

Family tours cater to kids' curiosity



Courtesy Context Travel

Context Travel docent Lawrence Owens explains a work of art at the British Museum in London.

By Erin Gifford, TODAY contributor

It's no secret that kids and teens have their own ways of learning about the world around them. They ask curious questions, pick up on unusual details and experience the arts and culture in altogether different ways from you and me.

Tour companies and individual educators are taking notice, offering family-focused tours and walks of major cities, galleries and museums. These tours are designed to make the arts, culture and history more easily understood and appreciated by a generation that prefers iPods to Impressionism.

"Never dumb it down, but make it more accessible and more approachable," says Suzanne Julig, a New York City-based art advisor and educator who gives gallery tours to kids. **"At the end of the day, you want**

kids to want to go back to the museum because they had a positive museum experience."

Context Travel, for example, uses Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). It sounds complex, but the idea behind VTS is simple: Ask children open-ended questions. What do you see here? What do you think that person is feeling in the painting? What's the first thing that catches your eye?

"These tours open kids eyes to the world around them and equip them with language for engaging the world," says Paul Bennett, co-founder of Philadelphia-based Context Travel, which offers specially tailored family tours in more than a dozen cities. "Kids become actively engaged with their surroundings, deciphering, reading, igniting cultural curiosity."

Jeff Tyburski of Fairport, N.Y., took his then 10-year-old son, Luke, on an Ancient Rome family walk with Context Travel in 2006, led by an archaeologist. "The trip reinforced and validated Luke's interest in archaeology, and now he's planning to study archaeology when he starts college next fall," says Tyburski.

Even individual museums have begun to make their offerings more engaging for kids. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art offers hands-on art activities and treasure hunts, even an exploration-based iPod Touch game hosted by Dingo and Collie, two colorful dogs from Roy de Forest's painting, "Country Dog Gentleman."

Here are several family-focused tours you may want to check out to help kids and teens get the most from travel experiences:

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Go on a lion hunt around Venice

Kids will get a kick out of traipsing around the City of Canals in search of winged lions, the symbol of Venice, on buildings, bridges and street corners as docents weave in a discussion about the history of the city during this three-hour walk. ([Context Travel](#), \$360 per group)

Unlock the secrets of French cuisine in Paris

France is known worldwide for its culinary customs and delights. Young chefs can expose their palates to the smells and tastes of local Parisian markets, then set up a food lab to experiment with French cooking. ([Context Travel](#), \$415 per group)

Join a scavenger hunt through the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Spend time deciphering puzzles and searching for art works throughout the museum's galleries. The most beautiful and interesting works will be distilled into an interactive discussion during this two-hour tour. ([SuzanneJulig.com](#), \$55 per child)

Brush up on Renaissance art (and how the paints are made) in Florence

Learn what "grotesque" paintings are and find out the strange ingredients used to make paint at the famous Uffizi Gallery. No yawns on this three-hour tour of one of the most well-known art collections. ([ArtViva](#), \$310 per group of up to 10 people)

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