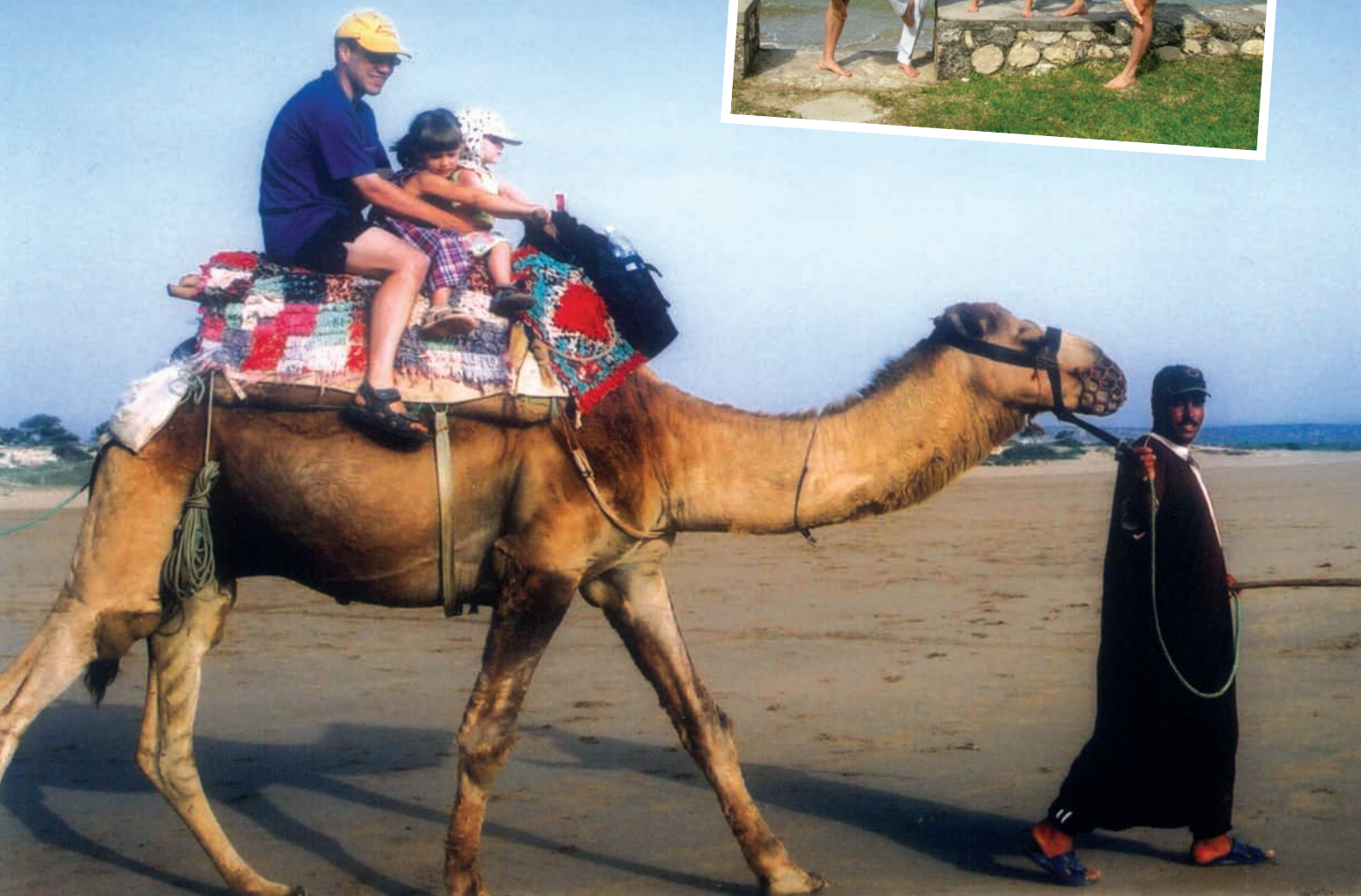


have kitchen, will travel

The adventure-loving McKenzie-Davison family proves that you can travel the globe with life-threatening allergies. It simply requires research, lots of precautions – and a suitcase jam-packed with food.

by SCOTT MCKENZIE



In 1993, prior to having children, my wife Keely and I went trekking in Nepal. We felt so adventurous, traveling with just a guidebook. We walked from village to village, staying in huts without electricity or running water, and eating at local restaurants. On our third day, we encountered a German couple traveling with two young children. The husband was lugging one of the largest backpacks I'd ever seen, the wife was carrying their 1-year-old and the 3-year-old was walking on his own.

We were amazed; I couldn't imagine washing diapers and preparing baby food without access to clean, running water. Since Nepal is notorious for people getting diarrhea, I asked what they would do if their children were to get sick. They replied that they were cautious, and never went farther than a three days' walk from a town with a doctor.

Clearly, everyone has a different view of risk. For those of us with children susceptible to anaphylaxis, our comfort zone can get very small. In many cases, we are only at ease eating in our own homes and the homes of a few close friends and relatives.

Keely and I knew when we had children that our days of backpacking through Asia, Africa and South America were over, but we still wanted to travel and to instill the love of travel in our children. When Taya, our second child, was diagnosed with multiple food allergies, including peanuts, nuts, dairy, eggs, barley and kiwi, it seemed like travel was going to be impossible. Our food requirements were already complicated since Keely and I are vegetarians and she is allergic to egg yolks. As well, I have environmental allergies to dust and cats to consider.

However, we have discovered that you can travel safely with



anaphylaxis and allergies. With careful planning, by always staying in places that have a kitchen, and by bringing our special foods with us, we have been able to continue to travel, albeit in a different style. So far Taya (who's now 6) has been to Jamaica, Grenada, England, France, Spain, and even Morocco.

Scott's Rules of the Road

- 1.** Our motto and Number One rule for traveling with anaphylaxis is: Have Kitchen, Will Travel! We always try to stay somewhere that has a kitchen. There are a surprising number of options, including condos, villas, ski chalets and hotels with kitchenettes. We wash all pots, plates and cutlery on arrival, since we don't know what foods were on them before.
- 2.** Stick to countries where you speak the language. So far, that has limited us to English- and French-speaking countries. It is critical

Clockwise from left: Scott and his daughters aboard a camel in Morocco in 2004; Scott, Keely, Taya and Kieryn with friends in Jamaica in 2005; the family at a villa in France in 2002; trekking in Nepal before the kids came along.



that you can explain allergies clearly to people without any risk of miscommunication. When our daughter gets older, we may relax this rule and there are allergy translation cards available. But for the first adventures, I recommend abiding by this rule.

I will never forget our trip to Italy when Kiernyn (our older daughter who has no allergies) was a year old. She spiked a fever of 40 degrees C on the first night at our rented villa. We were staying in the middle of nowhere in Umbria and did not know where the nearest hospital was. I called the villa's agent for directions. She not only drove us to the hospital, but also translated what the doctor was saying. I can only imagine that this experience would have been even more stressful if we were dealing with an anaphylactic emergency in Italian.

3. With allergies in the family, it's essential to know the distance to the nearest hospital *before* you book accommodations. We like to stay within an hour's drive of a hospital, and to know that there is also a doctor or a clinic nearby.

4. We limit the number of flights to get to our destination, and avoid connecting via a third country. Since we're traveling from Ottawa, this means looking for places we can fly to directly from Toronto or Montreal. We prefer not to fly through the U.S. because if we bring meat and fruit for the meal on the plane, we'll have to throw them out if disembarking to catch another plane.



5. Given my environmental allergies, we try to find places with tiled or wood floors instead of carpet. We look for wicker furniture or leather instead of stuffed couches. We always ask if the place has dogs, cats or other pets, as some villas and ski chalets are also people's homes for part of the year.

Sun, Sand, Surf and Safe

VILLA VACATIONS

Are you tantalized by the thought of a vacation in the sun this winter? If you go talk to a travel agent about such a holiday, you will be presented mostly with brochures for 'all-inclusive' resorts. This is outside our comfort zone since answers about ingredients to mass-prepared meals can be spotty at best.

Our preference is for villas with kitchens. Now most people think villa vacations are for the rich and famous. Yet many are no

Scott's Rules for Food

1. We bring our own food for our daughter for every flight. We never let our daughter eat something if we don't know the ingredients, and she never eats anything without her auto-injector on hand. We carry at least four EpiPens on every trip.

2. We pack and check one suitcase full of non-perishable food for every trip. You can't count on being able to buy allergy-free foods abroad. Some items to consider (depending on the allergies): egg replacer; sesame-free bread; nut-, dairy- and egg-free cookies; nut- and dairy-free cereals; and gluten-free pasta. You can include a small freezer bag for perishables (like dairy-free margarine).

3. Check the import restrictions on the country you are going to as well as any

countries you are connecting through. Like the U.S., many countries have restrictions on bringing in meat, fruit and vegetables, but most are OK with dry goods.

4. Bring enough food for your first day, so you don't have to shop the moment you arrive. Think pasta and a can of pasta sauce for a first night's dinner – or instant noodles for an overnight in a hotel room without a kitchen.

5. Are you staying longer than a week? Then bring allergy-free bread loaves and freeze some once you get to your destination. That way, the bread will last.

6. Research local food labeling laws. If you're thinking of traveling to the Caribbean this winter, I can report that

much of the food is imported from the U.S. and Canada. So labeling on these products is not a problem. But you need to be more careful with locally produced items.

7. We eat as many meals as possible in our rental unit's kitchen. When we go out for a day trip, we pack lunches and snacks to bring with us. If we absolutely have to eat out, we will not count on a waiter to communicate about the allergies. We try to speak directly to the person preparing the food and explain: the allergies, the fact that they are life-threatening, and to ask about possible cross-contamination. We prefer smaller restaurants because you have a better chance of speaking to the cook.

Stick with plain, simple foods (no sauces) to reduce risk. For example, plain rice, plain pasta, plain vegetables and grilled chicken or fish. Ask if an allergen has been on the grill before ordering.

more expensive than an 'all-inclusive' holiday and, if you share a villa with another family, some are even cheaper.

Villas come in every size and price range. Some are part of large resorts, with access to a resort's activities and facilities, while others are stand-alone. Catered villas with a cook are common in Jamaica, Barbados, St. Lucia and Mexico. Self-catering villas are more common on other Caribbean islands and in Europe.

If you want full control over the food, then self-catering is best. We also love having a catered villa when traveling with a group, but it does mean you have to explain the allergies clearly to the cook as well as the concept of cross-contamination. The good news is the same person cooks for you all week. We always e-mail the allergy information, then call to speak directly to the cook before we arrive. We ask the cook to remove all traces of the major allergens from the kitchen. We go with the cook for the first grocery shopping trip to check ingredients and explain what to buy.

We always try to rent villas with their own private pool because our kids can have fun just playing and swimming in the pool all day. But if you are looking for lots of activities for yourself or your kids, consider renting a villa or condo that is part of a larger resort.

The Internet has made finding villas much easier. You can either rent a villa directly from an owner or go through a villa agent. For the first rental, I recommend an agent, and make sure the person has been to the properties and can make recommendations about which ones are suitable for your family.

An additional point on cost: in the off-season, prices are as low as half what they are in high season. If you can get away outside of school holidays, it's definitely worth it.

TOP 10 RENTAL QUESTIONS

Decide which factors are the most important to your family. Do you want a pool, to be on the beach or both? Do you want a cook, or do you prefer to cook? To get you started, here's my Top 10.

1. How much is the villa, are there any taxes, what deposit is required?
2. How many bedrooms, and what type of beds are in each?
3. How many bathrooms and do they have bathtubs or showers?
4. Does it have a pool and are there steps into the pool?
5. Is the villa suitable for children?
6. How far to the nearest hospital and airport?
7. How far to the beach and is it suitable for children?
8. How many staff are there, what days/hours do they work, what tip is expected for the staff?
9. Does the villa have any pets?
10. Is a car and/or driver required for groceries and getting around?



Opposite: the pristine beach at Silver Sands on Jamaica's north coast. Above: Keely and the girls befriend a merchant in Morocco.

Our Sun Escapes

JAMAICA – Our first Caribbean villa trip with allergies was to Silver Sands resort about an hour east of Montego Bay. Silver Sands (www.mysilversands.com) is a small community of about 40 villas and cottages built around a beautiful beach on Jamaica's north coast. There are one- to seven-bedroom villas that are clean and comfortable.

Most have private pools and all are within a few minutes walk of the beach. All villas include a cook and maid who work six days a week to prepare meals, clean and do your laundry. We think the villas here are the best value in Jamaica and, possibly, the Caribbean. The beach is amazing. However, the facilities are limited to a tennis court, a playground and a small beach bar.

On our next trip, we decided to try a luxury villa at Tryall Club, also in Jamaica. Tryall Club (www.tryallclub.com) is a high-end resort of 76 villas built on a championship golf course and beach, 30 minutes east of Montego Bay (Hillary Clinton has vacationed here). They have two- to eight-bedroom deluxe villas, all with private pools and all are within a few minutes walk or golf cart ride of the beach.

All villas include a cook and maid who work seven days a week to prepare and serve meals as well as clean and do your laundry. Tryall also has a range of facilities including a restaurant, beach bar, kids' club, fitness club and golf course, although the beach is nothing special. The villas here are more affordable in the low season.

GRENADA – Our most recent trip was with 17 people (friends and family) to our nicest villa yet. Grenada is a small island with far fewer people and tourists than Jamaica and weekly direct flights from Toronto. We rented two villas next door to each other through Nick Hughes at Spice Isle Villas (www.spiceislevillas.com). Hughes knows the island and the villas well, and can also organize tours and a car rental for you. He has a range of villas from one to five bedrooms, most with private pools, and all with maid service. Most villas do not include a cook, but excellent catering services are available [See "Catered To," page 36]. The villas are reasonably priced and the beaches are beautiful, but we did have to drive to the beach.

If you go: A must-see is the Grenada Chocolate Co. factory

Eleven of us stayed in this sunny, 6-bedroom villa in Grenada in 2007. Sharing can make villas affordable.

(www.grenadachocolate.com). They make delicious peanut-free, nut-free, dairy-free, organic, fair-trade chocolate using solar power. I brought home 50 bars!

MOROCCO – Our most exotic villa trip so far was to Morocco with a group of 13 people, including another family with a daughter allergic to peanuts and tree nuts. There are daily direct flights from Montreal to Casablanca. We rented the six-bedroom, six-bathroom villa (www.riadbaoussala.com) with a small pool directly from the French owner.

The stay included breakfast and dinner near the laid-back, walled town of Essaouira. Before going, I e-mailed and spoke to the owner about the allergies and food requirements, and she said she could manage them. Each day we planned that night's dinner menu together with the owner or manager (who spoke English), and they explained it to the cook.

The food was excellent, with homemade nut-free, egg-free and dairy-free bread, freshly squeezed orange juice and great dinners to accommodate vegetarians, meat eaters and allergies. We were just a 10-minute drive from several beautiful, white sand beaches, which were miles long and practically deserted.

Our children loved the camel rides on the beach and getting henna art on their hands. One day a herd of goats jumped the wall of our villa and started eating the garden plants. The young boy herding the animals had to come in to get them out. Our children thought it was very funny to see the boy chasing goats through the



CATERED TO

Since there were 17 of us in Grenada, we pre-arranged to have the dinners catered with Kim's Catering (www.kimscateringservices.com). We certainly presented a challenge: our daughter who has multiple allergies; my wife and I who are vegetarian; and the rest who ate meat. While the kids preferred plainer fare, adults wanted "interesting" food.

Talk about going the distance: Kim prepared a well-thought-out menu for the week – with a five-course meal every night. She removed nuts and peanuts from her kitchen, and every dish was labeled with ingredients and whether it was safe for our daughter or vegetarian. The food was high quality and delicious. The desserts were to die for, including an egg-free, dairy-free chocolate cake that my daughter loved.

VILLAS ON THE WEB

Some Internet resources, which I have used, to help you find a villa:

www.definitivecaribbean.com – good overview of the various islands including some villa recommendations.

www.hotcarib.com – a good selection of villas in Barbados, St. Lucia and St. Martin. Rich is very knowledgeable; we rented a villa in Barbados through him.

www.villascaribe.com – selection of villas throughout the Caribbean.

www.jamaicavillas.com – a beautiful collection of luxury villas all over Jamaica.

www.sunvillas.com – moderate and high-end villas around Jamaica.

www.tcvillas.com – a selection of villas in Turks and Caicos.

Additional resources, which I have not used, but which look promising:

www.mexicovillarentals.com – for people comfortable in Spanish, a selection of villas in Mexico including Puerto Vallarta, Cancun and Los Cabos.

www.tropicalvillavacations.com – for those on the West Coast: villas in Hawaii and Los Cabos.

www.slowtrav.com – online community for vacation rentals.

garden. Another day, we went for a walk and found someone had "parked" their camels in front of the villa for the day by tying them to a tree. These are the kinds of things you just never see in Canada.

Now It's Your Turn

I hope our family's experiences will inspire you to try traveling, despite serious food allergies. If you're nervous, take small steps at first: before booking a flight south and a villa, try out a weekend at a not-too-distant destination, and stay at a hotel with a kitchenette. This will get you used to the requirements of packing and cooking in a new place.

Once you are ready to go farther afield, take the time to research your options and plan your food carefully. Your children will have fun new experiences and learn about how people live differently in other countries. It is possible to leave home without leaving your comfort zone. Just make sure you bring the kitchen with you.

Watch for Scott's future travel columns in Allergic Living, and send him your comments or best tips at editor@allergicliving.com