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How to Plan a Birthday Trip Itinerary for a Loved One

RACHAEL DYMSKI

We emerged from the Churchill War Rooms, squinting in the sunlight as we left 1945 behind and entered present-day London. “That was amazing,” my husband said as he went over details of Churchill’s documents, the Map Room, and the Transatlantic Telephone Room disguised as a private toilet. “The best part was that I didn’t have to plan getting here at all.”

He was right. Every year, for my husband’s birthday, I plan him a surprise trip as his gift. He gets to show up and enjoy a mini-vacation tailored specifically for him, no preparation required.

I think one of the best things about birthdays is that they give us a chance to celebrate the people we love and the reasons why we love them. My husband Andrew loves to travel. He is always up to go anywhere. However, he hates to plan. He gets stressed out by the details of accommodation and travel arrangements. The number of places to go and things to do can overwhelm him to the point where planning a trip feels more stressful than fun.

A few years ago, I realized that one way I could celebrate him on his birthday was to take him somewhere he’s always wanted to go, but plan it all so he wouldn’t have to. I picked a secret destination I thought he would love, booked accommodations, and planned our itinerary. When his birthday finally arrived, I packed our bags in the car, handed him a hot coffee and a folder containing the location of his surprise destination: London.

I gave him details as the trip unfolded, so that each day and destination was a sur-



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The Map Room within the Churchill War Rooms in London.

prise. He would find out where we were going to eat as we headed there, where we were staying only as we walked up to the Airbnb. Andrew was able to enjoy a vacation tailored specifically to him without planning a bit of it, and I got to be the one to plan an exciting surprise.

The trip was so much fun that it’s become a yearly tradition for us. It’s a wonderful way to give an experience as a gift, and Andrew loves knowing at least once a year he won’t have to navigate car rentals or sift through hundreds of Airbnb options to get away.

If a birthday trip would make a great gift for someone you care about, here are a few tips to get your planning underway.

Plan a trip around what they love. Andrew loves history, so every trip I’ve done has been a historical destination. We’ve traveled to the monuments in Washington, D.C., to the French and Indian War Fort Necessity near Pittsburgh, to Dwight D. Eisenhower’s home at Gettysburg. Ev-

ery trip we plan has some kind of historical element as the central theme. Does the person you’re planning for love a certain type of food, or music, or climate? Picking something they love makes the trip feel truly special.

Write out an itinerary. One of the early birthday trips I planned for Andrew was a day trip to St. Malo, France, while we were staying with family in the English Channel Islands. I thought that we would just arrive on the ferry in the morning, walk around, and figure out what we wanted to do as we went. The combination of old, winding streets and our abysmal understanding of French made the city feel overwhelming, and we spent most of the morning just trying to orient ourselves.

I’ve solved this problem by creating a thorough itinerary. These itineraries are flexible—meant to serve more as a guide than a hard timeline. I put together sights and activities that are close in proximity to one another, and a couple of restaurants to choose from. This way I can offer a few choices without feeling like there is too much to pick from.

Add personal, memorable surprises. Andrew has read almost every biography that exists about George Washington. When we went to D.C., I knew that we had to visit Washington’s home, Mount Vernon. We could have driven there, but I wanted to find a way to make our journey more memorable. I found the Potomac Riverboat Company, and realized we could travel via boat, almost straight from our Airbnb to Mount Vernon. It was such a fun, special surprise for Andrew. I also knew that he had never toured the Capitol, but

(Left) The Mount Vernon Mansion, the home of George and Martha Washington, overlooks the Potomac River in Virginia.

(Right) Britain’s leaders plotted the Allied route to victory during the Second World War from the Churchill War Rooms in London.

I wanted him to have a personalized experience. I contacted a friend who worked for a congressman, and she gave Andrew and me a private, behind-the-scenes tour.

As you think about how to plan a trip for someone you love, think about what extra things you could throw in that would really make the trip stand out.

You don’t have to break the bank for it to be special. Some years, these birthday trips have taken up a significant amount of our yearly travel budget, but other years, I prefer to go smaller and stay closer to home. When we went to Pittsburgh last year, I cut costs by staying with friends rather than a hotel or Airbnb. One year, we visited a battlefield close to us Andrew had never seen, and I packed a picnic lunch of Andrew’s favorite food—Italian subs and chocolate chip cookies—to enjoy while reading about the battle’s history.

Far more special than an elaborate trip is showing that you know and care about the person you’re planning for. Coming up with a few personalized ways to make the day or trip about the person you love will go a long way.

I didn’t have to take my husband to the Churchill War Rooms for him to have a special birthday. But making the effort to plan such a surprise for him gave us both memories to enjoy for years to come.

Rachael Dymski is an author, florist, and mom to two little girls. She is currently writing a novel about the German occupation of the Channel Islands and blogs on her website, RachaelDymski.com

Back at It: Expert Tips for Re-Entry Into ‘Normal’ Life

BARBARA DANZA

As cases of COVID-19 decrease and communities are allowed to open back up, are you going to run straight out into the world, or might the transition back to normal be a little bit more complicated than that?

As the dust settles on this unprecedented time in history, the emotional and psychological impact that “staying at home” has had on many might be surprising to some and concerning to others.

I asked mental health expert Dr. Gregory Jantz for his advice in assuring a sure footing upon re-entry. He is the author of “Healing Depression for Life” and founder of The Center: A Place for Hope, a treatment facility for depression. Here’s what he said.

THE EPOCH TIMES: Most of us have been living with some degree of “lockdown” for many weeks. Based on what you’ve observed, how are we doing? How has this impacted people’s overall well-being?

DR. GREGORY JANTZ: “Shelter at home” has



Gregory Jantz.

turned quarantine into confinement, and confinement has escalated all symptoms of anxiety and depression. In a certain subgroup we are seeing significant despair, and it is predicted—and seemingly holding true at this point—that suicides in some states will be greater than death by coronavirus. Overall, we are not doing well. We are at a place of a mental health pandemic. And when you layer the financial stress on top of the present state of anxiety, we have a ticking time bomb.

The difficulty in transitioning back is that we don’t know what “normal” is, or how to behave now. The pandemic has disrupted societal norms, so one of the things we’re seeing, at times, are individuals making harsh judgments of others—for example, whether we should wear a mask or not.

THE EPOCH TIMES: How do you recommend individuals best prepare themselves for the transition back to normal?

DR. JANTZ: I recommend individuals prepare for a transition, but don’t see it

as “normal”—see it as “I’m adapting over time.” We also need to allow for a great deal of social grace: we need to be slow to judge, and practice acceptance and kindness in a manner that we have not done before. Throttle back on judgment, not forward.

THE EPOCH TIMES: What advice do you have for parents aiming to ensure their children’s well-being as we move forward?

DR. JANTZ: We need to be careful that we are not continuing to impart our own fear about COVID-19 on to our children. Kids need to feel safe and secure—and they get that from those closest to them. What they also need now a sense of fun and enjoyment; they need to be allowed to go through normal developmental stages.

THE EPOCH TIMES: What are some practical things families can do to take care of themselves as they navigate this transition?

DR. JANTZ: We need to re-engage with physical activity outdoors: hiking, games, and things that we’ve avoided—like throwing a ball back-and-forth!

Have a “Digital Detox Day” one day a week—no devices.

Serve others. Consider volunteering in some capacity—for instance, soup kitchens still need help.

Take turns reading a chapter, each day, from a family-oriented book.



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Consider volunteering. Places such as soup kitchens still need help, for example.

Pull out card games and other types of hands-on games. We set up a ping pong table, and do “brain breaks” because the kids are still studying online!

Quality sleep is important for all family members. There is a definite link between sleep patterns and depression, so if you improve sleep quality, depression levels will improve as well.

THE EPOCH TIMES: Overall, what do you believe are the keys to moving on with life in a healthy way?

DR. JANTZ: The key to moving forward is to allow for a period of change—we need time for this transition. This has been a significant trauma for us all, but we can move forward with a sense of strong community, and a reset in our relationships, if we allow time for this transition.