



BY TERENCE LOOSE

TOUR OF DADDY

It's family vacation time! And you thought your job was hard. Dads, get ready for two weeks harder than boot camp.

I have been food poisoned on four continents. I have sailed across a stormy ocean in a small, leaky boat. I have been loaded into the back of my own Toyota pickup by four angry men wielding AK-47s.

None of it was as trying as travel with my doe-eyed little girl.

And yes, this did come as a bit of a shocker. I assumed family vacations would be just that: vacations, for all of us. I assumed the sleepless nights, the survival tactics and the AK-47s were all a thing of the past.

I was right about the AK-47s. So far.

It took a while to figure this out, though. Those first few years, I actually looked forward to vacations. I worked my 50 weeks with those two off as the beacon of escape, then booked the aisle seat and bought the flowered shirt. I saw vacations as the time to turn the BlackBerry off, grab a cold one and enjoy a little "family time."

Then I woke up and smelled the diaper bombs. I was a dad now, and survival depended on my not thinking of vacations as relaxing getaways but seeing them more as 10-day missions into foreign lands, overcoming impossible obstacles and enduring major trauma in order to liberate my child's cultural education. As mission leader, that was my sole priority. And since I am not an ex-Navy Seal with the testosterone and biceps of Rambo, being the mission leader was going to hurt. A lot.

In fact, simply leaving the hotel room before noon now requires military-level planning, the focus of a bomb diffuser and the ability to overcome pre-teen guerilla tactics that the Viet Cong would be proud of.

Then the real work starts.

By midday, I'm whining more than my daughter and nostalgic for the AK-47 days. But then, just when it seems that all hope is lost and I can't

muster the strength for another family day in “paradise,” a primal voice echoes out from the recesses of my mind with a rallying cry: “Damn it, Daddy, this is the your little girl’s world view on the line, so man-up, pack the squeaky toy and get out there. Remember, it’s not a vacation; it’s an adventure!”

Preparing for Battle

My daughter turned one in the Caribbean, two in Tahiti, three in Belize, and four in Hawaii. At five she was offered a credit card from American Airlines.

You’d think she’d learn how to pack lighter. I, on the other hand, pack lighter than a commando, taking only those things needed for my survival. No longer do I bring the dive gear, the reading material, the surfboard. This is vacation, after all; there’s simply no time for all that fun stuff. No, my gear now consists of a few shirts, shorts and, if I’m feeling particularly needy, a pair of socks. All in all, it takes up a square foot or so. My wife does the same.

Of course, we still end up bringing five suitcases, mostly filled with stuffed animals, 23 pink dresses, 120 DVDs, a personal DVD player... basically, the idea is to transport our daughter’s room to the tropics so that we avoid forgetting that one item that will create a meltdown more destructive than Chernobyl. (Hint: There is no way to obtain a singing Elmo doll in Bora Bora. Trust me on this.)

Delivery to the War Zone

Next comes the plane ride, which used to be a pleasant thing, before I was a dad. Kick back, catch up on some reading, take in a movie, and get served drinks.

Now, I don’t bother carrying on anything but Tylenol, unless I can score some morphine. I will not be reading. I will not be watching movies. I may be drinking, heavily, but the other, childless passengers, i.e., the ones who have no idea what I’m going through, tend to frown on this. It also cuts down on my reaction time, which I’ll get to in a moment.

What I will be doing is wrestling, cajoling and generally pampering my daughter.

In fairness, my daughter is a great air traveler. But then, I would be too if

plane rides meant five hours of videos, juice service and hurling peanuts at fellow passengers until they punch my father (remember the reaction time comment?). All that and plenty of leg room, too!

And if you are wondering who actually watches those video monitors with constant progress updates, it’s us dads. I’m sure they were the brainstormers of flight attendants sick of answering the query on our minds from take-off to landing: “Are we there, yet?” So, when you hear someone cry in a manic, joyful expression, “Look, hon, only four more hours!” you know where to look. Just watch out for flying peanuts.

Local Transport

Once you hit the theater of operations, you’ll need to be mobile. Usually that means a rental car. Correction: Humvee. All those Elmo dolls demand seating. Of course, if you are like me, you have decided to make this mission even tougher by signing on a yacht or ship and thus will need to take buses and taxis whenever on land. The good news: You will gain a new love and respect for New York cabbies. The bad news: You will gain a new love and respect for New York cabbies. In fact, based on field experience, I have come to the opinion that the Third World is not where New York taxi drivers are from, but it is where they are sent to work out their aggressive driving issues. One prime example came on a small Caribbean island where the vibe was “totally mellow, mon.”

Until we took a cab ride.

Our goal was a relaxing beach 20 minutes away. Two minutes into the ride, our goal was mere survival; or at least a quick, painless death. The “taxi” was a minivan that, because of the battery of massive speakers blasting 50 Cent, now sat only four. Legally. Unfortunately, the driver and his cohort, who stood at the open sliding door spitting on would-be passengers who declined his solicitations, seemed uninterested in legal technicalities. So we were packed in with eight other tourists tighter than a clown car. Only no one was laughing. I death-gripped my baby while trying to signal my wife to jump out the door if the van slowed to less than 60. Chances were that we’d miss the pave-

ment entirely and fall the hundred feet or so of roadside cliff to the water. And those odds sounded better than staying put. But our opportunity never came and in the end, we did make that beach. Deaf, pale and wobbly, but alive.

A few hours later, when we had to return... well, let’s just say it was a long, long walk back. And getting spit on didn’t help.

Combat is the Only Real Gear Test

For that same cruise through the Caribbean, I purchased the \$200 Deuter Kid Comfort Child Carrier, a backpack that held a child, figuring a stroller wasn’t much good aboard a giant sailboat at sea or on islands that still sported dirt roads. “Plus,” I told my wife, “a little workout on vacation is a good thing and with this bundle on my back, we’ll get some daddy-daughter bonding time.”

The backpack was comfortable, fairly light and since it also came with water bottle holders and large pockets that could hold food, toys and a guidebook, it left my hands free to snap photos. As I marched around our yard with my daughter in her new perch, it was everything I hoped it would be.

Then we got to the boat. Let me explain a little something about 19th-century windjammer replicas they neglect to mention in the brochures: First, there are more stairs to climb than a Chinese high-rise; and second, they rock. Only subtly, of course, so that the average passenger hardly notices, but for me, a dad with 40-pounds of baby and toys strapped to his back, time on the good ship *Royal Clipper* imitated a level-12 StairMaster workout while shouldering a sloshing five-gallon water tank.

The ship did prepare me for sightseeing on the picturesque island of Grenada, where some inconsiderate non-dad had placed every single sight worth seeing at the peak of a tall, steep hill. The good news was that in a very short time the backpack was lighter thanks to my drinking all our water and eating all our food. The bad news was that we were soon at the top of a hill with no food, water or guidebook (it had “mistakenly” been dropped half way up the hill).

I took no pictures, either. I was too

weak to hold the camera up. So my wife handled that. My personal favorite is the one at Fort George, with my daughter on my back, smiling and bonding with me by playing my head like a bongo. I appear sweaty, tired and fingering the bullet holes left from the execution of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop with a look that can only be described as envy.

Friendly Fire

My daughter is a social butterfly and her favorite thing to do on vacation – besides bonking me on the head with... well, anything – is to make new friends. And even now, when I know better, I can't help but think it is a reprieve, a time when she and her newfound friend will play together blissfully while I catch up on what my wife has been doing during our family vacation together.

Then, mysteriously, suddenly, and most definitely for a long time, her new friend's parents disappear.

"They said you'd play with me," Connor, my new child, will say and immediately blast me in the face with a high-powered water gun. Then the bonking starts, as do the requests for \$12 resort sundaes and hot dogs. If I'm truly lucky, Connor will remember his room number and at least I will get paid for my services. In hot dogs. A lot of hot dogs.

Finally, sometime around sunset, Connor's parents will reappear, looking relaxed and oiled and exactly like the resort brochure promised I would look.

"We would have been back earlier," they'll say, "but that spa is just so wonderful. We hope you don't mind."

By this time I am usually only half conscious and stretched out on a chaise lounge like a fallen soldier. This is not lost on Connor's parents, either, who will say, as Connor gives me one last blast in the face, "You know, you look like you should visit the spa yourself."

You Are Merely a Pawn

Or, more accurately, a pool toy.

I used to like pools. They offered a nice break from the beach and somehow a chaise lounge in the sun can make even Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* an upbeat read. Now, however, I fear pools more than an overweight cat.

This is because they mean only one

thing: eight hours of playing motorboat, rocket launcher and Shamu while receiving a third-degree sunburn and slowly slipping into hypothermia. Remember that time you saw some nutball wear a wet-suit in a Hawaiian resort's heated pool? Yes, that was me. Now you know why.

I do still bring a massive tome, however, preferably hardback. Not for reading, of course, but it makes a great towel weight against the "balmy" trade wind, which somehow feels like an arctic gale after eight hours in a pool taking friendly fire.

Finding Sustenance

First, if you are going "native" in your dining, hoping to try that wonderful little place all the maniacal cabbies eat at, forget it. They are all out now because here's a news flash: the rest of the world smokes. Heavily. So unless I want my daughter to have a trucker's voice by the end of week one, we stick to the hotels. This means three times the cost and a nice table right at the end of the buffet station where people routinely ask me to pass them a fork.

But that's okay. Having given up the idea of dining for pleasure long ago, I now see food purely as something needed for survival. Essentially, I'm just there to cram down some carbs. Besides, every so often, I get my revenge when my daughter hurls a ketchup-laden fry at a hostess.

There is one slim chance at a nice night out, however. The trick is to order room service for Leila before we go to dinner. If all works out, she falls fast asleep after eating due to her long day of beating the crap out of a defenseless pool toy. Then we plop her in a booth with a blanket and enjoy our meal. At least if I don't fall asleep before the entrée. Being a pool toy is exhausting.

Jungle Fever

Ever see those movies where the hero is about to get lucky with the sexy team member when, suddenly, screaming and explosions cut everything short right when it's about to go past a PG-13 rating? Welcome to the romance portion of your vacation. That's all I better say on that.

Medic!

That's right, those screams and explo-

sions mean one thing: my daughter is ill. She has yet to beat my food poisoning record, but all that pool and ocean time have resulted in ear and throat infections in every corner of the world. (The infections are in her ears and throat; she is in the corner of the world.) And screaming. Lots of that.

The worst came in Belize, in a place that was so pristine it had crystal blue waters, no airports and few roads. Apparently, bacteria loved it too. Doctors didn't. So, standing with a crying child in my arms, on a dock – we were about to set sail for eight days on a chartered private yacht – I was told by a nice local man with zero irony in his voice that he knew a very good doctor in the capital.

"You could be there by Tuesday," he said.

For the next three hours, as my wife and I walked miles of dirt roads and back alleys searching for a clinic that seemed more and more like an ancient Mayan myth, I actually yearned for the \$200 Deuter Kid Comfort Child Carrier.

Then, like a palace showing itself through the trees, it appeared. Okay, not really a palace. More like a shack. In fact, it was a structure few SoCal locals would park their cars in and I instantly feared it would not cure, but worsen our daughter's condition.

But as I've found in most of my Third World travels, the quality of the people inside made up for the failings of their surroundings. The doctor was nice, professional, soothing, and even wrote a prescription, which we filled after seeing another three hours of dirt roads on the way to the pharmacy.

Why We Serve

This is a question I ask during most of my bruising and battering vacation. Then, back at the relative comfort of my day job, I'll thumb through the photos of my daughter smiling wide as she swims with a sea turtle, learns to hula or bonks me on the head. And then, like a clearing wind sweeping away the smoke of a charred battlefield, all my doubts fade away and I'm already planning the next trip. Not for the glory or the honor or even the free hot dogs. But because being a father really is the toughest job you'll ever love. And while it's true, it's no vacation, it's one hell of an adventure.☺