

Field Trips- Planning for a Great Day and Avoiding Possible Problems

by Susan Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 87 (summer 2004) of the PENNSYLVANIA HOMESCHOOLERS® newsletter.]

I recently received an email and phone call from a nice fellow who works at the Martin Guitar Factory in Nazareth PA, just north of Allentown. The factory has a small museum and also takes groups on tours of the facility, and many homeschool groups have come for visits. This all sounds very nice- but there was a catch. The Martin Guitar Factory was having some real problems with these homeschoolers, and they needed to know how to solve them so that they could continue to let groups come on tours. Here is what Brenden Hackett, the Tour Manager at Martin Guitar, outlined as trouble spots- see if these sometimes may happen when your local group plans tours in your region:

- Arriving on time: Our tour guides are all employees. For this reason, they're scheduled one month in advance to ensure the managers have enough time to cover their departments. Their time is valuable, making the arrival of a tour group at least 10 minutes prior to the tour start time very important.
- Children: Although everyone is welcome to visit, we do not recommend the tour for children under 8 years of age. Most of the tour is technical and historical. Also, our museum is exactly that.....a museum.
- Behavior: With several million dollars worth of guitars on display, it is very important the children's behavior be monitored at all times. We do, however, have several instruments that may be played by children.
- Parents: Also, it seems that parents, who may not have seen each other in awhile, often spend time socializing amongst themselves, occasionally leaving children unattended. We want to avoid "bulls in a china shop."
- Fees: Our tour program is small but growing rapidly. We don't have the ability to accommodate large groups (10 or more) in the *afternoon* public tour time slot of 1:00PM. This is why we encourage homeschool groups to schedule in the *morning*. We'd be happy to extend a discount to Home School Groups who schedule *morning* tours in advance. Our regular *afternoon* fee is \$3 per person. The **new** Home School rate for *morning* tours is \$2 per person. If you are interested in contacting the Martin Guitar Factory for a tour call 1-800-345-3103, x272 and also be sure to check out their excellent website at www.martinguitar.com/visit/.

Many homeschool groups get 'rave reviews' from tour guides that homeschool kids are so well-behaved and attentive. But I'll always remember the time a friend of mine shared that her group was no longer getting these types of positive comments- instead the kids were embarrassingly unruly and racing around, not getting in line when asked to by guides, uninterested in the tour topic, and more. Parents might be chatting excitedly with one another and even disturbing the tour rather than helping their kids pay attention- or alternatively the parents might dominate the question and answer time, leaving the kids to just stand by passively. We all also need to keep in mind that it is crucial that we abide by any safety or policy rules of places we visit for group tours.

We also need to think carefully about *why* we want to go on any tour in the first place- and to prepare our kids to get the most out of the experience. Not every tour being organized by a homeschool group will be right for our family, at this particular time- especially if we are hoping to bring along very young preschoolers or toddlers.

I've found that having my own kids *write down* a list of possible questions to ask when on a tour really helped them be actively listening and aware- before doing this, my kids tended to be rather passive on tours and always drew a blank when asked if they had any questions. I'll never forget our tour many years ago of the Pittsburgh Airport, where the tour guide was so impressed by all the kids' many questions- he began telling everyone he ran into as we walked through the airport, "These are *homeschool* students, taught at home by their parents- and you wouldn't believe the terrific *questions* they asked!!! What bright kids!" The interesting thing was that this particular tour guide had been really down on homeschoolers at first- and had originally thought our group contained a few 'trouble makers.' The kids' questions were what won him over and changed his perceptions.

Also, sometimes parents have shared with me that going on a field trip just as a family, or maybe with one or two other families, can be much better than going as part of a huge group. There is more time for really studying the exhibits, for talking about what you are seeing, for slowing down to enjoy the experience. When a zillion other friends are there -- friends our kids don't get to see every day -- it can indeed be very tempting just to want to play and talk, rather than learn something and focus in on the tour. Homeschool groups might at least want to plan on heading to a nearby park for a picnic or playtime *after* a large group tour, so that the kids will not feel they need to use the tour time to catch up with their friends.

I'd also like to welcome either parents or older students to write REVIEWS of favorite tour sites in Pennsylvania- we'd like to have a regular feature on various places to visit. We welcome all further suggestions on making homeschool field trips go smoothly- we'll publish as many as possible in the next issue.