

Travels with Mommy



Give that little girl a handkerchief / Geben Sie diesem kleinen Mädchen ein Schnupftuch / Donnez un mouchoir a cette petite fille / Date un fazzoletto a quella ragazzina.

—Karl Baedeker, *The Traveller's Manual of Conversations*, 1862

So what if you protested against the Vietnam War when you were in college? Visiting the *Intrepid* Sea-Air-Space Museum, on its aircraft carrier anchored in the Hudson, may tap surprising wells of patriotic sentiment as your kids explore their innate fascination with guns and vehicles.

—Holly Hughes, *Frommer's New York City with Kids*, 2001

In 1862, the well-known travel guide writer Karl Baedeker published the sixteenth edition of his phrasebook. Addressed to male travelers, the phrasebook tutored Mr. Sophisticate to attend to his female companions' needs in English, German, French, and Italian. "Steward, will you assist this lady to go on deck, she is very unwell?" "Can we get a pony or a donkey for Madame, to mount up that hill?" As for Madame, Baedeker gave her phrases for but one activity: making her toilet. "Clean that looking-glass a little," she learned to command a maid in four languages, "it is quite dull." All was not lost, because then as now, it was possible to salvage any day with good hair: "Come, make haste. Plait my hair, and make the curls; for I want to go out."

With or without men and maids, and with or without Baedeker, women and children have always traveled from country to city and back again. In early modern Europe, cities as well as country towns consistently served as appealing

destinations to travelers, male and female. Members of the ruling classes with roots in landed estates would head to cities in winter for diversion. By the eighteenth century, European capital cities offered visitors clubs, coffee houses, theaters, operas, shops, balls, and assemblies. The fashionable could expect to see and be seen as they promenaded along grand boulevards or through landscaped parks. They would make reverse pilgrimages in spring and summer. Nobles, especially those attached to the pope or a king's court, would escape the perceived pressures of town for the comforts of country retreats. Italians even coined a special word for this seasonal move into the countryside: *villeggiatura*.

As wealth expanded into merchant classes and relative peace descended on Europe at the close of the Napoleonic Wars, Europeans and Americans sought to follow the circuits nobles had for centuries made between city and country. By the 1830s, the newly rich bought their own country estates, while the majority sought to become "travelers," "tourists," and "excursionists," words all new to the nineteenth century.

Publishers rushed to take advantage of this relatively ill educated bunch, providing information (for a price) that would ensure smooth travel and good times. In London in 1836, John Murray produced his first guide, intended to educate and inform. Three years later, in 1839, Karl Baedeker followed suit. By 1840 in America, the Appleton Company began issuing guides featuring resort and countryside travel and provided information about big cities. British entrepreneur Thomas Cook organized European tours with temperance themes as early as 1841. After the Civil War, he took an American business partner and encouraged middling sorts in the U.S. to use his itineraries and guides to approximate the Grand Tour. At about the same time, Americans had access to fifteen-cent city guides and inexpensive travel magazines, including *Sunset*.

Social and cultural historians have posited that women and children largely went to the countryside, practicing a middle-class form of *villeggiatura*, arguing that travelers, especially women, wanted to escape from cities, which they viewed as unhealthy and corrupt. Although other kinds of evidence may well support assertions that women frequented country and seaside resorts more than they visited cities, the guides, themselves, don't bear out these presumptions.

Consider *New-York Scenes*, more chapbook than guidebook, first published in 1816. It used vignettes of city life to "entertain" and "instruct" children in early-nineteenth-century America. In addition to describing New York buildings and neighborhoods, it quoted liberally from the moralistic novel *Jack Halyard*, a story about two country boys new to the city. Jack's visits to courts and jails and his observations of the down-and-out taught young readers about the importance of telling the truth, not coveting "useless glitter," avoiding strong drink, and helping the poor, especially those burned out of their homes (fig.1).



Fig. 1. Destitute family in New York City. Frontispiece, *New-York Scene's* [sic]: Designed for the Entertainment and Instruction of City and Country Children (New York, 1833).

Almost in spite of itself, *New-York Scenes* also communicated excitement and delight about the city. If New York was pockmarked with sin and vice that would teach important lessons, it was also sprinkled with fascinating sites, especially for kids (fig.2). After detailing the “charming promenade fronting the Bay of New-York,” the little book posited that “children from the country would gaze with wonder at the numerous vessels, entering and leaving the harbor, and sailing in every direction. The steamboats, too, form an additional interest to view from this spot.”

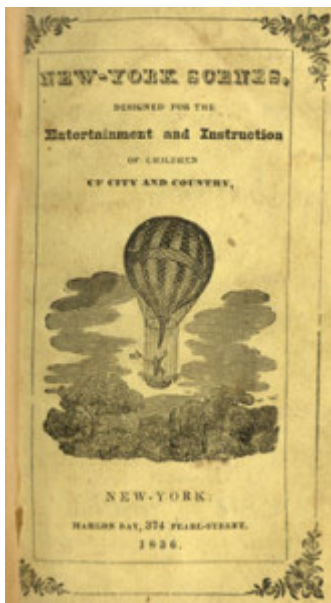


Fig. 2. Title page and frontispiece, *New-York Scene's* [sic]: Designed for the Entertainment and Instruction of City and Country Children.

Guides eventually picked up and capitalized on cities' potential to delight. By the late 1870s, guides mentioned a few pastimes as specifically well suited to women and children. Guides began to list carousels, circuses, pantomimes, and magic and marionette shows in conjunction with kids. Baedeker's

1876 *Paris* explained that both the *Theatre Miniature* and the *Funambules* were meant “for children.” Appleton’s 1876 *Illustrated Handbook of American Cities* did not single out zoos as especially good for kids, but it mentioned that the Philadelphia Zoological Gardens charged just ten cents for children and twenty-five cents for adults, acknowledging, at the very least, that parents and children might be touring together.

Even when mentions of children and women venturing to cities were few and far between, guidebooks included advertisements for hotels catering to the needs of traveling families. The Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York touted itself as “the best family hotel in the United States,” (fig.3) while the Windsor, located on Fifth Avenue between Forty-sixth and Forty-seventh Streets billed itself as having “elegant apartments, *en suite* for families, permanent or transient.” In New York in 1876, kids aged two through fourteen rode all “modes of conveyance” for a half-price fare, reported Appleton’s *Illustrated Handbook of American Cities*.



Fig. 3. Advertisement for the Fifth Avenue Hotel, N.Y. (“The Best Family Hotel in the United States.”) in Appleton’s *Illustrated Hand-Book of American Cities; Comprising the Principal Cities in the United States and Canada, with Outlines of Through Routes, and Railway Maps* (New York, 1876).

The implication in such glimpses is that this sort of travel was the exception rather than the rule. Those planning trips needed to be reminded that not all establishments were, indeed, suitable for ladies and children. Baedeker’s 1899 guide to the United States and Mexico advanced prevailing attitudes towards travels with children, if not with women: “The seats in the American [rail] cars offer very limited room for two persons, and their backs are too low to afford any support to the head; a single crying infant or spoiled child annoys 60-70 persons instead of the few in one compartment.”

By the turn of the century, city guides began to report the existence of museums specifically targeted for children. Not focused on men or women, a 1917 guide to New York listed a “Children’s Museum” as a branch of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in Bedford Park. The museum, founded in 1899, included a “Busy Bee Room”—a prototype for “nature centers” everywhere—where children could categorize and label insects and plants as well as look after pets and fish.

After World War II, travel guides to cities made sure to list such serious enterprises, but they also acknowledged, like the writer describing train travel with children, that kids could be bratty. For instance, *Fodor’s* 1966 guide to New England chunked up each geographical region with sections on “industrial tours,” “historic sites,” “museums and galleries,” “shopping,” “what to do with the children,” and “hints to the motorist.”

One reason guidebooks began to emphasize children and their preferences doubtless had to do with changes in household staffing. In the late nineteenth century, families wealthy enough to visit cities took their maids or governesses to care for children, but by the 1950s and '60s, child care was the preserve of mothers and even fathers. *Hart's Guide to New York City* sheds light on an early phase of this shift. Perhaps Mom and Dad brought the kids to New York to explore, but they certainly did not wish to spend all of their time as a family. "The problem of how to care for Junior while you're doing the town is quite easily solved in New York City. Most hotels will secure baby sitters for you." Ever thorough, *Hart's* listed seven temporary childcare agencies, including "Bivins Nurses Registry Agency," which, the guidebook explained, was, literally, never closed. "Mrs. Bivins is a most pleasant woman, who has about fifty sitters on call, most of whom are practical nurses, and are especially skilled in handling infants . . . If necessary, a sitter will stay overnight."

Somewhere between 1964 and 1966, the competition between wanting to take children everywhere and wanting to park them with Mrs. Bivins settled out. The babysitting agencies went the way of the brachiosaur, and city guides focused on parents—specifically mothers—who would assume sole responsibility for making kids' recreational time meaningful. The emphasis, at this stage, was still on children and their entertainment, while, a quarter century later, that focus would settle on mothers, themselves.

In 1966, Bernice Chesler published *In and Out of Boston with Children*, which travel book specialists acknowledge as the first guide to make a city explicitly safe and fun for women and children. Every entry provided a kids-eye view of Boston, with running commentary about what would make life easier for the mother-in-charge. Chesler evaluated dining spots not for the quality of their cuisine but instead for their appeal to children—which had the biggest "gobs of whipped cream" or the best "half-scale mast of a clipper ship in the lobby." Chesler let travelers know how to enjoy historical sites and exhibits with kids ("The primitive homes with few rooms are a good introduction"), how to look at the city with kids ("While on foot, always notice the tops of buildings; often the upper portions have original architecture even though street floor renovations have been made"), and even how to walk the Freedom Trail with kids (do it backwards). Her focus was on the kids, themselves. How could adults—educated, inquisitive, babysitterless women—make sure that children had a good time?

Nearly a century and a half after Baedeker circulated its handy phrasebook, publishers began asking a slightly different question. How could totally liberated, sitterless women used to setting their own agendas have a good time with children? The very concept seemed oxymoronic. Guides such as *Frommer's New York City with Kids* extolled the virtues of bringing along children and encouraging them to set the itinerary, even if that meant making Mom and Dad go places they'd once considered politically incorrect. *Frommer's* author Holly Hughes explained that she initially concluded her "life as a Manhattanite was over" once she'd given birth, but eventually decided that, rather than taking

all the fun out of travel, kids actually enabled Baby Boomers—members of her audience who may have protested the Vietnam War—to experience cities more deeply and authentically, putting adults in touch with the “real” New York.

“We actually talk to passersby now—there’s no better way to strike up conversations with New Yorkers than by the simple virtue of having a baby strapped to your chest in a Snuggli,” she wrote. “Taxi drivers, most of them immigrants from far-flung foreign lands, teach us about their native countries and coach us to speak words in their own languages.”

No longer in need of phrasebooks to teach their men how to speak foreign languages to protect them, women are strapping on Baby and making nice with the cabbie. Who’s having a good time now?

Further Reading:

Readers interested in the history of tourism may want to consult Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (Oxford, 1999); Catherine Cocks, *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850-1915* (Berkeley, 2001); John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (Amherst, 1989); Alan Sillitoe, *Leading the Blind: A Century of Guidebook Travel 1815-1914* (London, 1995); and John Towner, *An Historical Geography of Recreation and Tourism in the Western World* (Chichester, 1996). I consulted a wide range of travel guides for this piece and quote from many, including *New-York Scenes: Designed for the Entertainment and Instruction of City and Country Children* (New York, 1833); *Appletons’ Illustrated Hand-Book of American Cities* (New York, 1876); Baedeker’s *Guides to Paris, Switzerland, Scotland, Canada, Palestine and Syria, and the United States and Mexico* (Coblenz, Leipsic, London, Edinburgh, and New York, 1862-99); Murray’s *Handbooks to Scotland and Switzerland* (London, 1864, 1913); George N. Pindar, *Guide to the Nature Treasures of New York City* (New York, 1917); *Hart’s Guide to New York City* (New York, 1964); and Fodor’s *New England* (New York, 1966); Bernice Chesler, *In and Out of Boston with Children* (Barre, Mass., 1969); Martha Shirk and Nancy Klepper, *Super Family Vacations: Resort and Adventure Guide* (New York, 1995); Elin McCoy, *Where Should We Take the Kids? The Northeast* (New York, 1997); and Holly Hughes, *Frommer’s New York City with Kids* (Foster City, Calif., 2001). Thanks to Matthew Hartzell, who helped identify and gather many of these materials.

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