

# When our six-year-olds joined the jet set

Our twins were spoiled when they flew to Asia by themselves. Will they ever travel with us again?

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This summer our six-year-old twins, Claire and Alexander, visited their maternal grandparents, uncles and aunts on the other side of the world. They travelled on their own, spending 13 hours on a plane each way.



The journey was not an easy one for my wife and me.

First, explaining to family members, friends and colleagues that Claire and Alexander would travel alone required considerable diplomacy.

Many people had no hesitation in telling us they thought this was a bad idea. “You’re sending them away on their own (how heartless can you be)?” was a common remark. The last phrase was not spoken, but clearly implied.

I learned quickly that the only effective reply was: “Yes, but we can only do this because they are twins. We’d never – ever – think of allowing them to fly without us if they didn’t have each other.”

Usually this was enough to reassure people that we are not entirely cold-blooded parents.

Next came the ordeal of booking the airline tickets. This took hours because the twins have different surnames and each has two passports. Claire has my wife’s last name and Alexander mine. Each child has a Canadian passport and a South Korean passport.

The South Korean passport would be used to enter South Korea, where my wife Sue’s family lives, and the Canadian passport to re-enter Canada when they returned at the end of the summer.

Because South Korea does not permit twins to have different last names, Alexander’s South Korean passport is under Sue’s surname, not mine as is the case for his Canadian passport.

And there was another complication in the documents: When South Korea issued birth certificates for our Canadian-born children, the dates of birth were recorded in Korean time. Although the twins were born only three minutes apart on the same day in Canada, one was delivered just before the hour and the other just after. Once the time of birth was calculated for South Korea, Alexander and Claire were born on different days – one just before midnight and the other just after.

The result is that Alexander has two passports under two different surnames and two dates of birth. All this had to be entered into the airline’s reservation system.

On the day of departure at the end of June, the twins spent their last hours at home talking about the first things they

would do in South Korea: eat ice cream and play *Angry Birds* on their aunt's smartphone. On the way to the airport they discussed at great length what flavour ice cream they would get, and who would play *Angry Birds* first.

At the airline check-in, the twins were converted into UMs: Unaccompanied Minors. That's airline talk for children travelling alone.

There was no waiting at the long airline check-in line. Our UMs were excited to get bright yellow pouches to wear around their necks with their various travel papers, including guardian-consent forms, passports, contact information and the note I'd written explaining Alexander's two passports.

Their luggage was tagged "super elite," meaning it would be the first available on arrival. I thought wistfully how I'd never been "elite," much less "super elite," when flying and that my luggage is invariably the last to appear on the carousel.

Once ready to go through security, Alexander and Claire were eager to begin their adventure. Sue and I wanted hugs and kisses, but the twins had little patience for this. The hugs they gave us clearly conveyed: "Okay, I'll give you a hug, but really I've got to go now and have a good time. And please try not to make a scene in public."

Airline staff led them past the long line of travellers waiting for security checks, and that was our last sight of them.

A day later, we heard about their safe arrival in Korea. The cabin crew – called Flying Moms by the airline and

"nice ladies" by the twins – had kept a diary on each UM throughout the flight. This was handed over, along with the children, to the waiting grandparents and aunt.

The diary recorded, in what must surely be diplomatic language, that the twins had not been shy about pressing the call button at their seats. Claire apparently made an inordinate number of visits to the restroom.

The twins told us that the most memorable part of the flight was watching a new animated show, and that Alexander had forgotten his camera when they disembarked, but one of the nice ladies found it and brought it to him.

At the end of the summer, when we picked them up again in Toronto, they were the first passengers from their flight to emerge. When we asked about the flight, we got "fine" and "good" as responses, and a request to stop for ice cream on the way home.

Clearly they'd become seasoned and blasé travellers.

My fear now is that next time we travel together as a family, the twins will expect the same royal treatment.

How will I explain to them that we must wait at check-in, at security, at immigration and at baggage reclaim? I can already hear what they'll say: "Daddy, can we please travel without mommy and you next time?"

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