



Text and photos by
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My qualifications

The *SMA News* team is fully aware that there are couples out there with four, five or maybe even more kids! It's just a matter of convenience for me to share my family's experience, since the mental trauma of relocating to France for nine months with three kids under six years old (including a newborn) is still pretty fresh. In the past seven years, we have travelled with one child, then two, and recently three; to Bali, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, France, the US and Canada.

Plan and prepare

I aim to be meticulous and to always plan thoroughly. I did my research and read various blogs of travelling mums, noting the different requirements in preparation for first-time flyers versus frequent flyers. I did mental step-by-step rehearsals of what hubby and I would need to do from the moment we leave the house to arriving at our destination, and then back. We dressed and packed accordingly. We anticipated problems and circumvented them. It's much like preparing for surgery: read the textbooks, think about each step of the surgery and assist (or practise on a simulator), all before actually doing one!

Back when we only had one child, that first trip out with a newborn was an experience. We learnt how to prepare the diaper bag, manage spit-ups and tantrums, where to change diapers in the absence of a changing room, how to feed the baby (breastfeeding tips can take an entire chapter), and even how much formula and hot water to pack. Practise, practise, practise – take a trip with your kid(s) and I don't mean a trip out of the country but just to the nearby mall; figure out how much to bring in your diaper bag. For first-time parents, it might feel a little overwhelming – as though you needed to bring everything. With more experience, you will find your own threshold of what is comfortable. When packing for kids of different ages, you will need to figure out what snacks, entertainment (if any) and how many diapers of the respective sizes to bring!

For air travel, the additional challenge of liquid restrictions is very real. Do spend some time to read up and clarify on airline vs country restrictions (ie, "reasonable" amounts of formula powder, prescription medicines and hand sanitisers). Even while 100% breastfeeding, I would still

pack some formula on board just in case stress/dehydration decreases supply, or if we encounter any opposition to breastfeeding. I was comfortable with asking for the milk bottle filled with warm water to the needed level – I have read on blogs where the parents would buy bottled water, and then ask the staff to warm up via a hot water bath.

Actual execution

During your trips to malls, staycations or travels to nearby countries, assess the energy levels of your children and their reactions to the stress of travelling and/or changes in environment. Also monitor your own energy and reactions!

Figure out if your diaper bags and logistics are adequate, under- or over-supplied.

You should also be ready to adjust accordingly to each child's needs. My inquisitive child loves new experiences – all we needed to do was tell him what we had planned for the day and what to expect, briefly, and he would embrace and find joy in the day's activities. Even during his "terrible twos" or "threenager" year, we did not have any issues with him.

For the picky child, he would have terrible inconsolable meltdowns that could last hours (one has to experience it to believe it); we have tried all the tricks in the book but to no avail. There was one terrible flight where he wailed non-stop for four hours. Two stewardesses, the chief stewardess and three concerned aunties came up to offer parenting advice. After a while, we took turns pretending the kid was not ours. Thankfully, he seems to have outgrown that phase.





The biggest challenge for us to date was the flight to France. It was for my husband's Health Manpower Development Programme stint; I had just delivered our third son five weeks prior to departure. Thankfully, my mother agreed to come with us and we managed to complete all the visa paperwork in time. The kids were then one month old, under two years, and five-and-a-half years. What this meant was having three types of diapers, two types of snacks, and a fair amount of formula on standby. Clothing had to be loose and comfortable. I was five weeks post-delivery... the flabby tummy, the uncomfortable perineum, breastfeeding-related problems (the mummies will understand!), long flights, transit, going through immigration and security checks were no fun at all.

In total, there were three adults, three kids, five luggage bags (including backpacks), one carrier and one pram. We prepared for various permutations of who takes care of which child, in which device, and how to physically handle the luggage. Child safety was also foremost in our minds.

Thankfully, the immigration checkpoints were smooth – all stations allowed us to step forth as a family unit with the exception of my mum, but once I explained that she didn't speak English, I could accompany her through.



People often tell me that travelling with kids will get easier and easier as they get older, and to treasure this period before they become teenagers and would rather die than be seen with me! I will definitely keep this in mind – meanwhile, I'm happy to just do local day trips!

Legend

1. CJ (3 years) is happy studying the safety evacuation plan on the aeroplane
2. CJ (3 years) entertains himself with cardboard toy train on a long train ride
3. Memorable trip to Paris Disneyland; thank goodness for my mum! CL (3 years) and CS (6 months) are fearfully mesmerised by Mickey
4. CJ (4 years) helping me with the pram, with CL (9 months) in carrier
5. CJ (3 years) – clearly a seasoned traveller even at a young age

Short notes

- The age of the child matters: newborn, infant, toddler, pre-schooler; different physical, emotional and logistical needs (eg, food scissors, separate food, kids' utensils).
- Use of carrier or pram: is the location pram-friendly, or are there rocky terrains, many steps or large old cobblestones?
- Poop emergency, leaking diapers: wet wipes, new diapers, disposal bag, hand sanitiser. Change of clothes for child and adults. Or failing that, dark coloured clothes and perfume.
- Tantrums: toys, titbits, lots of patience staying calm and not whacking the child, thick skin and a sense of humour. My boys respond well to toilet humour and a fart-sound always diffuses tension. As mentioned, thick skin is needed when passers-by give disgusted looks.
- Safety: kids getting kidnapped or lost, risk of forced separation from child at certain borders: The kids had stickers/ temporary tattoos with our names and contact details, and we wrote on the inside of their clothes. We brought along copies of their birth certificates. Always one adult had full attention on the kids.
- Pack common medicines (Panadol, Piriton, etc) and appropriate clothing for the weather: layers, socks/hats/ mittens/swimming stuff. Singapore has spoiled us. We slop everywhere in T-shirts/shorts/slippers!
- Physical problems in-flight: ear blocks leading to inconsolable crying; try to time feeds with take-off and landing. Try to time the flight with your kids' sleep cycles. There is a safety rule about having to use an infant seat belt when there is turbulence, so we have to wake up the baby and lift out of the cot. Just do it and deal with the crying.
- Hygiene: wet wipes to wipe down every surface; some parents recommend doing so for every flight, but we didn't do this strictly.
- Packing list: I have a standard template of all possible things I need to pack, categorised by child, and check-in vs carry-on. Just personalise for each trip, and you will never miss a thing. At worst, buy whatever supplies needed! ♦

