

Breaking the Connection

CAPE FEAR, NORTH CAROLINA — So the plan was this: take seven urchins, ages 3 to 17, on an old-fashioned vacation without high tech gizmos. A noble intent, correct? Well, you know what they say about noble intentions. The road to hell is paved with them.

Back in the pre-tech era, family vacations usually involved fresh air. But now, many American kids don't want to go outside, unless there is someone handing out money. Many modern children stay indoors so they can feed their machine addictions. Why bother risking the elements when any kind of visual you want is a click away?

The ferry to Bald Head Island at the southern point of North Carolina takes about twenty minutes. There are no cars allowed on the island; you transport by golf cart. The beaches are pristine, and the island marshlands teem with wildlife. Radio Shack is not there.

I rented a beach house that immediately bewildered the tykes. "Where is the Xbox?" one of them asked, a hint of panic in his eyes. "The TV only has shows! Where are the games?"

When informed there were no electronic games available, profound silence descended on the room.

But there were other options. We explored the marsh and saw red foxes running around. We hit the surf, where the water was clean and warm. "But what about the sharks?" an urchin urgently asked. When told they can't survive the large breaking waves, so they remain far off shore, the kid was mollified a bit, but remained suspicious.

One night, we all participated in the island "ghost walk," a \$10-per-ticket tourist play. Three college kids dressed in pirate gear led a stroll to the island lighthouse and to an

old cemetery. Along the way, they told of shipwrecks, pirate atrocities, and civil war mayhem. Apparently the ghost of Aaron Burr's kidnapped daughter, Theodosia, roams around the island, lacking cash to buy a ferry ticket out. For a while, the kids were enthralled and I was encouraged. They had to use their imaginations to picture the stories being told; there were no high tech visuals.

But arriving back at the hacienda, I discovered one of the urchins had smuggled in an iPod, and three of the boys were huddled around it shrieking with joy. They were cyberspaced-out in a matter of minutes.

The three older girls were getting more into the swing. Now they wanted to get up at one in the morning to look for turtles coming ashore to lay eggs. The boys were asked if they wanted to do that as well. "Turtles?" the eight-year-old said. "Don't they bite?"

"Not as hard as sharks," I replied.

The girls went on their mission, but did not see any turtles. They did see more foxes hunting for turtle eggs, however. They also saw deer without the assistance of the Animal Planet channel.

In the end, the vacation received mixed reviews from the kids, even though I suspect they liked it more than they were admitting. Three of them got to drive the golf carts around, everybody enjoyed the surf, and when water guns appeared, laughter filled the air and the machines were momentarily forgotten.

But the minute we arrived home on Long Island, a long way, culturally speaking, from Bald Head, the urchins headed for their sacred space. The PCs were alight faster than you could say "Theodosia."