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KIDS IN *Museums*

Andrea Mynard finds that you don't have to be silent or studious to enjoy museums with your family.

FAMILIES CLIMBING INTO A GIANT BIRD'S NEST IN A cedar tree at Compton Verney Art Gallery, Warwickshire, this year may marvel at their bird's eye view of the world. They may even feather the nest themselves, adding a few treasures such as pine cones to this art installation for future visitors to find. Meanwhile, visitors to Exeter's RAMM museum may get a buzz out of children's bee bags before learning how to make their own mosaic.

Difficult to believe that museums were once dark, musty places where children were hushed and warned

not to go too near the exhibits. Nowadays young visitors are positively encouraged to get touchy feely at many of the UK's museums and art galleries. Fossils are hidden in sandpits, storytelling amidst architectural splendour enralls toddlers and we're all encouraged to get interactive.

Dea Birkett, who was prompted to set up the Kids in Museums initiative 10 years ago after being thrown out of the Royal Academy because of her noisy two year old twins, agrees: 'There have been huge changes in museums, they used to be stuffy, dull places. Now you sniff, >



'There have been huge changes in museums, they used to be stuffy, dull places'



Children experiment at 'Tiny Tate'

> you feel, you stroke- it's a multi-sensory experience. You can make things happen.'

Welcome families

The Royal Academy, like so many other museums and galleries throughout the UK has reacted extremely positively to the gauntlet thrown down by Kids in Museums challenging them to be more welcoming to families. As well as introducing interactive elements, many museums have made access easier for pushchairs and generally made thoughtful changes in providing a safe and comfortable environment for families.

Creating Inspiration

I once spent a cosy, rainy afternoon in the Resources rooms of Compton Verney with my then four year old. One particularly comfy space within the eighteenth century mansion has a gorgeous selec-



tion of children's art books, jigsaws and drawing materials. Having browsed the portrait gallery downstairs, children can create two of their own portraits – one to take home with them and one to peg up for future visitors to view.

There are free family activity backpacks available at this award winning art gallery, offering options from 18 months to teenagers. Backpacks for little ones include a picnic blanket, which they can take into the grounds to look at bugs and collect treasures to make a piece of land art. Older children can solve clues and hunt out the hidden treasures of the collection or explore "perilous places" as they discover incredible facts on a nail biting adventure through British Folk Art.

Making the Most

Since many museums have been so creative in their efforts to engage families, it seems only fair

'If your children are noisy, chances are they're excited and there are some great experiences to focus this excitement on'



Summer fun at Compton Verney

Where To Go

- ▶ Compton Verney, Warwickshire (comptonverney.org.uk) has a private art collection within a mansion set in lovely grounds. Try treasure hunts and lots of activities in school holidays from 'The Big Draw' Curious beasts competition to wonderful Christmas activities.
- ▶ Beamish 'The Living Museum of the North' County Durham (beamish.org.uk) allows visitors to learn about steam power, take part in a 1900s agricultural show or Dig for Victory.
- ▶ At the Horniman Museum

and Gardens, South London (horniman.ac.uk), visitors can become a tree detective, discover mini-mammals or take a journey along the Amazon.

- ▶ At the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter (rammuseum.org.uk) pick up a bee backpack full of ideas for fun activities, learn about Roman mosaics and make your own.
- ▶ At M Shed, Bristol (mshed.org) see the Up, Up and Away! artwork created by families, using hot air balloons as a theme to capture in words and drawings what they like about this wonderful museum.

that we make the effort as visitors to get the most out of our visits. Sam Skillings of Compton Verney makes a good point about the way we approach our visit: 'The main thing is to not be intimidated, and not think you have to be quiet in galleries. A lot has changed – you can make noise, talk and get involved around the exhibits.'

If your children are noisy, chances are they're excited and there are some great experiences to focus this excitement on. At the Horniman Museum and Gardens in South London's Forest Hill, an Amazon Adventure (until November 2013) will take the family on a journey along the world's largest and most biologically diverse river, meeting a stingray, learning about exotic pink dolphins, piranhas and anacondas. You can feel an electric eel's zap and discover the environmental dangers facing the Amazon.

Sometimes noisiness is more about boredom than excitement. Dea Birkett has ideas to get children interested from the moment you arrive: 'My personal tip is, don't leave the museum shop until last. Go first, say that you'll buy your children their favourite postcard, then suggest you all

go to find whatever curiosity they've chosen a picture of. You then have a treasure hunt and it's for something that they've chosen. And you don't have all the way round, "Can we go to the shop?" because you've already been and they've chosen their favourite thing.'

Get Involved

You may also get more out of museum visits if you remember it's all about the whole family experience. Not just toddlers to teens; babies will enjoy the sensory and social stimulation, while grandparents may want to take part too and their participation may add a personal, anecdotal slant to visits. Dea says: 'There has to be something for every member of the family, adults as well as the kids. Grandparents get in touch with us and say that museums are one of their favourite places to take grandchildren to.'

It's a great excuse to roll your sleeves up and get involved in some fun activities too! Whether it's sitting down at Compton Verney and using cardboard, coloured pens and old packets to make collages or drawings of something from your street for a modern street scene or bringing your beetroots to County



'Grandparents get in touch with us and say that museums are one of their favourite places to take grandchildren to'

Durham's Beamish Growing Your Own competition.

Sam Skillings agrees: 'Often activities with children help adults to get more out of their visit, it's good to learn together.' She sees parents starting to let their imaginations run as wild as their children's in the folk art collection of Compton Verney, prompted by the stories children create about what they think the exhibits may have been used for.

Beamish museum involves the whole local community in their annual Agricultural show, which recreates a typical county

show from the early 1900s. Visitors stroll amongst goats, geese, falconry displays, take part in Industry classes, make peg dolls and watch demonstrations of ploughing and country crafts.

Great to see that in an age of virtual experiences, museums are offering real experience with really exciting things.

Want to know more?

Kids in Museums, kidsinmuseums.org.uk

- Andrea lives in rural Gloucestershire and is mum to Ruby, five.