

Will travels with my teen fix empty nest blues?

Feeling a pang as your kids leave home? Louise Atkinson took a trip with her daughter Flo and discovered something new about herself on the way

Louise, 52, is married with three children, Florence, 19, Isaac, 16, and Gregory, 14, and lives in Oxfordshire.

Our eldest child was about to leave home for uni but not before she took a lengthy back-packing trip through Thailand and Cambodia. When I was Flo's age I had done plenty of intrepid travelling but then I married, had a family, and packed my wanderlust away. Travel, like everything else for the last 20 years, became all about compromise and holidays morphed into blustery camping trips and cheap, all-inclusive beach hotels.

As her departure date neared I felt increasingly old and washed-up. More than that, I felt envious. She was about to do the thing I used to love and I was facing the prospect of a fast-emptying nest while juggling the indignities of menopause, ever-encroaching greyness, creaking joints and gathering wrinkles.

My longing for freedom and adventure became almost intolerably painful. So I offered her a deal: I'd pay to extend her trip into Vietnam for a couple of weeks and treat her to a few posh hotels and spa treatments if we did that part of the trip together.

It was a scary prospect. Would I be miserable if I didn't get enough sleep?

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Would there be bandits and con artists lurking on every corner? Would we bicker? And – honestly? – am I far too old to be doing this sort of thing?

It felt rather a selfish undertaking but I convinced my husband (and everyone else) that this would be a very special last slice of mother/daughter time together. Secretly I wanted to see if I still had it in me, and if I did, I wanted my daughter to be impressed and inspired.

The upside of travelling with your teen is the easy familiarity and the deep sense of maternal satisfaction you get from being able to pass on nuggets of life-changing wisdom. I'm sure I annoyed her

at times, but I think secretly she was a little bit impressed with how I pushed the boundaries for both of us.

I had hesitantly left huge gaps in our itinerary so we could have the freedom to

roam and wouldn't always know where we were going to sleep each night, and discovered the true joy of spontaneity shines so much brighter if you let yourself get a little bit scared in the process.

Travelling with your teen does have its challenges, such as living with the

Travelling together: Louise and daughter Flo on the banks of the Mekong and in Halong Bay (below)



total lack of sugar-coating you might get from a friend, or partner (everyone heard her shout, "God, you're so embarrassing!" when I emerged from the loo with not only my T-shirt but all the wayward straps from my backpack tucked into my knickers). My generous offer to pay made her an occasionally expensive companion and I found myself pandering to her pricey demands to eat at restaurants with tablecloths when I yearned to perch on plastic stools under a dangling light bulb at roadside food shacks. >>



Sharing a yoga class at the InterContinental Danang

On the plus side, her sniffer dog antennae for free wifi meant we were logged on and connected within seconds of arriving at each destination and she taught me stellar social media skills and the art of the perfect selfie (click continually while changing expressions, then self-edit or delete stream if not entirely flattering). I'm left with a series of joyful photos in which I

The trip turned out to be a profound release

look deliriously happy and 15 years younger. But the truly wonderful thing is I felt

15 years younger the whole time I was there, and the euphoric blood-transfusion effect still lingers now. On this trip I wasn't old and I wasn't mum – I felt utterly liberated from the encumbrances of both.

It really struck home one morning when I caught Flo eyeing herself in the bathroom mirror, muttering a phrase that tainted much of my adult life: "Will I ever be skinny, blonde or tanned enough...?" And I realised none of that really matters to me any more.

Has this trip changed me? Hell yes. I had thought it might be a last gasp of motherhood and a frantic clutching at precious days together, but it turned out to be a profound release. The empty nest holds fewer fears now. I'm ready for Flo to go, confident that she is perfectly capable of negotiating life on her own. Meanwhile, I returned full of vigour and bursting with love for my amazing husband who held the fort, thereby allowing me to remember how to be the fun, vibrant, brave and feisty woman he originally fell in love with.

"A trip with my son made me reassess a few life values"

GP, Dr Kate Barnes, 52, is married with three boys (Oliver, 22, Jack, 21, and Harry, 17) and lives in Buckinghamshire. Earlier this year, she and her husband travelled with their youngest son to New Mexico.

This trip was supposed to be all about visiting Jack, my middle son, who has been studying in the USA, and also to give me the chance to spend quality time with my youngest son, Harry, before he leaves home too. But it turned out to have rather a profound life-changing impact on me.

I think passing the age of 50 can give you a heightened sense of your own mortality and I was becoming increasingly aware that my central mothering role in this family was fast becoming redundant. The trip gave me very precious time to think, to be inspired, and to reassess a few life values.

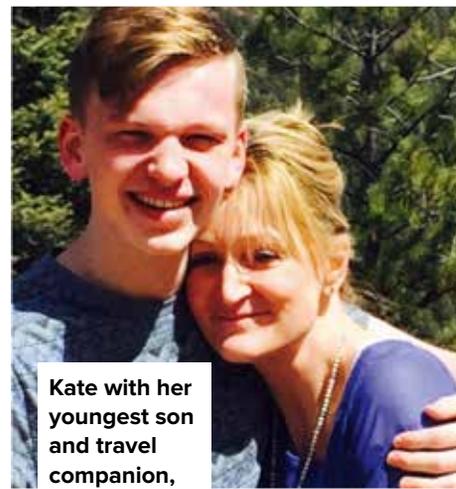
Although I trained in conventional medicine and have practised as an NHS GP for 25 years, I have always had a strong interest in a more holistic approach to health and have trained in hypnotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy in recent years.

In Santa Fe, New Mexico,

I was completely lit up by the history of the Native American Indians and fascinated by their methods of natural healing.

When I returned to the UK, I found myself looking at life through a different lens and determined to free up time away from home (at least a week every month) to travel, study, reflect and possibly write about the broader aspects of medicine.

It's a big ask, but this trip made me realise why not? What's stopping me? Perhaps we should all start thinking a bit more like students when we are in our fifties.



Kate with her youngest son and travel companion, Harry

TRAVELLING WITH TEENS?

► Don't waste time wondering whether they want to travel with you. Just offer to pick up some of their bills if you can. ► Push your boundaries – pick

somewhere out of your comfort zones so the fear and excitement bring you together. ► Leave gaps in your itinerary to allow for spontaneity – you can book trains, flights and

even budget hotels online when you're there from your phone. ► There's no shame in a pull-along suitcase (no one really uses bumbags or backpacks any more). w&h