Adoption Camps
Explore the Various Camp Opportunities for Adoptees & Adoptive Families

Heritage Tours
Returning to your child’s birth country; what to expect, how to plan & much more

Adoption Grants
What to Consider Before Applying
Should your family go on a birthland tour? Yes. Absolutely. But answers to the questions “Are we ready?” and “How do we get ready?” are a bit more complex.

As with any great adventure, there are many factors to consider as you prepare for this important milestone.

Start by making it a priority. (Yes, it’s really that important.)

“It truly is something every family should experience,” said Jan Dunn, a social worker and director of Dillon International’s Lifetime Support Services. “We want families to realize that when they adopt internationally, they are becoming an international family — Korean American, Haitian American, Chinese American, etc. A birthland tour should be a family affair and a very natural and normal event.”

Children do not stay children forever. As they grow, they will encounter social expectations that they have visited their birth country and know some of its language.

“There will be a great sense of pride and satisfaction for them in having achieved these things,” Dunn added.

**Build a Foundation.**

Don’t wait until you’re thinking about a birthland tour to start exposing your child to elements of his or her birth country’s culture. Seize every opportunity to let your child know that celebrating heritage is important to you. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- If you traveled for your child’s adoption, share your treasured memories: what the trip was like, the people you met and all of the sights, sounds, smells and tastes you remember from your child’s birth country.
- Attend heritage camps for adoptees and work to stay connected to the families you’ll meet there.
- Get involved with community organizations of individuals from your child’s birth country.
- Learn about and celebrate your child’s birth country’s holidays and special occasions.
- Add popular foods from your child’s birth country to your family’s mealtime lineup.
- Read age-appropriate books about adoption and his or her birth country.
- Work together to learn some key phrases in his or her birth country’s language.

**So, what do you expect?**

Don’t get on the plane without first framing a few expectations of what a birth country visit is — and is not.

This is going to be fun; you will have a great time and you will see plenty of tourist attractions. But this isn’t going to be your ordinary vacation or holiday, so don’t approach it with that mindset.

Because of the price tag associated with international travel, it might be tempting for parents to make the tour a graduation, birthday or anniversary gift. Don’t do this without consulting the adoptee first.

If your family is facing struggles, deal with those issues separately. Do not look to a birthland tour for a quick fix or magical solution to the challenges of adoptive parenting.

A birth country visit is a life-changing trip where one revisits the past, celebrates the present and anticipates the future. And remember, this trip is about your children so talk with them about their expectations. How do they feel about traveling? What are they excited about? Or worried about?
“Their expectations could be completely different from yours,” said Lisa Leung, Dillon International’s tour coordinator. “Unless you make a point to sit down and talk about it, you’ll never know.”

Here are a few ideas for starting conversations and preparing to get the most out of this trip-of-a-lifetime:

- Break out the paperwork. Reviewing your children’s lifebooks, adoption paperwork and referral photos are great ways to start a conversation about adoption and your children’s birth country. Be sure to make copies and take them on the tour with you.

- Learn as much as you can in advance of travel, Dunn advised. “When you get to your birth country, a lot of questions you didn’t even know you had will surface once you get involved with the culture. You are definitely stepping into another world when you get off the plane.”

- Talk to other adoptive families who have gone on a birthland tour. Their shared perspective will give you insights. They’ll be a great resource for tips on travel and packing, too.

“OK. When do we go?”

If your child joined your family at a young age, plan on making the first birth country visit when they are a pre-teen, around 8-13 years old.

“They’re old enough to remember and enjoy the trip, but still young enough that they aren’t as overwhelmed with identity issues,” Leung advised. “The first trip is the perfect opportunity for an adoptee to get to know their birth country’s culture and experience the sites.”

You should plan on taking a second trip when your child is an older teen or young adult. That trip will be an invaluable opportunity for an adoptee to explore his or her unique adoption story, reviewing the adoption file or exploring options of a birth family search, Leung added.

A birthland visit can be emotionally taxing for young adult adoptees.

“They relish being in a country where they look like everyone else, yet at the same time, they feel separated and isolated by not speaking the language and constantly being called upon to explain why this is the case,” Leung explained.

“It’s ideal for young adults to travel with other adoptees,” Leung said. “We have heard from many adoptees who report that having the support of fellow adoptees is what got them through the pains of culture shock, identity issues and birth family searches.”

Because of this sense of camaraderie with other adoptees, traveling parents should be prepared that their child (of any age) might tend to distance themselves during the trip.

“It’s natural for them to want to blend in and to spend more time with fellow adoptees in their travel group,” Leung explained.

While this can be a lonely feeling for parents, it’s actually a good thing.

“This can be an important step in their identity formation while reconnecting to their birth country,” Leung said.

“What about children who arrived home when they were older?”

With more children arriving home to their forever families when they are in their tween or teen years, it is important to note that their feelings surrounding a birth country visit will
be significantly different from a child who arrived home as an infant or toddler.

While a birthland tour is still a valuable experience, the trip must be approached with additional preparations, Dunn said.

“Parents would need to consider how their child has coped with the trauma of leaving their birth country and talk through with their child about how he or she feels about returning for a short trip,” Dunn advised, adding that families should seek guidance from their adoption agency’s post-adoption department or an adoption-competent counselor before departing. “The key to a successful trip would be preparation: Making sure that their child understands they are going to their birth country with their parents and coming home with their parents.”

The journey doesn’t end when you get home. Returning to your child’s birth country can bring up unresolved emotions, particularly feelings of loss and grief for both adoptees and parents. It might take weeks or months to process these emotions. And that’s normal.

“There’s a feeling of being at home and foreign at the same time. There’s a struggle between those root issues of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Why am I feeling this way when I had such a great time?’” Dunn explained.

Adoptees typically feel an increased desire to know more of their history once they’ve visited their birth country. It can be difficult for them to reflect on an adoptee tour companion who was able to meet foster family or birth family when they were unable to have this experience, Dunn added. “There’s that inward struggle of wanting to be happy for someone, but that feeling of ‘Why isn’t this happening for me?’”

Parents should be ready to be supportive as their child navigates these feelings and keep in contact with their adoption agency for advice after they get home from the tour, Dunn added.

**Travel. Reflect. Repeat.**

“It’s wonderful that we are seeing more and more families who make birth country visits a regular part of their child’s life, going every year or so,” Dunn said.

This is ideal since your kids will experience their birth country through different perspectives as they grow up; however, realistically, this isn’t affordable for everyone.

So just commit to taking every opportunity you possibly can to connect with the country that gave you the most beautiful gift ever — your child.

Susan Serrano is director of media relations with Dillon International. To learn more about non-profit Dillon International’s adoption, humanitarian aid and lifetime support services, including counseling, heritage events, birth family search and birthland tours, visit www.dillonadopt.com.
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