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Quit Your Job and Travel the World for a Year?

By Heather Eng



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One couple made it happen. Here's how

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A Decade of Preparation



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Who hasn't woken up on a dreary Monday morning and thought: "What am I doing? I should quit my job, grab the family, and travel the world." But that's just something people say, right? No one actually does it because, well, there's the mortgage to pay.

John and September Higham made the ultimate travel fantasy come true. In June of 2005, the Silicon Valley-based couple left their jobs, sublet their house, and took their children, Katrina, then 11, and Jordan, then 8, on a year-long trip to a whopping 28 countries.

How did they manage it? One year after their return, the couple talks to us about how they made it happen, from swinging it financially to carrying their daughter -- broken leg and all -- across Europe.

How did you come up with the idea for a round-the-world trip in the first place?

John: In 1993, my company sent me to Japan. We lived there for one year before we had kids. We enjoyed that concentrated together time and decided that when we had kids, we'd take them to live overseas for one year. Over a decade, that idea morphed into not just living overseas, but traveling for a year.

September: It was significant that we thought of it so early on, because if you want to take a year off and spend that much money traveling, you have to live your life financially so that's possible. We never bought the bigger house, and we always drove old, clunky cars. It took many years of disciplined savings to do this.

Was it strange saving for a trip 10 years away?

September: It became a way of life. The kids had always known we'd take a trip around the world, so as soon as they got old enough, they got into the spirit of it. They'd say, "Are you sure we should buy this? Shouldn't we be saving that money for the 'round the world trip?'"



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So you biked all the way through Europe with two kids?

September: We have two tandem bicycles. Katrina shares one with me, Jordan shares with John. The cycling worked beautifully, and we made it as far as Switzerland. One day, while rock-climbing in a mountain playground there,

Katrina was rappelling down a boulder. Her rope broke, she tumbled to the ground, and John carried her 45 minutes down the mountain. Her leg was broken, and her wrist was so badly sprained that she couldn't use crutches. She was wheelchair-bound for weeks.

John: And that was the end of the cycling!

Yet you still managed to complete your journey? Katrina's a real trooper!

September: She was definitely a trooper, but the real trooper was John. It was nearly impossible to find a wheelchair in many cities. He carried her on his shoulders all over Europe.

Was it tough to pull Katrina and Jordan out of school for a year?

John: We thought the school would be a little hysterical -- and the teachers were -- but the principal just chuckled, patted us on the back, and said, "Have a nice trip!" But we definitely planned for the kids' education. September spent a lot of time investigating our destinations and researching fiction books relative to the places and geared to the kids' ages.

September: For example, we knew we were going to China, so we bought the book *Red Scarf Girl* about the Cultural Revolution. We bought over a hundred books and divided them into 12 piles. Every month my mother sent us a package of books.

John: We also started each morning with a formal math lesson.

September: And the children wrote in journals. Every night, when we were done with activities, they'd record the day's events.

How much did it all cost?

September: \$120,000 for our family of four to travel for 52 weeks. That includes paying for plane tickets, medical insurance, clothing, and gear; storing our belongings at home;

buying guidebooks and kids' books and shipping them all over the globe. Immunizations alone cost about \$2,000.

What was your favorite destination? Your kids' favorites?

September: We all liked Switzerland because we love hiking and biking and the country is really set up for that with trails everywhere. Katrina's favorite was Tanzania. She begged for us to go there and see the big animals on a safari. And Jordan's favorite was Costa Rica because he loves volcanoes and rainforest animals. My favorite was Turkey because it's inexpensive, the landscape is incredibly beautiful, and the people were so friendly.

What do you think your kids took from the trip?

September: When you look at the children, you wouldn't know they've traveled around the world. And when they're interacting with their friends, there's no indication that they've lived a different life. But when you talk to them, you realize they have a sense of themselves as citizens of the world, rather than citizens of their town, or state, or country.

For example, if we're speaking about the war in Iraq, they'll immediately say, "What about the people in Iraq? How are they dealing with this?" Whereas I think if you only lived in the U.S. and only listened to American news, you forget there are real people living all over the world.

■ How to Make It Happen

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Was it hard to convince Katrina and Jordan to leave their friends and take a yearlong trip with mom and dad?

John: Both kids were very enthusiastic. We'd also taken "practice trips" since they were very young to get them acclimated to traveling, and find out what worked and what didn't.

Which countries did you visit on your trip?

September: Iceland, England, France, Switzerland, Austria, Czech Republic, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, back to Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Dubai, Tanzania. Then we went to Mauritius, Singapore, Japan, China, Thailand, Cambodia, back to Thailand, all the way to Costa Rica, Panama, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, back to Chile, back to Bolivia, Peru. We spent our final month in Belize.

Wow -- how did you decide on that route?

John: I'd been harboring ideas of cycling across Europe for a long time. Summer is the best time for that, so that came naturally. We decided after we finished that leg, we'd continue eastward until we ended up back in California.

- **One Broken Leg and \$120,000 Later**

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How to Make It Happen



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What advice do you have for other families who want to do what you guys did?

John: You just have to make it happen.

September: There's no convenient time to take a year off. And there's just a small window when the kids are the right ages: old enough to understand the trip, but young enough so they're not yet in high school. And it doesn't have to be traveling around the world. You can drive cross-country or visit every national park.

And as far as finding the money to do it, would I recommend even taking out a second mortgage? In most cases, I'd say yes. You can save all your money for retirement and hope you have a grand time. But you'll never have that time with your kids again.

Ready to plan your family's escape? Check out John's forthcoming book: *Armageddon Pills -- Don't Leave Home Without Them (and Other Lessons from a Family's Journey Around the World)*.

For more information about family world travel, check out the Highams' travel website:

www.armageddonpills.com

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irene.chan3686597 wrote:

It's proud to do that. I wish one day I can do that too. I guess it good for the kids too, they can learn in difference way than school. They can really open their eyes to the world instead of just watching TV. It is an amazing idea and you really did it.

10/5/2007 1:22 PM CDT

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michelle hosam wrote:

This is amazing. Hats off to this family for actually doing what we all dream about. Just great.

9/23/2007 1:02 PM CDT

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brandiekeh1 wrote:

Absolutely a dream come true! How amazing would that be? I can't wait to try it with my own family!

9/4/2007 10:51 AM CDT

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MandyJohnson wrote:

I think everyone should do this! Anyone got \$100K they can send me? Awesome idea to travel around the world with your kids!

8/13/2007 1:06 AM CDT

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dhigham1 wrote:

You guys rock. I want to go next time.

8/11/2007 7:32 PM CDT

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