Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Alex Payne, Jess Field, and Pam Lorg

Points Talk®

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

Alex: Today, we have a super special guest on the show. She's been traveling on points longer than any of us, including solo traveling with her four kids for the last 10 years. Listen in as she shares her story and advice.

Welcome to *Points Talk*®. We are three moms who've discovered how to leverage credit card welcome offers to get hundreds of thousands of dollars of travel expenses for nearly free. We've used credit card points and miles to take vacations to places like Hawaii, Paris, Greece, Maldives, Japan, and so much more. And the best part? We each still have 800 plus credit scores. Imagine being able to take the vacation of your dreams for nearly free. It's totally possible, and we're here to show you how.

Alex: Before we get to today's episode, one quick thing. A week from today, on Tuesday, November 10th, we're opening the biggest discount we've ever done on Points Talk® Premium. 25% off annual, and you keep that price as long as you stay subscribed. This is our Black Friday sale, running from November 10th through the 18th. The link is in the show notes, along with a button to have us email you the moment it opens. Okay, on with the show.

Alex: Hey, I'm Alex.

Pam: And I'm Pam, Alex's mom. Let's talk points.

So today, we have a special guest on our podcast. Toni Perkins-Southam is something of a rock star in the points and miles world. I mean, I have heard her name for forever. She knows way more than I know about points and miles. She's been doing this for a really long time. We are just really lucky that we have her doing some freelance writing for us. And today she's here to talk about her journey with points and miles and her 10 years of solo traveling with her kids. Talk about, now she's a rock star just by doing that, if you ask me.

So first off, Toni, tell us how in the world did you get into points and miles?

Toni: Oh my gosh. It's so crazy just hearing, like, I was reading the, our brief, and I put like 14 years, but I was like, I think it's actually been longer because I'm like, at that point in my life, I've been in it for so long. I don't even know.

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

Alex: I was thinking, I was like, wait. I was like, "I think Toni's been doing this longer."

Toni: Yeah. It has been longer

Alex: Because when you read, I was like, "It's only, she's been doing it longer than 14 years." I feel like you're an OG. You are 100% an OG in the points of miles.

Pam: Definitely, she is.

Toni: Well, I appreciate you guys. I wasn't quite there like “Pudding Guy” OG and stuff, but I definitely got into it. I do feel almost OG. I don't know what's the word for that. But yeah, I've been in it for a hot minute, and it's crazy to just see how it's evolved over the years and stuff. Like even my origin story, I'm like, "How did I get into it?"

I know really the true story is I had a cousin telling me kind of about points and miles at one point, and I thought that she had lost her mind and joined a cult because I had grown up thinking, you know, credit cards were evil, and anyone who used their credit card was frivolous. And this cousin of mine is just perfect in every sense. Like, just to the book, just this perfect person. So she was telling me like they're getting all these credit cards, and I was seriously concerned for her soul.

But then, that evening, I just was really intrigued and just kind of started diving in and haven't slowed down since then. So that's really, I kind of have to credit her and her husband, who, ironically, I don't think they do much, like they ever did too much with points and miles after that. So it's kind of funny how that worked. But yeah, so that was that.

I dived in real fast, though, with, so my husband, I can't even keep my story straight anymore. It's been so long. We had traveled once back in like 2012, and we loved it, but we spent a fortune, and we were like, "Oh, we're never going to be able to travel like this again." And then I talked to my cousin and she told me

about all this. And so yeah, right away, we started just signing up for every blog we could find out there, every points program.

And back in the day, like even when you would sign up, you would get, you know, 500, 1,000, like Rapid Rewards® points just for signing up. It was the golden era. Like kids these days, they wouldn't believe the things that we could get points for back in the day. And then I think soon after, I booked a trip to Tampa to, like, one of the original FTUs. It maybe had been around for a while; I don't know. Just so out of my comfort zone, too. I was like, "I'm not the person to join a community like this and go meet people."

But yeah, met people there. One of my best friends in the whole world, I met there, and we still talk all the time. And yeah, it just spiraled and the next thing I know, I'm flying all over the world with my kids, just doing crazy things. So, yeah, it's pretty wild.

Pam: How did you go from doing this to actually writing about it? Because I mean, you've written for, you know, several different groups and stuff. I mean, yeah. So how did you, how did that take place?

Toni: Yeah, that's what's so crazy about this all is like, this is my career. This is more than just a fun hobby. Like, this is my livelihood. So how did I, how did I get into writing? Back in, like, 2016, I think it was, maybe 2017, I actually, do you guys know Dia?

Pam: I don’t.

Alex: I don't.

Toni: Dia Adams? Yeah. Dia, talk about an OG.

Alex: The name sounds, the name sounds familiar. I know the name.

Toni: Yeah, promise. Yeah, she, I feel like she's kind of quiet now, but back in the day, Dia is such an OG. She was having these conferences or like these seminars for family travel, and I went to one of them. I don't remember where;

super fun, loved it. And then she had actually asked me to speak at her next one. And I was like, "Wait, you want me to talk? I don't even know anything."

So I spoke there and that kind of opened up some opportunities and not too long later, Richard Kerr had been started Award Travel 101, which was Travel Hacking 101 back in the day. He had started that, was pretty new. And he reached out to me and asked me if I'd be a moderator. So I kind of started moderating for that.

And then we were owned by AwardWallet, and they actually, they kind of threw it into my lap. They were like, "Oh hey, like you're going to write an article about something." And I was like, "Whoa, like I don't write. What? No." And one thing that Richard told me that stood out to me, and it still kind of, I stand by it today, is I was like, "I can't write." And he's like, "Well, do you know how you become a better writer?" And I was like, "How?" And he's like, "You write more."

So sure enough, just kind of started writing, took on some more freelance articles with AwardWallet and stuff. And then 2020 hit. Forbes Advisor had actually popped up at like the worst time ever. They were looking for freelance writers, and I applied to do that and really, really out on a limb because I was like, "Listen, like I don't know a lot about this, but I have a lot of passion, and I have a lot of subject matter expertise. Like, I promise I will work hard." So that kind of evolved there. So I was freelancing for them for a while, and then yeah, I just kind of turned into a career.

So I ended up leaving AwardWallet completely and getting a full-time position at Forbes in 2022. And worked there for almost four years. Actually, today's my one-year anniversary of getting laid off, so it's a little rough over there.

Alex: Their loss is our gain.

Pam: I'm thinking the same thing, Alex. I was going to say that because we are so- I am so proud that we have you. We have your byline on some of our articles because it's just, I mean, yeah, it's really cool.

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

Toni: I absolutely love writing for you guys. Like it's a dream. So thank you. Like, the feeling is mutual. Like, I think it's an absolute dream, and I love writing for you, and it's so fun. But yeah, so now I just freelance full-time and then in my other life, I do have, I do have a few other things going on. I'm working on my Master's in SPED right now. And then up until a couple weeks ago, I was working at the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind, but I just- something had to cave. I was working like 90 hours a week between school and freelancing, and I just was losing my mind. So now I'm just freelancing and in school. So, yeah.

Alex: You know, Toni, all of this time, I always thought like you were like a journalism major. I was like, "She's such a good writer that I was like, wait, what? You didn't go to school for this?" Like, that's amazing.

Toni: No, I actually was a history major, which is so weird because, like you said,

Alex: Hey, that's what I was too.

Toni: What? Let's go, girl.

Alex: Yeah.

Toni: I love that. Great minds think alike. But yeah, so it's funny because yeah, I'm in this, like, public, digital publication, media, journalism world/SPED. Like, neither have anything to do with my history degree, but.

Pam: So I know one thing that I think has always impressed me about you is that you travel solo with your kids and you have for years. I mean, you guys have gone to some amazing places. How did this come about to be where you're like, "Oh, I feel comfortable. You know, my husband can't travel or whatever. I'm just going to take the kids and we're going to go."

Toni: Yeah, yeah. I love, this is one of my favorite things to talk about because this is kind of like why I do what I do because my whole goal is to empower families, but even beyond families, like parents who maybe are in, you know, kind of different situations where like they're not able to travel with their spouses and stuff. Like I want to empower you and show you, like, listen, if I can do this- me, who's accidentally flown my family to the wrong side of Turkey- like I make a

lot of mistakes, you guys. I am a space case. Like, if I can do this, you can do this, and it's okay.

So, so how it kind of happened for us was my husband worked in gas and oil. I don't know if you guys know anything about gas and oil, but it's just like the craziest schedule ever. Like, there's nothing like it. My husband would be gone for months at a time. We had traveled with the kids to Paris when they were babies. Well, when my daughter was a baby. So I have four kids. Daughter's the youngest. She was a baby. We loved it so much. And when we got home, we wanted to do more of it, but it was kind of like his schedule was just so crazy. It was like either travel without him or don't travel at all.

So our motto kind of became, my motto became like, "Listen, I'm already crazy. I'm already losing my mind. Like, might as well do it somewhere cool."

Alex: I love that.

Toni: Yeah. So yeah, that's kind of- it was also, I don't want to say complete credit, like I just got really brave and I was like, "I'm just going to do this alone." We also had a bit of a kind of crazy situation where we lived in Colorado; we were supposed to be moving, plans to move fell through, and we didn't even know where we were going to live. So I was like homeless. And so same thing, I was like, "Well, if we're going to be homeless, let's do it somewhere cool." But my husband couldn't really come with us because of his schedule.

That was the first big trip. We flew out to Europe, and it was me and the four kids. They were 9, 7, 3, and a year. Like I was still breastfeeding my daughter.

Pam: Oh my goodness.

Toni: Yeah, like it was legit.

Alex: Okay, stop for a second because you were brave. Like you're like, "I don't want to sound..." No, that is brave. No matter what the circumstances are, I don't think most people are going to say, "Oh, let's go find a place to live in Europe since we don't have a place." Most people would be like, "We'll find, we'll find a

place like in the town we're considering." Like, that is very brave, so props to you for taking your infant and your three other kids.

Toni: It was brave. It was brave. It was also crazy. Like, you know how they stay like coincide, but yeah, definitely a little bit of both. But so our first big trip, we spent like two and a half months in Europe. We spent most of it in Croatia in this, like, tiny little town. I say tiny, like you guys know how it is. Like tiny for Europe, which is actually huge for, like, especially like Utah. It's way bigger than where I live now. But where it is in Europe, it was like, "Oh, what a cute little town." But so we spent gosh, like six or seven weeks in Croatia in this little town called Pula.

And that was, that was an adventure. Like my son, my oldest, got an abscessed tooth. And we didn't have a car and we were staying like kind of far out of town. And I just, I don't know how, I feel like I could, this Toni could not do what that Toni did. Like, I don't know how I did it. Like we're like walking around Croatia, right? Like trying to find like a dentist and a doctor, and my phone had died and I've got like screaming babies and like I told you, I'm still breastfeeding my daughter and I just, it was just chaos, but somehow we survived it. It was chaos.

Yeah, so we stayed there, and then we headed out to Marseille, France, and we were there also for like five or six weeks. That was a lot of fun. And then at the end of that trip, we kind of bounced around, just visited a few places, and then flew to Utah from Zurich, stayed with my parents, still homeless, right? I'm like, "I don't know what we're doing." And then I ended up flying back to Europe because I had a trip planned with a friend long before any of this had taken place, went to Iceland, and while I was there, my husband's like, "Listen, I'm just going to buy a house in Utah. Your family's here, let's do it." And I was like, "You know what? Let's go." So that's how,

Alex: And you've been in Utah ever since?

Toni: Yeah, 10 years, which is crazy. Yeah. But yeah, so then once I did that, though, it really just sparked this. First of all, I knew I could do it. I was like, "Hey, I can travel with my kids."

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

Alex: You're like, "Hey, we walked around Croatia with a dead phone, crying children, and an abscessed tooth. I can do anything."

Toni: I can do anything. Yeah, exactly. So the next year, we booked a big trip again, and this time we went to Central America, stayed in Guatemala for almost, also like six weeks, I think it was. And that was, that was also an adventure, you guys. So my kids are all one year older, but they're still really little. And,

Pam: Do you speak Spanish?

Toni: Depends on who you ask.

Alex: Okay, for me, yes, you speak Spanish. I would say if, yes.

Toni: I also speak present-tense Spanish. Like if I need to talk about the future or past, things get really weird. Like if I want to be like, "Hey, I went to the mall last year," I'd be like, "Hey, I visited Guatemala last year." I'd be like, "I'm in Guatemala last year." And they'd be like, "Yeah, okay, I got you."

So that experience was insane. We had, like, our Airbnb was beautiful, you guys, but, but it was scorpion-infested. We had like 18 or 19 scorpions throughout that stay. It was a little traumatizing. And the kid with the abscessed tooth got stung by a scorpion. So you think like he would hate traveling at this point, but we survived.

So that was crazy. Then we bounced all over. We went to, ended up in, like, Ecuador, Colombia, just kind of went everywhere and stuff. And yeah, just each trip I just got a little braver. And now,

Alex: I love that you're like, "I got a little braver." I'm like, "Wait, you're maxed out on bravery already." How do you get braver than a scorpion-infested Airbnb?

Toni: Yeah, a little braver, got a little easier as my kids got older, I think. You know, you don't have to carry so much crap, not having to take, like, a stroller around, things like that, definitely. Yeah, so yeah, this summer, 10 years later, we took a trip. My oldest son, he doesn't even live at home. He didn't even go

with us. So I'm only traveling with the three kids, and we headed out to Europe, and we spent a month in Bulgaria. Spent some time in Romania, made a little day trip to Greece, spent some time, yeah, just kind of in Eastern Europe this time, and it was great. It was so much fun, and I just, yeah, like reflecting on all of this and like looking back to how different our trip looked with older kids.

Like I can leave the house for a second. You know, I can be like, "Guys, I'm going grocery shopping. You're 16, you're fine." Like, I don't have to pack all my kids, a sleeping baby, walk five miles to go get groceries. I'm just like, "Peace out." Or I can just send them. There was a grocery store nearby, and I was like, "Hey, go buy some cheese," you know? So, yeah, traveling with older kids is nice.

Alex: You've come a long way.

Toni: We've come a long, a long way. On that same note, they're teenagers. So there was about a thousand times I wanted to kill them. They wanted to kill me, but we also, you know, it was a lot of fun.

Alex: So how, when you're going on these very long trips with the kids where you're going for weeks or months at a time, how do you strategize using points for those extended vacations? What's kind of your strategy behind where you do and where you don't use points?

Toni: Yeah, you know, that has changed also so much because, like I was saying, back in the day, you know, points grew on trees. I,

Toni: Yeah. Can I talk about, like, old deals? Is that?

Alex: Sure. Yeah, absolutely.

Toni: Like compliance stuff? I don't know.

Pam: No, it's fine.

Toni: Okay, okay. So, you know, back in the day, I used to MS a lot. So, manufactured spending, and I would also haul my kids around with me to

different grocery stores and stuff. Once again, don't know how I did that. Like, you couldn't pay me enough to do that these days.

Alex: But you know what? Maybe it's like when you're younger, you don't know any different. You know what I mean?

Toni: Exactly.

Alex: You don't know that there's another option. You're like, "Well, I got the kids, they're going with me." You just do it.

Toni: Yeah. Like, this is just how we survive. Yeah, 100%. But you know, one of the biggest deals we did was the American Airlines Executive Card. It came with a 100,000-mile welcome offer, and you could, and there was like no restrictions. Like, you could just get a new one like every month. So between me and my husband, and then I had this cute little mall- this is in Colorado, we had this little mall down the road, and they would sell gift cards, and the fee was like, I think it was $1.95. They ended up increasing it to like $2.95. So I'd just walk in and buy like $10,000 in gift cards, and then I'd go to Walmart, and I'd go get my little money orders, and then I'd go, you know, pay the card off, and then open a new card the next month.

So I mean, we had like millions of miles. Like they just rained points and miles. So it was actually really easy back in the day. I'd just be like, I don't know, is this a good points valuation? Doesn't matter because I have so many points and miles.

Alex: Yeah. And for anyone listening, yes, like, this stuff doesn't exist anymore. So if you're like, "That sounds amazing."

Pam: I'm kind of glad. I'm glad it doesn't because I'd be so tempted and I'd be spending way too much time on doing that kind of stuff. So I'm glad it doesn't.

Toni: Yeah, there, I mean, bittersweet, right? Like yes and in some ways I'm glad because I am, I'm such an all-or-nothing person. So it was like my full-time job, and honestly, it messed with my mental health. Like, it made me kind of crazy because, first of all, you're doing something completely legal. There's, I'm using

my own money and doing these things, but people don't understand that. So I would get like, people thought I was this like criminal lord boss or whatever, and I'm like, "I'm not doing..." So that was always- I hated that feeling that people thought I was doing something illegal or whatever. I did have the cops called on me several times, and I, they were like, "She's literally not doing anything wrong. Just because this feels weird to you doesn't make it..." But yeah. So I, in that aspect too, I don't, I don't miss that at all.

Alex: Yeah.

Toni: But fast forward. So yeah, it's a lot different these days, and I have to be a lot more strategic with how I use my points and miles for sure. I actually- this is going to, I don't know, this is like blasphemous. I actually use travel portals a lot more. And you know, the valuation really, it truly is not as good. Like you're going to get way more points, or more value out of transferring your points to like partners and stuff. The problem is, you know, we still need two hotel rooms everywhere we go. We still need, you know, and finding the availability.

I used to love Hyatt more than anything. I, I don't love Hyatt. Like, Hyatt is not my friend. I can never find what I need with Hyatt, like ever, ever, ever. And then the next option is, like, you know, Marriott or Hilton. And I'm like, "Yeah, I'm not going to spend 50,000 points for one room."

So I do a lot through portals these days. And because we've traveled to kind of smaller areas with non-chains, I'm able to find some really good deals on different, like, homestays, things like that. So I definitely, I feel like people who, you know, are a little averse to portals because you hear so much, "Well, the CPP and the valuations." Like, it's okay, guys. Like it's okay. Check out some of these travel portals. Like there's some really good deals.

Alex: Which one is like, what are like your go-to travel portals?

Toni: Honestly, the one I have the most points with. So like, I still have a pretty good stock of like Ultimate Rewards® points right now. I don't fly Southwest. I don't fly United. I mostly fly American just because I am able to. Little, little tangent here, but my biggest travel hack is my flexibility. Because I have

flexibility, I can travel, I can find the absolute cheapest flights, and I can go then. And I know that not everyone has that, and it makes totally strategizing things different. But for me, I have flexibility on my side. So I'm able to really utilize American Airlines. They have some really, really crazy cheap fares to like, Europe. You know, I find flights to Guatemala, one of our favorite places, like 90,000, 10,000 miles.

Alex: And Toni, like, we talked before the episode started, and Toni was telling us about like a trip she had done where they kind of had a crazy itinerary. And is that something you do regularly where you're like, "I'm willing to take these long layovers and crazy itineraries to get the lowest fare?" Is that something you regularly do?

Toni: Absolutely. We have slept in more airports because of stupid layovers and stuff. Once again, not for everyone, but if my husband's coming on the trip and it makes more sense to split some people into one flight and split people into other, we will absolutely do that. I have no,

Alex: So your flexibility is not just like my dates are flexible. You're flexible across the board. Like I'm willing to do what I need to do to get us where we want to be at the cheapest way to get there.

Toni: Yep, exactly. And that is really, is just a game changer for us. And I get that doesn't work for everyone, and some people aren't comfortable with that to each their own. For me, like, I'm a little bit of a glutton for punishment. So you know, I'll be like, "I can save 1,000 miles if we sleep at the airport tonight." Yeah, let's do it.

Alex: Well, I love it because, like, it's different than what we do, but we are very, we very much preach you do you. And it's very refreshing, I think, for people to listen and hear a different perspective that is not the same as what everybody else is doing and realizing, "Hey, if I'm willing to do these things, we can have some pretty incredible experiences as a family."

Toni: Absolutely. And it makes for a lot of memories. Like honestly, you know, there's always, it's always an adventure. I will tell you that. Like, the crazier

itinerary gets, the more memorable it's going to get because, you know, there's a lot of moving parts and pieces. And like I said, I literally have flown my family to the wrong side of Turkey. So many mistakes.

Pam: How did that, how did that happen?

Toni: Okay, I just got to tell this story. It's too good.

Alex: Please.

Pam: You do. It's too, it is too good.

Alex: Everyone's like wanting to hear it. Yeah.

Toni: Yeah, it's like, oh my gosh. It's so embarrassing and so ridiculous, but so good.

Alex: But it's good for people to know like a pro, an OG like Toni, still will… it makes us all feel like, okay, it's okay if we make a mistake.

Toni: Right, it's okay, and you can adjust and survive and make it all work. Like, that's kind of like your worst nightmare, right? And guess what? Like, it was my worst nightmare, and we survived, and it was actually fun, and it makes for the best story, and we're good to go.

So what happened was we were in Izmir, Turkey, which is all the way on the west coast, having a grand time. And this is my husband was with us too. And we had, it was like a winter Christmas trip, just a couple weeks long. And I had booked all the flights. I'm usually the itinerary, flight booker, planner, and all that.

Okay, listen, anyone can make this mistake, though. I'm telling you, right? So we were going to Cappadocia, which is the place you see with all the pretty balloons and stuff, right? And the airport that you fly into is Kayseri. It's like K A S E Y something, right? So like when I was looking at the flights, I started typing it in and like the airport code KSY came up and I was like, that's obviously Kayseri, right? So I booked the flights.

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

We, the morning started out. It was like, I feel like I could write a novel about this. It started out, like we wake up early because we're jet-lagged. No, no. We wake up because there's an earthquake, right? I'm like, the whole room's shaking, and I'm like, "What is happening?" So there's an earthquake. So it's just like this foreboding, you know, this foreshadowing like, what's going to happen? We get to the airport, got there at the wrong time and had to wait for like hours. Finally got checked in, hop on the flight.

And I just remember like thinking, like, this is a really long flight. Like, I thought that Turkey, like Turkey seems smaller than this to me, and I'm just surprised that it's taking so long. But whatever. It was like a 4-hour-long flight, and I was like, "That just really, really surprises me." Like on the map, it just looks like it should be a lot shorter. Whatever.

So we get to the airport, you guys. Like we get there, we get off the airplane, still don't realize we're in the wrong city. And…

Pam: Oh my goodness.

Toni: We're like waiting for our rental car because it's supposed to pick us up. And we had, like, landed a little early, you know, and stuff. And so we give them like a full hour, and I'm like, "Okay, this is getting a little ridiculous." So my husband's like, "Let's just, let's just go to the rental car place." And I was like, "Yeah, let's do that." So he like, puts in his map, he's like, "Hm, that's weird. It says it's 12 hours away." And I'm like, "Oh my gosh, obviously that's not the rental car place. Like, you're so dumb." And I'm like, grab his phone, and I'm like, why are we like on the border of Armenia? And it just comes flooding in.

Pam: I can't believe it took you so long to figure this out.

Toni: I know. I know. And I look and we're in a town called Kars, K A R S, which somehow is like the exact same airport code, or what the airport coding in my head should have been. So I had a huge panic attack and I was like, "What are we going to do?" But then I was like, "Ooh, maybe we should go to Armenia. Like we can knock off another country." But then I was like, "Wait, no, no, no. Like we have a plan."

And it was such a small town. They only had like one more flight going out. It was leaving in a half an hour. It was going to Ankara, which is not even where we needed to be, but I was like, "Listen, we need to get to like a big hub so we can figure out what the heck we're doing with our lives."

So we were able; they were so amazing there. They got us on that flight and from the time, like I realized there was a flight, the time like, it was a half an hour before it left, and they like got us on the flight and everything, got to Ankara. And then we ended up having to get rental cars, two cars, because Turkey has this thing where like you can only rent a certain size of vehicle. You have to have a special endorsement to rent something bigger. So I had to drive, husband had to drive; had a sick kid puke everywhere. I still wake up in cold sweats thinking about driving in Ankara. But we drove out to Cappadocia. Made it.

Alex: How long of a drive was that?

Toni: I want to say it was like 4 hours.

Alex: Okay.

Toni: So not like horrific, but long enough. And yeah, so then we made it and everything was good.

Alex: Well, it goes to show, you can, everything's figureoutable.

Toni: Exactly. 100%

Alex: You know, like, it's figureoutable.

Toni: Yup.

Pam: You're making me showing up at a hotel and having them tell me, "Oh, we were expecting you last night," seem much easier now.

Toni: Yeah. And that happens. That happens like all the time. You just got to, like, you got to adjust, be willing to go with the flow.

Pam: You do. No one's going to be perfect.

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

Toni: Exactly. And that's not to say, guys, I'm an anxious person. Like I freak out about everything. I love freaking out. It's who I am. So, but I also realize I've come to this point in my life, like I realize like a lot of these fears and freakouts, they're irrational. So I'm going to do it. I'm going to freak out, but I'll still get the things done that I need to do.

And that's also like kind of a message I want to share. Like it's okay to do it scared. Freak out, do all the things. Like I, you guys know, like I, my fear of flying- I would bawl on airplanes for years and years and years, lose my mind. But I've realized like I want to travel more than I want, then I'm going to let my fear stop me. So, you freak out, be crazy, and then once you get there, you're going to be like, "Oh, it's fine." You know?

Alex: So, man. Okay, so what are some of your favorite places you've been with your kids solo traveling?

Toni: I actually hate this question because literally everywhere we go, I'm like, "I want to live here. This is my favorite."

Alex: I know. Yeah. Or what, like, are there ones that stick out to for them, even, maybe?

Toni: Yeah, yeah, for sure. Well, we just got home a couple days ago, and we spent some time in Chamonix, France. And my one son, he's like, "I'm going to live there when I'm older." He's like, "I'm never leaving." Like he was obsessed with it. It was really, really lovely. Like I, way different vibe than like I don't feel like we usually are hanging out in mountain towns and things like that, but that was really enjoyable.

But as far as favorites, and I'm going to say like favorite, thinking of like having kids in tow, you know, family destinations and stuff. You guys know I love Guatemala. I think Guatemala is just like a gem. It's so beautiful. The natural beauty there is just uncomparable to like so many places.

And I really enjoy, like, Antigua. It's like super safe, super beautiful. Imagine this, like, old, this old city that's a UNESCO World Heritage Site. But you also have

this, so you have this, like, Spanish colonial era there that's still, you know, in the architecture and stuff and so beautiful. But yeah, like the Mayan culture is still so alive there, and it just feels so like ancient and special. And then all of a sudden you look around, and there's like a volcano exploding in the background, and you can watch lava. It's just,

Alex: So cool.

Toni: It's just the coolest thing and it's, you know, Antigua is like a little on the pricier side because it is touristy, which is kind of funny because we mostly avoid the touristy place, but this is like my one exception. It's still pretty affordable overall, but I, yeah, I think everyone should go to Guatemala. Like it's kind of a life-changing place. I love it.

I really love Peru a lot too. I think Peru is super family-friendly. There's so many things to see and do. People are really sweet. It's, you know, reasonably priced. So those are really great ones. And then I love France. Like, people either love or hate France. I fall into the love category. Like I could go to France every time and be happy. All of France. Like I love Paris. Those are really great.

I'm trying to think of a couple other destinations that were really special with the kids. Iceland. We loved Iceland with the kids. Like, I was a little nervous about taking the kids just because it's so outdoorsy, adventurous. I was like having nightmares about my kids like plummeting off of cliffs, you know. The normal stuff.

Alex: I know what you mean.

Toni: But we loved Iceland. And we went around; we went over Christmas a few years ago. It was just magical. Like it was so much fun. So those were probably some of my top ones for sure.

Pam: So when you're taking these trips, how much are you using points and how much are you using cash? And kind of what is your earning strategy on earning points and miles? I'm interested in, you know, through the years. I would think it's probably changed.

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

Alex: I know, Toni, if I'm correct, you have, you're like very LOL/24, right? Like you don't even care about that. Am I correct?

Toni: I care...

Alex: Like years ago you let that go, right?

Toni: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think, like, when you are traveling with so many people, like, you kind of just the rules change for you a lot. Like yeah, what I love, like if it was just me and my husband or just me, yeah, I would be all strategizing, like you know, staying under 5/24 and getting these certain cards and blah, blah. Like, I just take what they can give me at this point. I will, I will get a Wyndham card and make Wyndham work any day. Like, I will make whatever I can work. So yeah, I'm really big on getting new cards constantly and just always working on a welcome offer.

Alex: Which I want to point out too is like you've been doing this for so long because people be like, "You're going to run out of cards. It won't work forever." And it's like you've been doing this longer than any of us, and you still constantly opening cards.

Toni: Uh huh. Yeah, and it definitely is harder, and sometimes I do get, like, there are times I do get frustrated. I'll go, you know, to apply for a card and I'm a terrible record keeper, so I'll be like, "I think I've, I don't think I've had this card." And I'll go to apply, and they're like, "Oh, you're not eligible," and stuff. And I'm like, "Son of a biscuit."

But yeah, no, so you know, am I opening up Chase cards? Obviously not. But you know, go for the Wyndham cards, go for the Choice Hotels. Like there, especially when you're traveling overseas, like we've stayed in some incredible Choice properties and some incredible Wyndham properties and stuff like that.

So yeah, my strategy, like once again, like flexibility, flexibility, flexibility. Like, take what you can and make it work for you. Stop being so picky. I promise you, like after traveling so much, if you're like, "Hey, what hotel did you stay in on this

trip?" I don't know if it was a Wyndham or if it was a Hyatt or what. Like, it doesn't, it doesn't matter, right? And that's not what sticks with you.

Like yes, it's fun to have like a fancy Hyatt or whatever, but at the end of the day, you barely spend any time at those places anyways. You're usually out exploring and stuff. So like don't write off some of these other programs because, you know, Hyatt's cool and there's some really great Hyatt properties, you know.

Alex: So, well, and I think this, your strategy is so good too for where points and miles have been going, where it is getting harder. You know, the rules are getting trickier, and it's like if you can find properties with those other hotel brands and branch out outside of Hyatt, you just open up more opportunity for yourself.

Toni: And they have really good redemptions too. It's not like you're dealing with, like, Marriott, Hilton.

Alex: Yeah.

Toni: Garbage, IHG garbage, where you're like, "Yeah, I'm going to spend 75,000 points for a night at this hotel that costs, you know, almost nothing." It's so dumb.

Alex: Yeah.

Toni: You can still, Wyndham, their lowest, you can find properties now with their new tier. Like, they started 5,000 points. Guys, that's crazy. 5,000 points. Like and their welcome offer on one of their cards, I think is like 100,000 right now. So yeah, don't, like don't overlook these programs. They're, they're really like, if you want to travel and you want to do more, you've got to be open-minded.

Alex: Yeah, for sure. I love that.

Pam: One of the things I think when I think about you traveling is I don't see you just sitting by the pool and having food brought out to you. I think you're out and about, you know, most of the time. Is that correct?

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

Toni: Yeah, I will definitely say we are not vacationers. Like when I travel, I need a vacation from my travel because it's pretty. We're pretty all in, which is kind of ironic because if you knew me from home, like, I actually, I'm not that adventurous. Like at home, I'm like, I just kind of hang out. I'm kind of a homebody and stuff. But when we go out and travel, I'm like, "We have to see this. We have to see this. We have to see this and we have to go here."

Like, I live in Spanish Fork, Utah, and there's a city called Provo, like 15 minutes away. I'm like, "Oh, I can't drive to Provo. It's so far. Like, are you kidding me?" But then like, on our trip just recently in Chamonix, like we had to drive from Chamonix to Lyon and there was like, the straight way to do it, which was like not even two hours. Or there was a scenic route, which was like almost four hours. And I'm like, "Yeah, we're taking that." And my kids are like, "You won't even drive to Provo, Mom." And I'm like,

Pam: That's so funny.

Alex: I love that. You know what, it is different. I'm with you on that. It is different driving the scenic route in France versus driving I-15 to Provo.

Toni: Yeah, exactly. But yeah, I, you know, I'm all, I'm a huge advocate for getting out and trying all the things. I told you, like I struggle with anxiety and have for a long time. And I remember my second trip kind of making a deal with myself. I was losing my mind. We'd spent a really long time in Guatemala and I loved it and it's glorious. But we had flown into Panama, and it was cloudy outside and I was just so afraid to hop on that airplane because I'm like looking at the clouds and I'm like, "It's just going to be so bumpy. Like I'm not going to be okay." And I was like, "I can't do this. Like we're just going to stay in Panama and then I'm going to go home. Like I can't do this."

But then I, I managed to do it. I got on and I did it and we got to Ecuador, and the flight wasn't bad at all. And I remember like making a deal with myself, like, "You did something that was so scary and you were so afraid to do. Like every time you get scared, you're going to do something." Not for everyone, okay? I'm not saying... And that was the craziest, most adventurous trip of my entire life. We did everything. Like we, like, we picked up hitchhikers over at, like, what's

the big volcano there? Cotopaxi. They were like young, sweet teenagers. It was fine.

But like, you know, we like, we did everything. We jumped off a- we bungee jumped off a bridge. We like, stopped everywhere. And my kids were little and they were just all about it too. Like we just went crazy and had so many adventures and stuff. So yeah, like do the adventures. Like the best memories come from just getting out of your comfort zone and just doing all the things and exploring all the things.

Alex: I love that. Tony, I have another question for you. Do your, your kids are in public school?

Toni: Mm-hmm.

Alex: So do you travel, like, how do you do your travel with their, your kids' schedules? Especially as they get older and just things like that? Like, are you pretty strict on school schedules, or you're like, you've worked it out, you talk to their teachers, you take them out. How do you manage that? Or are you just doing most of it in the summer?

Toni: Yeah, we do a lot of it in the off season now. When they were younger, we would do it whenever. We are really fortunate in Utah that they are so chill about taking your kids out of school.

Alex: Yes, we are very lucky.

Toni: I have talked, like, even my brother in Idaho, like they are so strict. And I didn't, I didn't even realize that until a few years ago, like how strict people, schools are. When they were younger, I one time we were going away for a really long time and the principal was like, "Oh cool, just like unenroll them, tell them you're homeschooling and like when you come back, we'll re-enroll them." And it was like super simple, easy, you know, no big deal at all.

As they get older, yeah, it is a little bit harder for them, but I've always found their teachers to be incredibly supportive. I have one in high, two in high school actually. And with this like little trip to France, like their teachers, as long as we

communicate with them, they'll let them take tests in advance, things like that. Yeah, they're really good about that. And I realized that's not the same situation for everyone.

But that being said, I have, I have homeschooled them in the past too, kind of so we can travel and stuff. And that was, that was good. They, they obviously hated me homeschooling them and wanted to go back to public school. So there's that.

But yeah, I think, you know, as long as you have a plan in place and just kind of, we've also always been pretty lenient with grades. I always joke with my kids like, "C's get degrees." So if you're, if you're a little, which ironically, my kids are very good students and get very good grades. But yeah, I think that if you're okay, you have to be a little bit okay with, like, knowing like they'll probably get some B's and maybe even C's, you know? And maybe not. Like maybe not either. But and I'm okay with that, and other people might not be. So, yeah. But ultimately, school, navigating school has not been the biggest barrier, like what you would think, at least for us.

Alex: Yeah. I think you kind of nailed it there with, like, just having the good communication with their teachers.

Toni: Yeah.

Alex: And in doing that in advance, I know it does definitely vary by school district and state and all of that kind of stuff. And I agree that we are more fortunate. My issue is it's my oldest is the one who he's like, "But I don't want to do makeup work." And then it stresses him out and I'm like, "Ugh." And he's the one who does want to get all A's and I'm like, "He's more worried about his grades than I am."

Toni: It's sure.

Pam: But he's also, he's also the one that wants to travel everywhere.

Alex: He does. He is also the one that wants to travel. Yes.

Ep #205: Solo Travel With Kids on Points with Toni Perkins-Southam

Toni: But I think, like, you as a parent can also, like, support him in helping him maintain his grades and stuff like that. You don't have to like, you don't have to pick and choose, right? Like, there are ways to kind of make it work both. Like I said, we're a little more lenient and my kids are a little like chill about it too. They're not like that concerned. But I think as a parent, like there are ways to make sure that he is still able to maintain those grades and, like, continue to have those goals and stuff.

Like I think one of the, beyond grades, one thing that's a little harder is like sports.

Alex: Yes.

Toni: That can be, that can be hard. My daughter is a competition gymnast and she has been for years. But we made it work this summer in Bulgaria. I actually brought her to a little gym out there, and she did gymnastics there, and that was like the best experience ever. And that situation is a little bit different. Like, she has some flexibility there. Like if you're on a football team, yeah, then you're going to have- that's going to be a harder conversation, and you are going to have to start picking and choosing. But I don't know, you know, it's just whatever, whatever your priorities and stuff are. My kids aren't on any teams, like, they wrestle, they do gymnastics, so that gives them a lot of flexibility. So, yeah.

Pam: So Toni, with all of your traveling with these kids, if you had to give everyone that's listening like four or five hints on how to make it successful, what would you, what would you say?

Toni: Yeah. Flexibility. Like, be flexible, be willing to get a little out of, you know, get out of your comfort zone. You don't have to go crazy and be like me and sleep on airport floors, but it does help, you know, like if you're willing, there's ways to do it. Like there's entire, there's entire blogs about like how to sleep at an airport, by the way. Did you guys know that?

Pam: Oh. No.

Toni: Very good information. I was actually looking at…

Pam: I don't know if I want to read them.

Toni: I was looking at that for the London airport because I was kind of, as you guys know, I was like worried about like the visa thingy or the ETA or whatever it's called. So I was reading about, like, you know, how to sleep at the London airport, which, by the way, there's not a lot of good advice out there. They're really weird and strict about sleeping at the London airport. Fortunately, we did not have to.

Yeah, so be flexible, be willing to get out of your comfort zone, and be open-minded. Like we talked about, like, you know, look at Wyndham, look at things like Choice, all these different programs. Those would be my biggest things and just, yeah, just don't let fear get in your way because it's really easy to let the fear like stop you from living your dreams and just be like, "Not today, Satan."

Pam: You know, it amazes me when you say, "Don't let fear get in your way," or that you're anxious or anything, because I'm looking at what you're doing. I'm going, "Oh my goodness, I can't even imagine. I could never have done that with you."

Toni: And then, yeah. And you know, and just as far as like points and miles go, I feel like, I feel kind of bad because I feel like I haven't given people a lot of like really great information about like earning loads of points and miles and stuff, just because I am in such a kind of unique situation where like you said, I'm five trillion/24 and things like that.

But hopefully, you know, just understanding like, I'm giving you permission to be like flexible. Not that you guys need my permission, right? But I think that we get really rigid in our thinking and points and miles, and I'm here to, like, tell you guys, like, don't be so rigid. It's okay. Like the CPP, if you don't have to tell anyone, you don't have to share it with anyone. Like, you just do what works best for you.

Alex: No, I love that advice, and I think it's so, so good because we'll get DMs from people that are like, "I opened, I've opened an Amex® Gold and a Chase

Sapphire and a Capital One Venture, and I feel like I've opened every card. What do I do now?" And I'm like, "You're barely scratching the surface here." Like, there is so much out there. And so I love, I think your advice is so good.

Toni: Yeah. And even beyond, like, kind of on that same note, even beyond, like, you know, the Bank of America cards that are still hiding out there and stuff, there's local credit unions, you guys. I have a credit, like tons of credit unions in Utah that offer travel rewards. And generally they're not, they're not transferable points, but like, so? I'm going to take, you know, I'm going to take these points and miles while they'll give them to me, and I'm going to use them. Like, you have so many options. It's amazing.

Alex: Yeah.

Pam: Well, it has been so great having you with us today, Toni. I just feel so lucky that we know you and that you're working with us. I am completely, totally amazed at all of your solo travel with your kids through the years. And we really appreciate that you came to talk to us today. I think you're my personal superhero in the points and miles world. And when I grow up, I want to be just like you.

So we hope that you all enjoyed today's episode. And if you did, please leave a rating and review.

Thanks so much for listening to *Points Talk*®. Make sure to hit the subscribe or follow button from wherever you're listening so you never miss an episode. Wanna start jet setting even faster? Follow the links in the show notes to learn about everything we discussed in today's episode. And to stay connected and follow along, follow us on Instagram @PointsTalkSquad. We can't wait to see where in the world points and miles take you.