

# How a Des Moines family ran away to travel the world

Missy Keenan, Special to the Register November 19, 2015



Raise your hand if you've ever fantasized about bidding a permanent farewell to your cubicle, packing up the family (or maybe leaving them at home – hey, it's *your* fantasy...), and hopping a plane for the other side of the planet.

If that scenario is still just an unrealized dream, here's your chance to travel the globe vicariously through Des Moines' Schwarz family. This family of four recently left work, school and their Highland Park home behind for an extended Asian adventure.

Before we join them in India for the current leg of their trip, a little background on how they got here. Thirteen years ago, Mason Schwarz's mom died quickly and unexpectedly of a brain aneurysm. She was 47 when she died, just five years older than Mason and wife Staci are now.

"From the moment Mason lost his mom, we have been living in real time," Staci wrote on her travel blog, *Blame It On My Wild Heart* ([blameitonmywildheart.com](http://blameitonmywildheart.com)). "It's not that we don't plan for the future, we just don't wait for it. Maybe we will live until we are 80 and have plenty of time to fulfill dreams. Maybe we won't. The only guarantee is that nothing is guaranteed. And that's how we live. It's a promise we made to each other after the funeral. And we intend to keep it."

Staci will be the first to tell you that they are not a wealthy family. She estimates that their three cars combined are worth less than \$10,000. But since they love to travel together, they make it a financial priority. Instead of new cars, a big house or a big-screen TV, every extra penny the family can scrape together is spent on travel.

Four years ago, Staci read the book "One Year Off" about a family who left their regular lives to spend a year traveling. One summer day by the pool she suggested to Mason that they take a similar trip – fully expecting him to say "no." But when he surprised her with an enthusiastic "yes," they began planning their escape.

After four years of planning and saving, late this summer Mason and Staci both quit their longtime jobs – Staci as a master data coordinator at Tones Spices and Mason as a printer/pressman at

American Spirit Graphics. They spent a few weeks preparing for their trip full-time using “the biggest, baddest long-term travel to-do list” borrowed from the travel blog So Many Places. Some of the items on the three-page typed list included getting ready for their house sitter, filling several months’ worth of prescriptions, securing special health insurance for international travel, making copies of marriage and birth certificates, helping 19-year-old Ian and 16-year-old Lily (who is homeschooling for her junior year of high school) prepare – and packing.

In late September, the Schwarzes eased into their adventure with a week at Disney World – a family tradition. Next they spent a month traveling around Turkey, followed by two weeks in India. Then they’ll travel to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Bali. They’re hoping to travel for 6-7 months, but they have a set budget and will head back to Iowa when the money runs out.

Now about two months in, here are some thoughts from the Schwarz family about their adventure so far (we caught up with them when they were in India):

**This is your family’s first experience with international travel. How are you adjusting?**

**Staci:** Our adjustment period in Istanbul was difficult. It was almost to the point of being paralyzing, which I wasn’t expecting. For me, it was mostly the fact that the simple things like food, lodging, and figuring out pay toilets was made more difficult because of the language and culture. Compounded with the jet lag, this was really overwhelming.

And then our first stop in India was nuts. Pure chaos, and too much of everything – too much filth, too much stink, too many people, too much poverty and just plain heart sickness at the way of living. However, it only took us about 12 hours to venture out into the city and start figuring things out, so our recovery time here was better than in Turkey.

We are here during Diwali, which is the second-largest Hindu festival of the year. We were having trouble booking trains to any of the places we wanted to visit, so we had a tour company help us book tickets and hire a driver when we couldn’t get a train. Also, we spent our first couple of nights in a backpacker hostel. It was clean and very friendly, but I needed something more plush after being out in the chaos all day, so we upgraded our lodging. We’ve spent more money than we would have liked, but we’ve also had a couple of guides that have been instrumental in helping us navigate so we can see what we want to see in the short time we are here.

We’ve been to Delhi, Jaipur and Agra, and in Varanasi I fell in love with India. For three days, the wonderful people at our hotel met us with smiles and unending assistance and authentic joy to see us. They invited us to celebrate Diwali and gave us sweets and let us help make mandalas in the hotel lobby. I was sad when we left them.

### **What has been the best part about this trip?**

**Lily:** Family bonding.

**Ian:** Experiencing different cultures up close.

**Staci:** Having unstructured time. Sometimes we don't even know what day of the week it is and that has been so liberating.

**Mason:** How we came together as a family and took care of each other while stranded on the side of the mountain. (The family got lost on a hike in Turkey, and a four-hour hike turned into 12 hours; they were eventually found by the owner of their hostel.)

### **What has been your favorite activity?**

**Lily:** The boat. (The family took a four-day cruise on a small boat in Turkey.)

**Ian:** Seeing the inside of the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque.

**Staci:** Walking down the travertine pools at Pamukkale. I've never seen anything like it, and walking barefoot through pools of water down a mountain was exhilarating.

**Mason:** Hanging out in Istanbul. The trams were easy to take and we could buy food from the market and cook it at home.

### **Any lessons learned so far?**

**Staci:** We had just gotten off the bus in Pamukkale and were exhausted. We were told that we would get shuttled to our hotel, but instead were led to a travel agency to book tours. We needed bus tickets for later, so we figured we would just buy those, and before we knew it we had paid too much for a tour the next day. I was irritated that we had let our guard down and Lily piped up and said, "I couldn't believe you paid that. I almost said something." And so we developed a "safe word." Whenever anyone is about to do something stupid like buying a tour we don't need or spending too much money on something or divulging too much information to people trying to scam us, someone hollers "caterpillar!" to bring that person back to their senses. It works like a charm.

### **Any particular moments from the trip that let you know you made the right decision to do this?**

**Staci:** Most of my moments are small like when the kids come into our room and crawl into bed with us and we talk about our day or our plans for tomorrow. Or when we are all sitting down taking a rest and I look up and see something amazing like the ruins of Ephesus and I think that it is such a

blessing to be able to see such awe-inducing places with the people I love most. Those quiet moments are when I know that we've made the very best choice in taking this trip.

**You quit your jobs to come on this trip. That was brave! What are your plans for after you return to Iowa?**

**Staci:** We weren't able to get leaves of absence from our jobs so we left permanently. Which sounds really brave, or really stupid. But the truth is, we were both ready to make some changes in our careers and decided to just use this trip as a palette cleanser to decide what we want to do in the next chapter of our lives. It wouldn't be at all far-fetched to say that we may come home, work for 3-4 years, and head out into the world again.

## **Travel Vicariously Through the Schwarz Family**

To follow the family on their adventures, visit <http://blameitonmywildheart.com/> or <https://www.facebook.com/blamemywildheart>.