 8 and 11, each carrying one suitcase and a backpack – embarked on a one-year odyssey. Starting with seven weeks in national parks around the United States, they then flew on to China and then to every continent except Antarctica.

The Jeness family was on the cusp of a new, grow-

The book is a clear marker for Tara Russell, a certified life and career coach in San Francisco: There was "before EPL" and "after EPL," she says. Before the book, it was harder to explain to clients the value of taking a career break and traveling. "Now they get it."

Ms. Russell, whose Three Month Visa Coaching and Consulting specializes in long-term travel, saw a spike in her business after the book came out. Counterintuitively, she says, the recession "really ripped the veil off the whole notion of job security. I thought it would have a negative effect on this kind of travel, but it actually empowered people to look at their layoff as an opportunity." Some families, she adds, see travel as a way to get time together: "One of my clients said if she didn't message her kids on Facebook, they would never come to dinner. This family realized the only way to knit themselves back together was to hit the road."

## FINANCING A FANTASY

Fantasizing about leaving everything and traveling "Eat, Pray, Love"-style is one thing; actually doing it is another. When the Jenesses first began planning their trip, they thought of a thousand reasons they shouldn't do it. Then, recalls Rainer Jeness, came a defining moment: "We stopped looking at traveling as a crazy fantasy, or from the perspective of risk, of what we had to lose – like careers, house,

## THE 'EAT, PRAY, LOVE' EFFECT: LOOKING FOR CLOSENESS, EDUCATION, AND PERSPECTIVE, FAMILIES INCREASINGLY ARE GOING ON THE ROAD.

ing trend among families: extended travel.

People are pulling up the roots of their stationary – often suburban – existence and hitting the road for long periods. Some want to give their children an experiential education, with the world as their classroom. Others want to disconnect from career stress, social media, a consumerist culture, and societal pressures to grow closer as a family. This isn't a sabbatical; it's often a life change. And some families aren't even sure when or if they will return to their old lives.

A surge in this kind of travel happened in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, inspired by a desire among families to get closer, observes Kimberly Goza, a founder of the website Families On The Road, which helps peripatetic Americans connect and share advice. The Internet has accelerated the trend, she suggests, making it easier to stay connected to friends, family, and co-workers. "It's just easier now than it used to be," says Ms. Goza, whose family has lived on the road for 19 years, supporting the lifestyle by performing professionally as "The Activated Storytellers."

Perhaps the biggest spark in long-term family travel has been the enormous bestseller "Eat, Pray, Love," by Elizabeth Gilbert. Published in 2006 – and followed by a gauzily romantic film – it tells the story of how Ms. Gilbert, 34 and newly divorced, healed emotionally and spiritually by traveling to Italy, India, and Indonesia.

friends – and began looking at what we could gain, at all the benefits."

Others make plans but never follow through. Betsy and Warren Talbot were dining with a couple of good friends in 2008 when discussion turned to a brother and a close friend who'd developed serious health problems out of the blue.

Betsy recalls the question that the couples asked each other that night back in Seattle: "What if you knew you wouldn't make it to your 60s? What would you do now?" And the answer for all of us was, "travel."

Interviewed via Skype aboard a ship off the coast of Senegal last month (six months into an open-ended round-the-world trip), Betsy said that all four at the table concluded: "Why wait?" Within 12 hours, planning began. The Talbots carried through with it; the other couple gave them a going-away party.

Families can take years to plan and save for their trips. Ann and Doug Brown were living a pretty typical, upper-middle-class life in Carlsbad, Calif., when they decided in 2005 to change their lives.

Part 1 of their plan was to buy into a new housing development in Loreto, Mexico, on the coast of the Sea of Cortez. They hoped to immerse themselves and their two children in Spanish and the Mexican culture. Though not thrilled with the public schools their kids attended, Ann says they weren't running from anything, either: "We were more interested in gaining something for our kids we couldn't get in Carlsbad." They wanted familial closeness, while

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▶ ONLINE: Rainer and Carol Jeness at <http://intelligenttravel.nationalgeographic.com/tag/jeness-family-travels/>

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE JENNESS FAMILY

Tyler Jeness and his mom, Carol, get a shower with their guide in Pai, Thailand (above). The Jeness family pulled up stakes in the US to travel the world. Left, from top to bottom: Stefan with a boy from the Datoga tribe in Tanzania; Stefan at the Notojima Aquarium in Japan; Tyler at the Turtle Conservation Center on Silhouette Island in the Seychelles; and the whole family (l. to r.), Rainer, Stefan, Tyler, and Carol, in Kyoto, Japan.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BROWN FAMILY

The Brown family (above, from left): Doug helping identify a fish that his son, Henry Wyatt, caught near La Cruz, Mexico; Mom Ann (l.) gets her kids, Chandler and Henry Wyatt, ready to paddle to shore; Doug and Ann and their kids aboard their 35-foot sailboat, the 'HanaCrew' ('Ohana' means family in Hawaiian.)

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cultivating an independent spirit in their kids.

"In the US, for example, all the games kids play – like baseball, soccer or T-ball – [are] organized by adults," says Ann. "There's a \$50 uniform, a \$25 team picture.... You can't just go out in the street and play a pickup baseball game anymore.... Here, the kids walk down to the beach and explore tide pools by themselves. We don't worry. They swim and build forts for hours."

In 2007 the Browns sold their Carlsbad house and much of their furniture and caravanned down the desert peninsula of Baja California, loaded down with supplies like toilet paper and canned goods.

Part 2 of the Browns' plan was to live on a sailboat for as much of a year as they could manage. In March 2010 they bought a 35-foot sailboat, a "blue water sloop cruising boat, made to be out on the wide-open sea," explains Doug.

Living at sea wasn't as wild a decision as it sounds – the couple had actually done it for two years on a 40-foot boat when they were first married (Ann had quit her job with a small independent event company and Doug had sold his business).

Others often see the Browns as courageous for moving their family to another country and for living at sea for extended periods of time. But Ann says: "I don't feel brave at all. This just feels very comfortable, very normal and natural for us. I don't know why more people don't do this regularly. I wouldn't do it if I were even a little bit afraid."

Writer David Elliot Cohen describes people like the Browns and the Talbots as "seekers." Mr. Cohen took a year off with his wife and three kids in 1996 and wrote a book about it, "One Year Off: Leaving It All Behind for a Round-the-World Journey with Our Children." Although he hears from more families doing this now than when the Cohens hit the road, Cohen believes the number of people leaving secure, stationary lives for itinerant ones is relatively small. "I think most people are really happy living a comfortable, productive life with less risk."

**WHAT POSSESSES THEM?**

Those who take extended-travel risks do so for a variety of reasons.

Dee and Scott Andrews, for instance, were bored living a comfortable, middle-class life in Boulder, Colo. So they decided to decamp for Europe in 2008. Dee was home with their two daughters, Grace and Emma, who were 5 and 8 at the time. Scott was chief execu-

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tive officer of a high-tech, venture-backed company, working long hours.

"It was a stressful time in my husband's life, and there was the monotony of the job and of our life in Boulder. We just needed a change from the routines into which our lives had fallen," says Dee, who wanted to let go of PTA meetings, soccer practices, and volunteering at school, and "shake things up a bit."

Before they had kids, the Andrewses had moved frequently and changed jobs every few years. In fact, Dee says, they once even discussed moving down the street "just to change something." Then, after a particularly stressful week for Scott, the family went camping. "We were in the mountains, sitting there together, and the kids were asleep. And Scott said, 'Let's move abroad. Let's just make this happen.' And I remember grinning from ear to ear thinking, 'Finally, we're going to do this,'" she says.

They decided on Spain so their daughters could become fluent in Spanish, a language the couple felt would be useful in the US. After school ended in 2008, they sold their house and cars; they put some things in storage and gave some away.

"It was one of the most freeing experiences I have ever had," says Dee.

The recession pushed Cameron and Nicole Wears to hit the road. Both had good jobs in Vancouver, British Columbia; a condo; and cars. Cameron worked in franchise development for 1-800-GotJunk. The recession dramatically slowed franchise sales, the company had some layoffs in 2008, and Cameron saw the writing on the wall: "I was very nervous about my situation there. At the same time, Nicole and I had always wanted to travel...."

"I saw everything in the economy going south. We had money saved to buy a house, but the real estate market tanked, so we decided to just quit our jobs and use the money to travel instead. We would see if the world figured itself out while we were away."

The pair rented out their condo for a year and headed to South America.

Just two months ago, Danielle and Greg Podlesny and their two sons bought a 24-foot 1982 motor home. The RV has a bed above the driver's compartment, bunks for the kids, a kitchen, toilet,

▶ ONLINE: Dee Andrews at [www.travelandtravails.com](http://www.travelandtravails.com)



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ANDREWS FAMILY

After getting lost on their camels for a time, the Andrews family – (above, l. to r.) Scott, Emma, Grace, and Dee – camped in the Sahara in Morocco. At left, Emma (l.) and Grace in the uniforms of The Lady Elizabeth School in Javea, Spain. Grace (below) discovered an octopus hanging out to dry next to a restaurant in Denia, Spain.



and shower. It's the Podlesnys' home for the foreseeable future. They plan to travel in it indefinitely throughout the US, in an effort to reconnect as a family.

The family had been living in Oceanside, Calif., where Danielle runs a nanny agency, Munchkin Minders, and Greg had been a general contractor.

**COULD WE EVER DO THIS? YES, BUT ...**

**Can you safely leave your job to travel?**

If you have desirable skills and experience, you should be able to find something else if your company can't hold your job for you, says Steven Miranda of the Society for Human Resource Management. If your skills are average and you aren't viewed as indispensable, he says, you take a huge risk walking away from that paycheck. Leaving your job to travel could also be viewed by a potential employer as reflecting a lack of commitment.

**What about taking kids out of school?**

Most families who leave on extended travel "road school" their kids using an established homeschool curriculum or by working out an arrangement for independent study with their child's current school. Ann and Doug Brown used the Thomas Jefferson homeschooling program. Rainer Jeness says road schooling for his kids was "90 percent field trips and 10 percent schoolwork." Dee and Scott Andrews put their kids into an international school while in Spain, then spent four months traveling and

schooling their kids, carting around textbooks.

**How do families save for a trip like this?**

Slowly and diligently. It generally takes at least a year, usually more. Betsy and Warren Talbot saved for two years. The Jeness family took four years to save \$150,000, socking away as much of Carol Jeness's salary as possible. Some families sell their houses and live off the equity. Others, like the Browns, start a business wherever they land.

**What is reentry like upon returning?**

Long-term travel coach Tara Russell says it's often hard for people to find their

stationary lives meaningful: "They miss that feeling of wonder they have on the road, of being aware of every moment."

Parents say the transition back to regular school for their children generally took just a few weeks. Craig James says that for his daughter the problem wasn't academics but time management, since she had been doing her schoolwork in short spurts, rather than every day.

Many of the parents interviewed for this story changed their profession when they got back. Dani James became an English as a Second Language teacher; Rainer became an entrepreneur.

– Eilene Zimmerman



Henry Wyatt Brown (bottom) and his sister, Chandler, assist newly hatched turtles as they make their way to the water at sunset at Paradise Beach, near Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.



Above, right: The Podlesny family – (l. to r.) kids Curren and Zane, and parents Greg and Danielle (holding Teddy the dog) – with the RV they all now call home. Above, left: Zane (l.) and Curren with their dad and dog at Salvation Mountain in Niland, Calif.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PODLESNY FAMILY

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says. “We wanted to be more involved with one another as a family.”

#### HOW THEY DO IT

Planning extended travel is a complex equation of time and money and “it’s easier to do if you have money, no question,” says Cohen. “If you’re just living paycheck to paycheck, you haven’t saved for your kids’ college, haven’t thought much about your retirement savings, this may not be for you.”

For four years, the Jenss family planned their trip, saving as much of Carol’s salary as possible and reaching their goal of \$150,000, says Rainer. “The planning can seem overwhelming, but it was also really fun. You have this world map and you’re thinking, ‘Where do I want to go?’”

Dee and Scott Andrews sold their house and lived off the equity. Scott continued to manage his high-tech business – making a one-week trip back every quarter – and earning a part-time salary.

In the mid-2000s when they first decided to travel, Craig and Dani James weren’t sure exactly what trip they’d wind up making with their two kids. But, says Craig, they made a “massive study of the whole subject. Even five years before we left, we were talking about it.”

Craig, who was an independent corporate communications consultant making six figures, began saving 10 percent of every contract, and within two to three years, he says, they had saved about \$100,000. It was, he says, “enough of a cushion to make the trip and feel less of a financial risk.”

They zeroed out their debt at home, renting out their house for slightly more than their mortgage and selling their car. In 2008 they set out first for South America, then went on to New Zealand, Australia, and Southeast Asia, and finished in Europe a year later.

The Browns were able to semiretire after selling their California home and moving to Mexico, living off residual income from investments. They also had very little debt, says Doug. “It’s less expensive to live in Mexico. You can have a rich life without being overextended.”

They live a very financially disciplined life now,

says Ann, making the same budget-conscious decisions other middle-class American families make. “This lifestyle may seem expensive, but it certainly doesn’t require someone to be extremely wealthy to do it,” she says. The Browns started a home-maintenance company in Baja and became distributors for water purifiers and softeners, which gave them the extra income they needed to live at sea for most of the past year.

Betsy and Warren Talbot saved and planned their trip for two years. They did research online and spoke to other travelers to figure out what they would need, on average, each day. The couple saved for 25 months and began downsizing on a weekly basis so they wouldn’t be overwhelmed right before they left. Their original budget was \$75,000 for travel around the world for one year. (Betsy blogs at [www.marriedwithluggage.com](http://www.marriedwithluggage.com) and details expen-

ditures in the “expense report” section.)

In October 2010 they left, each with a large backpack and small daypack. In mid-April, after taking a cruise ship to Antarctica, they asked if they could stay on board and ride back with the crew to England. The ship’s crew told them that no one had ever asked that before, and they let the Talbots stay on without charge.

Already, they see their decision to travel as a complete life changer. “I don’t expect us to ever return to regular life,” says Warren. “The money will eventually run out, of course, so we’ll have to face that and deal with that when it happens.”

#### HOMECOMING VS. MACHU PICCHU

Of course it’s not all “Eat, Pray, Love,” because traveling together 24 hours a day, seven days a week can present challenges for even the closest of families. Travel coach Russell tells her clients that extended travel is not the solution to family dysfunction: “Whatever is dogging you here will dog you 10 times more on the road.”

Rainer Jenss says spending so much time with his wife magnified some of their issues: “We have very different parenting styles, but it never affected us that much. When we were traveling, though, it was harder to work out.” But, he adds, “You develop patience on a much deeper level.”

Craig James says his kids had a tough time when their friends from home would communicate with them by e-mail or on Facebook. “They could see what their classmates were doing and it hurt. My daughter was supposed to be starting high school and she was very connected to her friends.”

When she missed her first homecoming dance, having boyfriends, or a new “Twilight” movie, he explains, “she would be depressed.... Never mind we’d been to Machu Picchu that day, when there was a party she had missed.”

In April, during a week when the Podlesny fam-

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ONLINE: Betsy and Warren Talbot at [www.marriedwithluggage.com](http://www.marriedwithluggage.com)



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WARREN AND BETSY TALBOT

At the Florialis Generica (left), a flower sculpture in Buenos Aires that opens at daylight and closes at dusk, Warren and Betsy Talbot leap for joy. After spotting some penguins and seals at Neko Bay in Antarctica, the couple posed for their own nature shot (above).

ily was traveling in Texas, and the wind was blowing at 70 miles per hour, they got on each other’s nerves, says Danielle. In fact they had to reschedule their interview for this story to change a blown tire, the third one that week. The windy conditions made it impossible for the family to get out and explore. “It was frustrating, and we were feeling cooped up,” she says.

For Dee Andrews, the toughest time came about six weeks into her trip, when they were setting up in Spain. “It became stressful and tedious. You’re trying to deal with the phone company, get Internet service, buy groceries, only you’re doing it in a foreign language and culture. I was living the same life only in a different place,” she says.

Dee recalls a night in Barcelona when her youngest daughter was under the bed crying because she missed her dog and wanted to go home. In hindsight, she believes those challenges were good: “We pushed ourselves to do new things. I think it made

us stronger, happier, and healthier.”

And that sentiment – that these trips were well worth navigating the difficulties – is nearly universal. Rainer tells how, after his children toured Bhutan, a Buddhist enclave in the Himalayas, his youngest son began building little shrines in the hotel rooms where the family was staying. “Visiting Bhutan was the least kid-friendly thing we did, and yet my younger son was really drawn into it – the customs, the culture, and the aesthetic. It was such a surprise to us,” he says.

The “most amazing” experience for Craig was a family feast in Cambodia. Their driver invited them to dinner at his home, near Phnom Penh.

“He lived in a shantytown, and his house was brick with dirt floors. We walked in, and his wife had prepared this amazing dinner for us. A dozen neighbors were there. We ate on a slatted bed that doubled as their dining table. It was the most amazing experience for all of us, to see this kind of generosity,” he recounts.

Craig says he got to know the kids in a way that

stationary, suburban life in Silver Spring, Md. didn’t allow: “We talked a lot about our family history and about ourselves. In our regular lives, most conversations were about logistics or instruction, from us as adults to our children. When we were traveling, we had the space for a different kind of conversation, about big ideas. It was like conversations you might have in a college dorm room.”

Ann and Doug Brown found that being together so much, especially in a place where everyone wasn’t just like them, helped her children “come out of themselves” and be comfortable around different kinds of people. They are self-assured but less self-centered, she says, than typical kids their age. Ann’s son, Henry Wyatt, 9, told her the months spent on the boat were the best of his life.

“Being able to fish every day, gather seashells, go to really secluded beaches on the Sea of Cortez for weeks on end was heaven for Henry,” says Ann. “The real adjustment for him will be if and when we emerge back in the States.”

#### TOUGH TO COME HOME

And that transition – back to the routine, stationary lives these families left behind – is “the hardest part,” says Cohen. “All the banalities and the real-life stuff comes back. And it’s tedious.”

At the end of their adventure, says Craig James, his wife was especially sad and emotional. She, more than anyone else in the family, “really understood what this moment in our lives meant. She knew that a chapter was ending and it would never be like that again. When we came back, it’s not like everything was different. In fact, things were remarkably the same.”

But the changes revealed themselves over time, especially in how open-minded they had all become about the world and themselves.

“My children are better citizens now because of our trip, and when they talk of future plans, it always includes travel. My daughter is going to El Salvador this summer to do a public service project and I might not have let her go if we hadn’t had this experience,” says Craig. “But now I know it’s a good thing, not something to be afraid of.” ■

The James family – (at left, l. to r.) Craig, Caroline, Conor, and Dani – at Machu Picchu in the Peruvian Andes. Dani (far left) and her friend Martha Kruger smeared Dead Sea mud on their faces at the En Gedi Spa near Masada, in Israel.



ONLINE: Dani and Craig James at <http://thewideworld.com>

COURTESY OF THE JAMES FAMILY