

If you're a busy mum and your idea of a family holiday is same stress, different country, then you need to meet travel nanny Michaela Drake, 22, the angel with crayons. Once the preserve of people who turn left when entering an aircraft, the idea of taking a nanny on holiday is catching on with the rest of us, and it's not as expensive as you might think.

We'll get to that later. First off, what can Michaela and her ilk do for you? "Lots of parents have said the fear of flying with toddlers has kept them grounded, so I'm there to make life easier," she says. "I'll have been round to the family's home and met the children before the holiday, so by the time I get to the airport, they already know me." On the flight, her bag of tricks — colouring, stories, little treats and puppet shows using flight socks — keeps the kids amused while the parents down G&Ts and experience the novelty of watching a whole film undisturbed.

On the ground, she usually finds herself housed in a villa,

sometimes in her own room, but more often sharing with the kids. "Parents tell me they used to choose hotels principally for the childcare, so they could have a few hours to themselves each day, but found that hotels with the best creches and kids' clubs were usually the most expensive. Villas are cheaper, they offer more freedom — and, as for the childcare, they've got me." How much time Michaela spends playing with and babysitting your children is agreed in advance — it's usually 30-40 hours a week, plus 15 hours of babysitting. That's five nights out in a row. Imagine.

"I mould myself to the mother and reinforce her parenting style," Michaela says. "But the kids always try to pull a fast one. On one occasion, I met a five-year-old for the first time, and as soon as her mother had left the room, she looked me in the eye and said, 'I am allowed fizzy drinks, you know.'"

Despite her role as enforcer, bonding with the children is easy: "They see me as a playmate, and my latest trick is an old Polaroid camera. I encourage

the children to keep a holiday diary and I allow them one shot a day. Old technology for us, but fascinating for kids."

Does flying off to foreign climes and handing your children to a nanny contradict the idea of a family holiday? "Working parents deserve a holiday too," Michaela says. "Most of the time, my job isn't to take the children off their hands, but just to be around to help."

Claire Taylor, from Hertfordshire, is a keen skier and has three children aged between three and six: "We used to use hotel-based childcare in the

**"Puppet shows using flight socks keep the kids amused while their parents have a gin and tonic"**

# PACK A POPPINS

For a family holiday without the stress, take a travel nanny. It's cheaper than you might think, says Chris Haslam



Alps, but booking three of them into the kids' club works out more expensive than taking a nanny, especially since we drive to the mountains and don't have to pay for her flight." And for Claire's travel nanny, it's an easy gig: "We take the six-year-old to ski school while she looks after the younger two. Then we come back at lunchtime to be with the children, so she gets the afternoon off. Rather than dumping the kids on her and spending the entire day skiing, we simply use her as an extra pair of hands that are there to help out. For us, she is a travel essential."

Rachel Warnock, from Yorkshire, also has three children, one of them with special needs. "A friend told me about travel nannies, and at first I was sceptical. Until then, holidays had been nonstop problem-solving exercises, as my son requires specialised care and the girls employed by the hotels we went to were basically useless. Finding a travel nanny who bonded with him before we had even left the country, and who could provide one-on-one care

whenever I asked, was amazing. I was on a high for weeks."

Linda Drake — Michaela's mother, and manager of My Travelling Nanny (020 8133 3126, mytravellingnanny.co.uk) — says her clients, most of whom come by word of mouth, are from all walks of life. "We have bankers and lawyers, but also teachers, business owners, farmers, all sorts." The same goes for her stable of frequent-flyer Mary Poppinses. "Many of them are primary-school teachers who have lots of holiday to fill, but we've got actresses, minor TV presenters and even an Australian detective on sabbatical on our books. Ski nannies are in great demand, but we've sent nannies everywhere from the Maldives to camping trips in England."

The selection process is rigorous: as well as childcare experience, candidates must have three references, undergo a CRB check, be competent swimmers and be trained in paediatric first aid. And the price? From about £375 for a week, excluding flights, food and accommodation.