

OPINION

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Contributed photos

Emma McNeill relished the trip through Europe, time, museums, art galleries and graveyards, the different languages and cuisine, even the missed flights.



Emma Does Europe

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My husband and I planned to go to Europe this summer and had started saving a few years ago to do so.

When he died 18 months ago, I had to decide whether to carry on with some of our plans including this trip to visit family in England, Northern Ireland and France, and to take Emma.

When Emma got home from college on the Island in June, I explained to her the details of the trip. I think she was excited, but it was hard to tell if she understood the amount of travelling I had wrapped into our 13-day voyage.

When her reaction was less than enthusiastic, I wondered if I had done the right thing in asking her to experience this many cities in such a short period of time. I wondered if she would understand the thousands of years of history, and whether she would be interested in our own 700 years of history in Belfast.

Would she find it fascinating to go through hundreds of years of our ancestors' pasts as I do? How would she react to my great grandfather's church visit in Drumbo? And would she be able to keep up?

I came up with the answer — how would any of my children react? They would be happy to have their parent to themselves and to be able to travel anywhere doing anything other than going to school or working for a few weeks.

So, with some concerns, a carry-on bag each, lots of great books, great attitude and a good set of ear phones, we were off to London. The next few days were a bit of a blur of planes, trains, the tube and walking in the countryside in England, yet Emma loved every bit of it. I didn't have to worry about her keeping up as she often led the way.

She loved the tour of London on the outdoor top section of the double-decker bus as we hurtled along with the thousands of other tourists on a hot London day. She was the perfect lady taking tea with our family.

We had both slept for a few hours and even with my concept of "jumping" right into the next time zone, she jumped in beautifully. She had no problem understanding people with an English accent nor did anyone have any problem understanding Emma.

Two days later, we landed in Belfast, and were taken to my cousin's Victorian, eight-bedroom several hundred year old home and had tea in the dining room with our cousins there.

It could have been intimidating other than the fact that these cousins are welcoming and tremendous hosts. Emma chatted between sips of tea and bites of delicious foods and explained our trip so far. After that, we were off to my great grand-



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father's church and escorted through the lovely building by the caretaker who gave all sorts of details on our family as did our cousins. Emma listened intently and took it all in.

The next few days we experienced our ancestors' areas of living, spent time in graveyards, looking at family plots and taking in all the McNeill history.

Emma understood what everyone said even with the thickest of accents, something many people who have not grown up having a collection of accents around them can't do. I was impressed.

If Emma got tired she told me and we organized a nap. I think that happened once as we were dashing through the green Irish countryside chattering away about our families as cousins who have never met do. If Emma was sleepy she simply closed her eyes, whether in a car, train, subway or plane. She took advantage of what can be boring travel time by napping and therefore really was never overtired. And she figure it out on her own. Smart!

We said goodbye to our Belfast family, and boarded yet another plane, to France. I wondered if Emma would have a hard time in France.

We landed in Frankfurt thanking God we had taken only carry-on luggage as we ran through the airport with only 17 minutes to catch the bus we had booked to Strasbourg. We were lucky that I speak a bit of German, am OK in French and that that airport is well organized.

From then on the main language was French and although I struggled through sometimes, Emma was never worried. We had family in Strasbourg and their first language is English, but outside the language is French so that is what we spoke. Maybe not the best French, but we understood and were understood. Emma immediately got into her very polite responses to typical questions and did not skip a beat.

If someone did not understand her or her they, she would ask what they were saying and we would sort out what she wanted to respond with. The French were extremely welcoming.

My husband used to quote "fish and family go off after a few days." so off we went

after three days on the fast train to Paris. We had never been to Paris before and did not have any family there to lean on or help us with a translation. We were two gals on our own in one of the most amazing cities in the world.

After we got to our hotel in the Bastille area, we strolled down one street window shopping and taking in the scenes and smells of the city. We found a little Italian café people watched and enjoyed a leisurely evening. People watching is fascinating anywhere, but in Paris, it's truly amazing.

The next day we had arranged for a tour in a convertible, an orange Citroen. Although this little deux cheveaux (two horse) was a lovely 35-year-old vehicle and fun, it kept stalling. That would be fine in a small town but Paris is large, the streets small and the drivers wild, but it actually added to our experience.

Emma took it all in stride as we learned about the Napoleonic years, why gold was emblazoned on certain items, which bridge was which. We saw the Louvre and L'arc de Triumph and many other areas, which was like taking a history class again.

Emma loved it. Hair flying through the convertible of sorts, honking horns, the smell of smoke and diesel yet she smiled through it all.

On our last day there we decided to go for a walk (which ended up being 12 kilometres) to take in the Lafayette shopping experience. We spent the day roaming around shoppes and boutiques en route to Lafayette and had a lovely day to do so.

Emma decided what she wanted to get for gifts out of her euros and for herself and pretty much completed the transactions independently. If she did not understand, she simply asked me what they were asking and I attempted to help. Then, with pride, she gathered up her items and change and said "merci bien" once again, and off we went.

Because of a small strike, we left Paris a few hours late to Toronto and missed both our connections.

Although we ended up travelling for over 33 hours, Emma took my racing through airports to get a standby ticket, eating erratically or not being able to, sleeping when she could. We finally did get home eight hours late.

If you ask Emma what her favourite part of our trip was, she will tell you "shopping" in London, Belfast, Strasbourg and Paris. With different languages, different accents and different money I realized once again that everyone is different and viva la difference.

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