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**WE TOOK A BIG STEP AND “CROSSED THE POND” THIS SPRING WITH OUR CHILDREN.** My cousin, her family and our family have experienced several successful domestic vacations together. We have been fortunate that, as-close-as-sisters as we are, our husbands also enjoy each other’s company and our children, a combined total of five, are similar in ages and interests. Past summer adventures have included hitting the beach when the girls were as young as two – and forging the mountains of Colorado where the boys relished the challenge of rock climbing.

The lingering desire, though, has been to experience Europe as a family. Julia, my cousin, and her family live in Scottsdale, AZ, and while in trips past she has much preferred I take the Schwartzcoff role of planning and executing our vacations, she coordinated this journey. As planning diva, she made the astute decision to invite her former neighbors, now living in Cincinnati, who are of like-temperament with

two delightful boys within complimentary ages of our group.

You become the beneficiaries of our experience and the valuable tips we can now impart, beyond wearing comfortable shoes and dressing in layers. Some tips come from great planning, some from learning the hard way and some from dumb luck, you decide which is which!

The key to our success was having a home base, our fabulous 17th century rented farmhouse. We were able to visit many sights and villages during the day but were returning to a familiar place, with plenty of room, in the evening. No unpacking and repacking, last-minute searches for misplaced Game Boys or CD players, or figuring out how to operate the new shower.

Julia is fluent in Spanish and took it upon herself to learn as much Italian as possible before the trip. The rest of us, however,

are questionably fluent in English and decided that we would try to get by with learning a few key phrases in Italian. We found the Italian people to be lovely, helpful and, in most cases, thoughtful enough to know more English than we did Italian. It went a long way with our Italian hosts that we made an effort to communicate in their native tongue even though they had a few chuckles at our miserable attempts at their beautiful language.



*Gelato stop in Sienna with Robinson family and friends.*

*photo by Julia Files*

**START WITH A PLAN AND A REALLY GOOD MAP**

Each night we selected our target for the next day, studied the map and read about the sights we planned to see. The house had several tour guide books on-hand and one was a duplicate of our chosen favorite, *Rick Steves Italy*. His book suggests, city-by-city, hotels, restaurants, walking tours and sights with telephone numbers to make reservations.

**Big Tip!** Make reservations for tours at popular sights and museums. We followed that advice and we realized the wisdom big-time when we visited the Vatican Museum and scooted past the four-

hour-long line to the front door only to be instantly ushered in to meet our tour guide. With seven children, there was no way we would have survived a four-hour wait. On other occasions we didn’t make a reservation for a tour, but only a reservation to attend the attraction at a certain time. Again, we were escorted in the museum at our appointed time. We would then find ourselves listening to passing tours conducted in English, gleaning tidbits of information we would otherwise not have learned.

**ENGAGE THE CHILDREN**

We all had our digital cameras but we also provided disposable cameras for the children. In some cases, their perspective on the historic sights was enlightening, but other shots of themselves and/or their partner-in-crime making pig-faces to each other were

**travel tips from a family trip to italy** by beth robinson

## FAMILY



*Robinson and Melikian children at crossroads in Assisi.  
photo by Pat Robinson*

not as endearing. All the kids had journals and were encouraged each night to write about what they had seen. We purchased a postcard from every sight to jog their memory and have a decent photograph, unlike the aforementioned self-portraits.

**“Gelato for the kids ...  
espresso for the adults ...  
and we were ready for the next  
adventure.”**

### THE MARY POPPINS BAG

Rome is notorious for pickpockets so everyone carried their valuables in small wallets tucked under shirts or fanny packs secured at the waist. Everyone except a Mom. Julia and Liz each had a backpack but I had my quilted black bag from which I constantly amazed our young travelers with what came out of that bag. I regularly carried Rick Steves with us along with a map, umbrellas, a wrap for when it got cool, antiseptic wipes and a collection of snacks for wilting children during what they sometimes considered forced marches.

The most important collection in that bag, however, was that of local coins. Why, you ask? Very few locations have public restrooms and even fewer provide them for free. With seven children, someone always needed to go to the bathroom and when we found one, we needed the change fast!

Lastly, I would encourage frequent stops to refresh. A serving of Gelato (Italian ice cream) for the kids and an espresso or cappuccino for the adults always provided the boost we needed for the next adventure.

After ten days anywhere, I am usually ready to head home – not so this trip. And what made it even more special was creating memories with our children.

*Beth Robinson is editor of Frisco STYLE Magazine.*