

On street safari

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Yesterday a woman heading for Arsenal's football museum – which is in the part of London near my home – stopped me in the street. “You must be on holiday,” she guessed quite incorrectly. When I explained I was on a street safari she seemed baffled. Why would anyone walk when they could go by car, she countered? The answer is so obvious to those of us with comfortable footwear...

Dickens walked for hours, waiting for inspirational action to add to his novel scenes. It cheered him up and made deadlines easier to meet. I work (three days a week) as a journalist and use my walking trips to my three-year-old daughter's nursery as much for inspiration as exercise. We could drive together (if there was a family car) but whatever the weather I prefer to travel local distances the age-old way. Lola and I can chat and both of us do a lot of grinning (impossible when keeping short temper at bay trapped in traffic gridlock). Waving a morning “hello” at people I know, smiling at the woman who runs the laundry or the newsagent whose children are prodigies, stopping to chat to the shopkeeper who makes delicious pesto, running into my daughter's former nursery teachers and chance meetings with people who have young children too makes the pavements of Highbury seem like a surprisingly friendly international village. It feels good to live here and to know that we aren't clogging up a parking spot or busy roads. We get the best of street life because we choose to use the streets for socializing rather than just speeding through.

On non-work days entertaining two young children – the baby strapped into the buggy and her elder sister walking hand-in-hand or resting on the buggy board – is about making best use of home time. That's when we go on endlessly changing street safaris.

Another way of seeing

I didn't have to think hard about why my inquisitor guessed that I was a holidaymaker: my buggy was laden with jumpers and coats for the children and myself. I had wet weather clothes, spare clothes, a nappy changing kit, rice cakes for hungry moments (the baby's, not mine), water and a Tupperware container filled with our picnic lunch. And I didn't have the stressed look of a woman trying to handle a buggy because the car is having a service.

Although my home is rarely more than a ten minute walk away I find that once I have left the house I just want to stay out. That way the children and I can laze in the park, dawdle at the playground and chat with the people we meet on our way. Piling stuff up in a car might work on the self-sufficiency front, but driving to and from the key child entertainment spots is not a way to make friends.

In contrast, even when it's cold and wet walking in the city can be a pleasure. I have a buggy that is easy to push (and to fold up so it's possible to get on a bus) and the children have the sort of all-weather gear that would be suitable for surviving a Lakeland winter. That way I know they will stay toasty warm, and dry enough for just one more late afternoon stroll. If only more

people in charge of their kids did the same: wandering around the park in the rain can be lonely if no one else is willing to brave a few squalls.

To be honest I sometimes have to use tricks to make my three-year-old enjoy being out. Window shopping can be a draw but pavement life is more so. Together we take routes which slope gently down hill (especially when she is tired); we walk on the sunny side of the street in winter and the shady side in summer. We make up running routes – from the tomato plant an elderly Italian man planted by a lamppost down to the bee-covered lavender hedge. From there it's a few wobbly hops to a fat red post box, and then down the passageway and home. We search for hollyhocks in summer, michelmas daisies in autumn and rubber bands all year round. We watch buildings going up, shout "Spot the dog" when we're feeling silly, chase leaves and dodge the bears that live in Islington's Georgian squares. We wonder if we'll ever see Rachel again, the ten-year-old who stopped her game of hopscotch last summer to draw a chalk picture of my Lola on the pavement. We pretend to be animals at the zoo whenever we find crowd control barriers on Arsenal home game days.

Making the territory home

I never really walk more than ten minutes in any direction: the only places to visit are the playground, the local parks, the shops, the nursery, the church playgroups, the city farm, the library, the café, and one day her school... so many places, and so easy to reach on foot. It's more like the country than the country. Indeed my three-year-old is expert at guessing where the city foxes mark their boundaries. She sniffs the air by a tangle of honeysuckle, the park bins and then a bushy overhang near a converted pub sensing what Ted Hughes described as "that sudden hot sharp smell of fox".

I've heard car-dependent friends sigh over my route home, saying they wished their street was as nice, not yet realizing that it always is. There are always low garden walls to climb, conkers or gingko leaves to find, street lamps to circle. Even dog poo (how I hate the way people fail to pick up these things) can trigger counting games...

I am never happier than when I am out walking with a toddler. I may pretend to be an urban warrior, but here on the streets around my home I am rarely angry – and oh, how angry I do get when I stay still or when my buggy is forced into a detour up and down a steep pavement because of the thoughtlessness of someone parking their cars in front of a flattened kerb. To so many people driving through the area, or rushing from house to tube, my home patch is just a hinterland – somewhere to get past fast. Or to pretend to go fast through as they rev the engine raging at the endless traffic jams generated by everyone driving their car at the same time. To these people I am invisible: a mother with a laden-down buggy eking out the hours between birth and the first day at school.

It's not like that at all though. I walk the streets because walking guarantees surprising pleasures. For me this may be the bloom of the first rose of summer – or indeed the last – and for my eldest daughter it will be an array of urban treasures from bottle tops to heart-shaped leaves. Meanwhile the baby looks on, eyes wide open, riding her chariot into the wind. How different her world views would be if she was marooned in a baby car seat, a metre or two's mirror vision from her mum.

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