

Can your baby become a road warrior?

by Petula Brown

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Travel with children anywhere can be a challenge, but packing up an infant for a trip to the big city can be a true adventure. How can you prepare you little one? How do you prepare yourself? Petula Brown's experience traveling as a new mother with a three-month-old to Chicago from Michigan provides lessons in planning, creativity and fun.

Lesson #1 – Do Trial Runs

Running errands can be a fascinating activity for the little one, but stop-and-go car travel is not the same as a road trip. If you want to try minimizing rest stops to every couple of hours, make sure the baby is used to the car seat and car movement over an extended period.

Visiting friends and relatives within a 1-2 hour drive time is a great way to help her get accustomed to road travel. The practice runs also help you gauge the baby's travel style. Is he a quick sleeper? Does she get fidgety easily? Is the baby a fan of your music preferences?

Trial runs can also help you adjust to a variety of scenarios, like roadside stops to retrieve Junior's favorite toy from the vehicle floor. While you may have conquered driving and eating at the same time, don't assume that you multi-task baby care and driving.

Lesson #2 – Confirm Your Assumptions about the Destination

Although your little one may be the perfect traveler, a road trip involves more than mom and baby. But what you bring may vary depending on where you go.

Before packing up the entire nursery and your luggage for any road trip, make sure to check on what items or services may be available at your destination.

In many hotels, cribs can be arranged as part of the accommodations, but check on the room's baby-friendliness and be prepared to bring some items if necessary. In a city with a good transportation

system, bringing a baby carrier to use on buses and trains may be easier to manage than a stroller. For high use items (diapers, formula, etc.) it may be more convenient to buy them as needed at the destination. In some areas, rental services may be available. Check such Web sites as <http://www.babysaway.com/> and <http://www.thenewparentsguide.com/baby-equipment-rentals.htm> to help you lighten the load even more.

Lesson #3 – Overestimate Rest Stop Time

The days of non-stop road travel are long gone with an infant in tow.

Fortunately, most rest stops have basic changing accommodations, but don't be surprised to find a wait. Even if accommodations are readily available, giving your little one additional stretch time out of the car seat with playtime or a jaunt around the rest stop helps minimize boredom for you while adding a new element of adventure for baby.

For alternatives to highway rest stops and gas stations, investigate whether malls, outlet centers or baby stores are on the route. They may provide more changing facilities, activity options and dining selections.

Lesson #4 – Make it More than a Twosome

If you have never traveled alone with a baby, having another trusted adult join the trip can provide great peace of mind. The second person can help out in countless ways, from splitting the drive time to occupying the baby on the road to helping maneuver luggage. Just make sure everyone is on the same page regarding what help to expect.

If you're traveling with Grandma, getting an extra hand for luggage-lugging is probably not likely, but she could occupy the little one from the back seat while you drive. A childless best friend may not jump at the chance to change diapers, but splitting drive time could be doable.

To help make the trip of interest to him/her, make sure to include baby-free time to pursue local

activities. Know a friend with a baby? Try making the trip a foursome. You may be able to share some items (toys, etc.), but double check that your vehicle has enough space for double of the necessities (car seats, etc.).

Lesson #5 – Decide on Activities, then Drop Half of Them

If you're accustomed to loading up on activities, be sure to prioritize must-do items and allow more time for activities that may be no-brainer tasks back home. Getting a baby dressed, fed and asleep in a new setting is bound to take more effort.

If possible, plan your first day at the location as a transition day with no planned activities other than getting your little one adjusted to the sights, sounds, feels and smells of the new location. For an older child, seeking out local child-friendly activities could help make the trip a treat for everyone. The Web can be a goldmine for visitors looking options.

For the Chicago area, three Web sites of interest are <http://www.walkabyebaby.com/activities.html>, <http://chicago.babyzone.com/> and <http://www.radiantmother.com/childactivities.htm>.

Lesson #6 – Don't Forget the Travel Basics

Baby or no baby, practicing certain travel basics can help smooth out potential rough spots. Invest in a check-up of your vehicle before venturing on the road.

Include a roadside emergency kit (first aid, jumper cables, flashlight, blanket, work gloves, gasoline container, spare tire, etc.) in your vehicle to cover unexpected situations. Obtain weather and construction information prior to your trip. Bring detailed directions and area maps for reference. Include healthy (and economical) snacks in your travels by bringing your own food instead of depending on rest stop convenience items. Check that your cell phone service will be available at all points on your route or buy calling cards to avoid high pay phone rates. Carry credit cards or traveler's checks instead of large amounts of cash.

By combining thoughtful planning, some flexibility and a positive attitude, your road trip can be a fun and memorable experience.