

FIRST PERSON

# Learning to Get On Board

A mom's meticulously planned family trip to a Titanic museum across the pond was turning into a real disaster—until she decided to go with the flow.

BY DEBORAH WAY



**L**ATE MARCH IN LONDON that year was windy, snowy, gray, and cold, but though I'd mapped out every detail of the trip, somehow I'd failed to bring warm-enough clothes for our child. This was especially terrible given that the trip was ostensibly

for our child. As it turned out, wardrobe issues were just the tip of the iceberg.

Hazel was 4 at the time, in preschool, with an abiding passion for the Titanic. An expert, really, the way kids are when they're obsessed. From Hazel, we knew that the ship was built in Belfast, Ireland, but had set sail from Southampton, England. We knew not just that it had four smokestacks but that the fourth was mostly for show, added to make the ship look more powerful and impressive. We knew of the ill-fated Captain Edward Smith. And the rescue ship Carpathia.

What we didn't know from Hazel, because Hazel didn't know, was that there was a Titanic museum—the Maritime Museum, in Southampton, across the Atlantic in an ancient stone building called the Wool House. That was my own brilliant discovery, and as I explained to my husband, taking Hazel there was how we could make up for having upended our whole world the year before, moving from Indiana to New Jersey for my new magazine job in New York City.

"You don't think that's a little extreme?" he asked.

"Never mind," I said. "We can go without you."

We could never have gone without him, but I already had a vision for the trip, and it had already led me to derangement. We'd spend six days in London, one in Southampton. We'd arrive on Mothering Sunday, the English version of Mother's Day. It would be a mothering triumph.

I spent weeks planning our Hazel-based itinerary. The London Eye (a gigantic Ferris wheel!). The Foundling Museum (all about orphans, just like Annie!). We'd have afternoon tea at the Wolseley and eat sushi at a restaurant where you sat at a counter in front of a conveyor belt on which the rolls rode merrily by. At the Imperial War Museum, we'd hold hands and cry for the poor British children who had to be sent away from home to escape the Blitz. At Tate Modern, we'd slide

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down a giant five-story twisty-turny slide. I even timed our visit to the Tower (ravens! crown jewels!) so we'd be outside when the Tower Bridge lifted its arms to let a tall boat through. And these were only the preliminary amazements, just the run-ups to the grand—the grandest!—prize.

Alas. The London Eye was not a Ferris wheel. In Hazel's eye, it was a boring room, fully enclosed, crowded, and slow-moving. The Foundling Museum was no better—no song, no dance, no Daddy Warbucks. At the Tower, we had to view the crown jewels from a swiftly moving walkway. "We're like sushi," my husband joked, but I couldn't chortle along; I'd pictured us lingering over scepters and tiaras, taking turns picking our favorites, the way Hazel loved to do with any sparkly array. So many things about the trip were not as I had planned, and I couldn't keep my disappointment in. With every letdown, I felt myself winding tighter, huffing and puffing and sighing ever more bitterly. Hazel set out each morning hopeful, looking, in mismatched layers of insufficient clothing, like a stoic pink refugee; a few hours later, my husband would be carrying 35 pounds of pink sorrow, their expressions twinned in resignation and defeat.

But we soldiered on. The big day dawned. The train came. A window seat was open. We reviewed our iceberg knowledge and arrived in Southampton to find the sun shining. We got our bearings, headed toward the water, and there it was, the old stone Wool House, as solid and true a 700-year-old building as one could hope to find, 800 yards from where the Titanic had left land behind. We were stepping into history. This was the dream I'd dreamed for my child, and we'd made it, and my heart was full.

Until we went inside and saw the sign announcing that the second floor, where the Titanic exhibits were located, was closed for renovation.

I thought: *No!* I felt myself bracing: to throw up my hands, exclaim in outrage, beseech and besiege the staff to make an exception for us who had come



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Way is the creator of [@thekeepthings](#) (on Instagram and Substack), a memoir project featuring stories of lost loved ones and the objects they left behind.

all this way, an exception for Hazel. But as my husband and I locked eyes above Hazel's head, his finger shot to his lips in a silent *Shh!* For good measure he zipped them shut. Then he mouthed to me: *Can't. Read.*

I instantly understood. Before us were all manner of items related, if not exactly to the Titanic, then at least to Southampton and seafaring in general. We had a friend who'd taken her daughter to the Disney Store and told her it was Disney World. We could do the same.

So we did. Hearts in our throats, waiting every second for the jig to be up, we surveyed models of ships we'd never heard of and made a game of deeming each one "No Titanic!" We looked at ropes and anchors and photographs and offered such Titanic connections and comparisons as we could. We read about sailboats and laughed to think how many sails the Titanic would have needed. And just when we were sure Hazel would call our bluff—"Hey, this isn't a Titanic museum!"—we came upon a children's area with an activity table, some engine room machinery, and an assortment of captains jackets, navy blue with gold braid and other captainly adornments, waiting to be tried on.

"Hazel, look! You get to be Captain Smith!"

A jacket was chosen. As I buttoned it up, Hazel was transported, eyes alight, fingers fluttering like eager starfish. There ensued much marching about and issuing of orders, inspecting of the pea green and polished brass machinery, vigorous turning of every wheel that could be turned. Eventually we made our way to a table where we could construct our own Titanic out of interlocking plastic building blocks. As we settled in, I took off my coat and finally settled down.

All this time, I'd thought I was the captain of our trip, striving heroically to steer. But all along I'd been the iceberg, the awful unyielding thing that, in its unyieldingness, threatened to sink us. And still to this day—especially today, as we journey through times when trying to hold fast to any plan so often feels like folly—I think of the small but titanic lesson I took to heart in that museum. The lesson that every overplanner, like every preschooler, is the happier for learning: You get what you get and you don't get upset. ■