

BIRTH COUNTRY TOURS: WHAT'S BEST FOR YOUR FAMILY?

By Kate DeLosso, CTC

It seems like such a good idea: revisiting your adopted child's birth country. You want your child to experience the culture and heritage and the journey has become almost a rite of passage for an adoptee. So many adoptive parents are talking about birth country tours, writing accounts of the family's travels, and posting websites with information. But before you decide to finalize your plans, take the time to ask "what is best for my family?"

As an adoptive parent of three international adoptees who are 28, 30 and 34 years old and the organizer of Motherland Tours for adoptees and their families since 1996, I have gained extensive insight into the complexity of traveling to one's birth country. Based on my personal and professional experience, I've developed a series of questions parents should to ask themselves as they consider revisiting their adopted child's birth-country. All of the questions apply to families with adoptees 12 years of age or younger:

1. **WHOSE IDEA IS THIS?** Is it the child's idea or the parents' idea? The child's peers or the parent's peers influencing this decision - everybody's doing it
2. **WHAT DO YOU EXPECT TO ACCOMPLISH WITH THIS TRIP?** This question revolves around feelings and expectations: how will you or your child feel if there is a visit the orphanage? What if the child can't visit their orphanage? Are you going to search for more information on your child's background? Will you be satisfied if there is nothing else you can learn?
3. **WHAT IS YOUR CHILD'S IDEA OF "CULTURE"?** Most parents tell me they want their child to experience their birth-culture. Your child may not view "culture" the same way you do. To children culture may mean the size of cars, the way people dress, and the food and not museums, historical sites and folkloric shows. How do you feel about this?
4. **WHAT IS THE BEST AGE FOR YOUR CHILD TO VISIT THEIR BIRTH-COUNTRY?** There is more than one answer to this question but for children under 12 years of age:
 - a. Young adoptees: Personally, I recommend children be 8 years or older for a cultural or historical tour of their birth-country. Parents need to fully answer question #2 to help determine the best time to travel with their children.
5. **IS THIS A GOOD TIME FOR YOUR CHILD?** No matter what their physical age, do you think your child is mature enough to understand and appreciate the differences in culture, to handle the rigors of traveling long distances and eating strange foods, and to visit to an orphanage to see the children who are left behind? Some children are ready for these challenges at six years of age; some won't be ready until much older. This is your personal judgment as a parent.

If you decide that it is time to take a Birth Country Tour, some further questions you should consider:

6. **WHO SHOULD MAKE THE TRIP?** Anyone who is important to the child and the family. That means siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Older adoptees may consider including: spouses, partners or friends. Consider traveling with families from your adoptive parent group or your adoption travel group.
7. **WHAT SHOULD THE TRIP INCLUDE?** English speaking guides, intra-country transportation, accommodations, family-friendly and child-focused activities, some meals, permission (if possible) to visit your child's orphanage or at least some time in the child's local province or town, historical and cultural sightseeing. Tour

exclusions should be prominently mentioned, such as, what are you responsible to pay beyond the cost of the tour?

8. **WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO GO?** This question has two answers: when is the best time to go for the climate/weather conditions and when is the best time for your family to go? School vacations can be a good time, but consider the climate of the birth country. Some families have to compromise between good weather, school, and family responsibilities.
9. **HOW DO YOU WANT TO TRAVEL?** Do you want to travel in a group that includes just immediate and extended family or travel in a group of 40 – 50 people? Do you want free and flexible time to be able to relax and explore on your own or tightly scheduled itineraries? Do you prefer three, four or five star accommodations? Do you prefer to build your own itinerary and determine the length of time spent in different places or follow an already set itinerary?
10. **QUESTIONS TO ASK THE TOUR OPERATOR:**
 - a. How long have you been in business?
 - b. How long have you offered tours for adoptees and their families?
 - c. Have you ever visited this country and if yes, how often?
 - d. How many adoptive families per year do you send to this country?
 - e. Are you insured? Do you offer travel insurance?
 - f. What is the minimum and maximum size of the travel groups?
 - g. Can my family determine our own itinerary or do I have to follow your itinerary?
 - h. If possible, can you obtain permission to visit orphanages?

From my own personal experience, I can tell you that some adoptees will feel it is absolutely imperative to visit their birth-country, some adoptees never feel that pull. Despite the fact that I have been organizing Motherland/Birth Country Tours for adoptees since 1996, my own son, Matthew who is 33 yrs old, has told me many times that he is not ready to visit. In the meantime, Matthew and I have visited China together and he has visited Japan on his own, but he has never expressed an interest in visiting his birth-country – not yet.

In 1995, my husband and I visited Korea with our daughter, Anne, when she was 17 years old. While we were in Korea, Annie said “The longer I spend in Korea, the more American I feel”. Anne is now 30 years old and says that one visit to Korea was the most important trip of her life because it gave her a sense of herself as a Korean-American but helped her appreciate the country where she was born.

A decision to tour a Birth Country is a very personal experience for each adoptive family. You, as the parent, need to make the decision that is best for your family and your adopted child.

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