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Have Dad Will Travel

A Journey with a Father and Daughter

"Would you like to take a trip around the world with me?"

That's how it began, my two-month odyssey escorting my 95-year-old father on a senior citizens' cruise from Beijing to Southampton, England in the spring of 2000.

Of course I said yes, even when I learned we'd be sharing a room for seven weeks. The opportunity to spend substantial time with my father, as an adult, was a remarkable prospect. And I'd have the chance to visit places I might never be able to see again, including the rainforests of Malaysia, the famed Raffles Hotel in Singapore and the "rose red" city of Petra in Jordan.

My father and I always had a fairly close relationship; my mother, 25 years his junior, died when I was nine. That left my father, then 70, with a rambunctious and precocious daughter, and little idea of how to raise a child in the 1970s. Although I went to boarding school starting when I was 12, we always shared the bond that seems to exist between motherless daughters and their surviving fathers.

When I was younger, Dad was the athletic one. The summer after my mother died, he took my sisters and me to Europe, walking along canals in the UK and hiking the Swiss Alps. We scrambled up rocky switchbacks, glaciers looming 7000 feet below, and when I pointed out a sign that was placed in memory of a tour guide "who fell from this spot", my father just laughed and continued on.

These days, I was the overly zealous one, eager to climb mountains in Borneo and volcanoes in Sicily. The difference was, now I was the responsible party. I couldn't go bounding off on my own adventures; the important part of the trip was catering to what Dad wanted to do.

My father is reasonably mobile - he walks with European hiking sticks called "trackers" - but his balance is precarious. Like a parent guiding a child, I would follow him around with my arms outstretched, in case the ship pitched and he stumbled. On more than a couple of occasions, I found myself with a 200-pound toddler falling into in my arms.

At some ports, we took excursions together.

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Usually, these were ones that showed us the sights by bus, with little walking involved. Other times, he would stay on the ship, and I'd go off exploring, reporting back to him what I'd found (second-century ruins in Vietnam, the Western Wall in Jerusalem). My favorite memory from the trip was helping him off the bus at the Pyramids, seeing his expression at finally visiting a place he'd dreamed about since his childhood.

During the days at sea, we talked. I learned about his childhood, about his relationship with his parents and his sister. He told me about being scouted for the 1927 Boston Braves, and why he turned them down. We talked about my mother, about what each of us went through in the years of silence following her death. I began to see the wholly complex, impressive and sometimes flawed person that was my father. By the time we returned home two months later, I felt as though I'd made a new friend.

My father has given me a great deal over the years, but the opportunity to get to know him as an adult was the best, and the most enduring, gift he could have possibly bestowed.

-- Sarah Chauncey

Sarah Chauncey is currently working on a book about the trip with her father. 🍷

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