EDUCATIONAL ECO-TRAVEL 3 WAYS!

WHY DO WE LOVE TO TRAVEL? IT HELPS US TO LEARN ABOUT WHO WE ARE AND THE WORLD THAT WE LIVE IN. IT HELPS US TO GROW, TO SEE THROUGH NEW EYES, AND TO APPRECIATE HOME ANEW. TRAVEL CAN BE ONE OF THE GREATEST TEACHERS. HERE ARE THREE WAYS TO LEARN AND GROW WITH YOUR BROOD IN TOW...

# 1 Learn Gratitude: The School of Thanks

I want my kids to know how good they’ve got it. Don’t you all?

Like most middle-class parents in Canada, I parent with a lot more. I obsess about their educational experiences, rush off to the doctor the first sign of a rash, and worry about which summer camp will be the most enriching.

I know that my parenting worries are a luxury. I also know that there is a very real risk to the kind of parenting I do. My children are more likely to grow up self-absorbed or, worse, have so few real problems that they create their own very real problems: addictions, violence, extreme preoccupation with themselves.

So, I did what any ‘national’ person would do: I took all my children ages 5 and 1.2— to the developing world. I had a few main goals in going. I wanted my children to learn to appreciate how fortunate we are to live in North America. I wanted them to understand that this is not the way that most people live easy access to clean water, to consistent electricity, to healthy food. I also wanted them to really learn another language.

I chose a little town called San Marcos La Laguna in southwestern Guatemala for three reasons:

1. I had friends going at the same time who spoke Spanish so I wasn’t overly intimidated about my lack of fluency in that language. (No hablo español.)

2. It is sunny and warm and dry there when Canada is at its most brutal.

3. Most importantly, they have an unusually diverse and bilingual Waldorf school (Escuela Caracol) with a mix of local Mayans and a strong international community.

So, plans were made. We traveled with three other families all coming from other parts of the world. For all four of us, it was a relatively spur-of-the-moment decision. (For me, three months of planning is spontaneous.)

It was an experiment. Was it a success?

When my eldest daughter, Chipper, the electricity went out for a week just when I needed to send work to my agent, and when my husband finally arrived after 2.5 months gone and my baby burst into tears and wouldn’t let him out of her sight again (not even to use the restroom), it wasn’t clear.

I had to boil water just to do dishes, hand wash dirty diapers in a sink outside, share my house with scorpions, spiders, and giant ants and share my yard with tiny bitting flies, clinkers, and the wandering dogs. My friends back home talked to each other with comments like, ‘Is she crazy?’ and ‘What is the doing to these kids?’

Overall, it was an overwhelmingly positive experience.

It was my daughter who first found the path to the school: a rocky little trail at a crossroads with a gravel road going one direction and a line of coffee-bean side going another. The rocky little trail cut straight up the valley and after a 200-metre scramble up, a little hobbist door appeared on the left of the path. With my five-year-old in hand and my baby on my back, we entered into a garden courts with trees and flowers and chickens and little pathways running between it all. Strangely, there wasn’t a single Chelsiot...

# 2 Learn to Love Your Environment: Out to Learn

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Out to Learn is a vision to provide students and the public with a better understanding of ecosystems, natural resources, and the stewardship principles to sustain them for future generations. A division of Gradiva Education Limited—a Canadian ecological consulting firm—Out To Learn offers experiential environmental educational programs in Halton, Ontario but can bring what they do to any facility—maybe even one near you! With expert instructors and programs that are tailored to a wide variety of audiences “including elementary, secondary and college students, citizens, and professionals,” their programs are offered through residential and outreach packages, workshops, day camps and field investigations. Program selection includes: Earthquakes, Ecology, Biology, Chemistry, Geology, and Outdoor Recreation. All look like a hand-on good time!

When we had the good fortune to check in with these folks, we were able to tour one of their lovely outdoor learning centres (a fish hatchery) located, all about owls (and the cute and fuzzy treats that they like to eat), took a look at identifying different animals by their tracks, and even got to play with poop… fake animal poop, that’s it. Now what kid wouldn’t like that?

Co-founder and wildlife biologist Barte Martin is also the owner and operator of Yours Outdoors, a company that offers unique learning vacations and outdoor adventures that explore the rich natural and cultural heritage of Halton County...