

# PARENTING

## Finding a Home Away From Home

*Living Overseas for a Year With the Family Can Be Challenging — and Transformative*

By DIANA FRIEDMAN

**W**hen my husband, Javier, and I packed up our family to spend a year in the Basque city of San Sebastian, we knew it would be a huge change.

Our motivation for the transatlantic jump to Spain was simple. We wanted to immerse our children, Naomi, 8, and Jordi, 4, in Spanish and Basque, Javier's native languages, while their brains were still young. We also wanted to provide them an opportunity to develop a relationship with their grandparents and cousins, whom they usually saw only every other year, and expose them to a lifestyle and culture significantly different from their own.

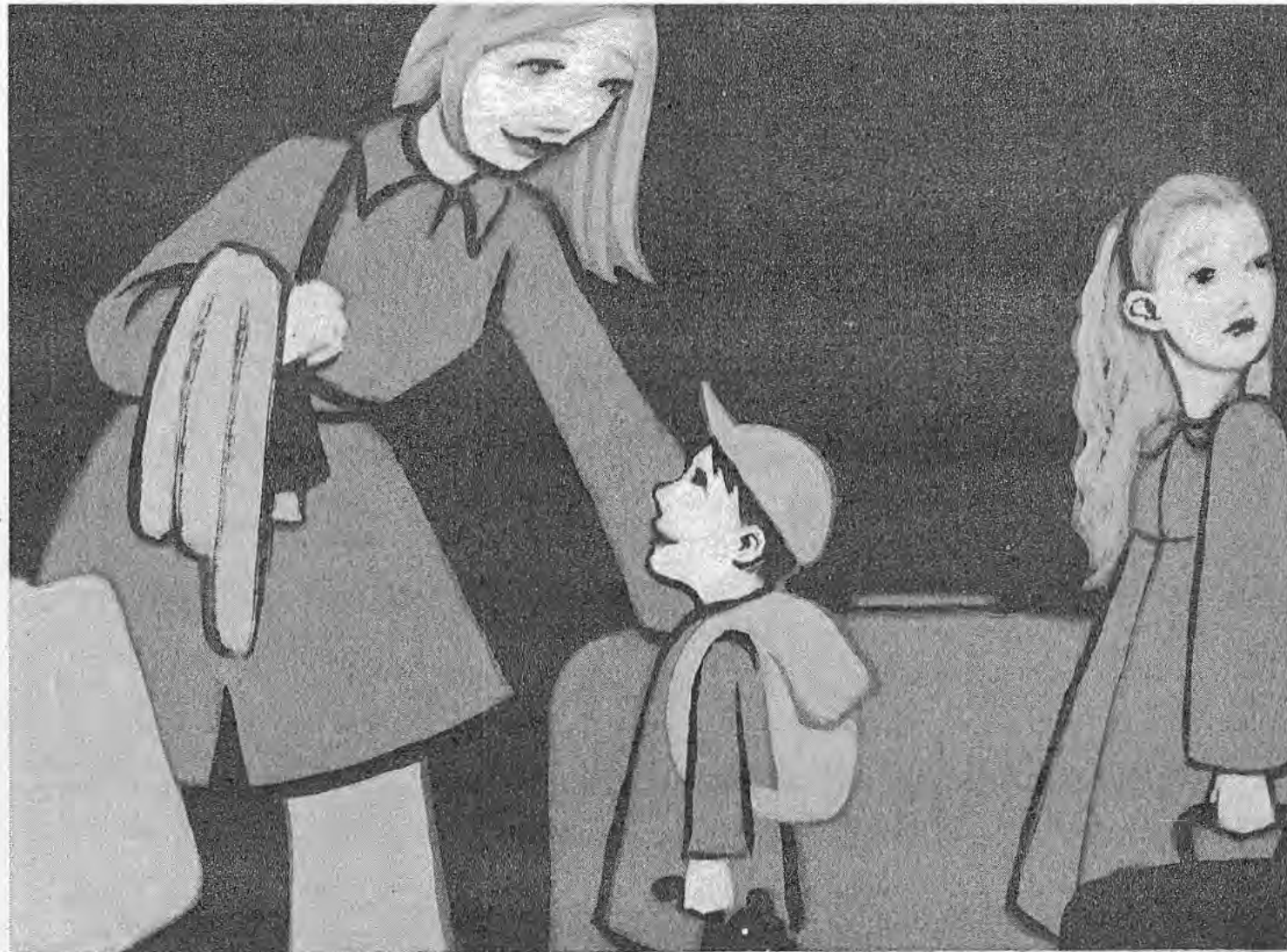
Motivation is one thing, though, reality another. The day of departure we spilled our worries over sandwiches at the Au Bon Pain at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

"I won't make any friends, and I'll be bored all year," grumbled Naomi.

"I'm worried we're going to be fighting too much, including you two," retorted Javier, referring to the all-out war the children had been waging the last year.

I had a list, too: How were we going to survive in a tiny European apartment with one bathroom? What would it be like coming home to a quiet answering machine if none of us made friends? How would Javier and I adapt to our switching roles — I was going back to work as a technical writer, while he was taking a year off from his job as a social worker to be a stay-at-home dad.

As it turned out, the things we feared most never materialized. Instead, we all wound up transformed, individually, and as a family, in ways we never expected.





Before the move, Naomi, the most social of the family, did not enjoy spending time alone. Yet in San Sebastian, living in a multi-lingual environment seemed to keep her so busy she didn't have time to be bored or lonely. At the supermarket, we'd spend hours trying to identify all the languages on the ingredient lists of the food boxes. And while she became friendly with a few children from school, she did not make close friends. Without a gaggle of girlfriends, though, she learned the fine art of spending time by herself, cloistered in her room, drawing, reading, and making jewelry.

Although Naomi never quite got over the idea that there would be no Arthur or Sponge Bob for a year, she grasped immediately how her reality had changed. With the family car 3,800 miles away, she stopped nagging to be driven everywhere and memorized all the local bus schedules to help us plan more effectively.

The most noticeable change was the relationship between the children. They started treating each other like human beings and inviting one another into their rooms for manicures and castle-building sessions. One night the apartment was a little too quiet, and I found them both in the bathroom: she on the toilet reading him "Captain Underpants" in Spanish, he quietly listening in the tub.

Apparently, changes in family dynamics were not unique to our family. Coletta Youngers, a Washington, D.C.-based consultant, moved with her children, 8 and 11, to Basel, Switzerland, when her husband received a year-long appointment. Being away from the constantly ringing telephone with its attendant demands — PTA, social activities, volunteer requests — said Ms. Youngers, allowed for far more concentrated family time. She also found her children getting along better as they spent more time with each other, away from their friends.

As with Ms. Youngers's family, removing our children from their social networks forced them to depend on each other for friendship. The distance — both physical and emotional — from our usual environments gave us the freedom to reassemble our relationships and family dynamic. Living in a much smaller space forced us to work harder at getting along; with no huge corners of a house to disappear to, we all found ourselves apologizing much faster.

Our neighborhood was so safe, that on weekend mornings, Naomi walked through the courtyard behind our apartment to cross two small streets to fetch the bread by herself. The neighborhood organization offered many activities for children, including free movies in the municipal building every Saturday. After a few months, we realized that despite a lack of official childcare, most parents left their small chil-

dren during the movie and ambled across the street for a coffee and a chat. The idea of village parenting may indeed be a cliché, but it's not hard to see why it's endured.

Village parenting, of course, has its downside. Jordi, who had few pre-trip complaints, was not happy about being pulled from his comfy routine and spent much of the first few months throwing tantrums. Children certainly made a lot of noise in the parks and play-

The distance from our usual environments gave us the freedom to reassemble our family dynamic.

grounds, but we soon figured out that while children were welcomed everywhere — bars, restaurants, parks — children with tantrums were not tolerated anywhere. Every time Jordi had a tantrum, even if in a playground where the noise level was ear splitting, women would come over to us and wave their hands in the international karate chop signal for hitting. "Go ahead, one good whack is all it takes," they'd tell me, repeatedly. While we found the intrusions annoying, we eventually decided they were a fair trade for living in a city safe enough to walk in at all hours and where children can play by themselves on the street.

Despite meticulous pre-trip planning, numerous calls and visits to the Spanish consulate, and Javier's Spanish citizenship, we were not immune to nightmarish tangles with bureaucracy. When we went to pick up our health cards, we

got caught in a ping-pong match between the Basque and the Spanish governments that took days to sort out.

Overseas lesson no. 1: Check, double check, triple check, and then be prepared for things still not to go your way. Americans are used to a certain kind of efficiency that does not exist in other parts of the world, and while the New York approach of "I want this, and I want it now," works in New York, it mostly just gets you dirty looks elsewhere.

Getting my ID card entailed a similar adventure — the office was only open from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and the wait was never less than three hours (unless you were willing to bat your eyes or wiggle your posterior at the guards). Once inside, we discovered we were missing a critical document which took weeks to arrive. With correct papers in hand, I took the day off work only to find the office closed because it was the "Patron Saint of Police" day.

But since the health-card fiasco, I'd learned. I'd already taken the whole day off of work, so I took two deep breaths and called Javier at home to come meet me at the beach. We managed an impromptu run and swim, followed by a hot shower, and a quiet glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and pastries in a small cafe, where we sat and chatted for hours, something we usually had little opportunity to do.

Learning the art of letting go goes a long way in a foreign country. My Palm Pilot started gathering cobwebs because no one made plans more than a week in advance. I grew to enjoy the last-minute post-lunch invitations to meet for a coffee or stroll downtown. By the time my residency card arrived the day before we boarded the plane to come home, it bothered me far less than it would have in the beginning of the year.

Nine months into our return, we're back to some sibling fighting, but the children have maintained the strong relationship they developed. It took them months to start using two

bathrooms again, and they often have "sleepovers" in each other's rooms.

They are also fluent in Spanish and have enough Basque songs and holidays in their blood so that some day they can return to the Basque Country as more than tourists. They also understand that there is a world beyond their American one; Jordi plans to have 10 languages under his belt by middle school, while Naomi looks forward to returning in the summers to San Sebastian, where she can play in the park, unchaperoned for hours on end with her cousins.

Javier and I? We're back to endless lists and complicated, tightly wound schedules. But we have learned to turn off the telephone — during dinner at least.

JULIA BRECKENREID

## If You Decide to Go

Learning the language, getting a job, enrolling your children in the local school, and celebrating local holidays will all help you feel at home in a new country, said Dena Leibman, a writer who lived for six years with her children in Amsterdam.

**Consult with your accountant about tax issues;** you may be able to exclude a large portion of your income from U.S. taxes if you are abroad for at least a year.

**Visit the consulate of your host country** to ensure you have all the necessary visas and documents. If you have any doubts about information you receive, check with more than one person. Be sure to have health insurance covered before departing.

**Use the Internet.** For a wide range of information, visit [http://talesmag.com/resources/expat\\_families.shtml](http://talesmag.com/resources/expat_families.shtml). The Web site [www.expatca.com](http://www.expatca.com) has information for expatriates living in the Netherlands (Holland), Germany, France, Belgium, or Spain. We found excellent tenants through [www.sabbaticalhomes.com](http://www.sabbaticalhomes.com).

**Check references carefully.** Sabbatical renters usually want furnished housing, which means less work for you.