

# SYNERGIA

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## 8th grade trip - general information for parents and teachers for a Synergia Learning Ventures Wilderness Journey with Tom and Debra Weistar

### A class's journey together

By the time a class reaches the end of 8th grade together, they are much, much more than classmates and teacher. The trip is the final stretch of their journey together and should be planned with intent and awareness of the specific needs of the moment: acknowledgment of changes and growth, an opportunity for strong challenges outside of their ordinary existence and a chance to experience freedom and independence while learning valuable life skills. Without the careful creation of planned activities by experienced leaders it is unlikely that these needs will be addressed. Even more critical in a Waldorf-type 8th grade class is the need for *conscious closure*. The end of 8th grade is recognized as a threshold time in our society at large and even more so in Waldorf education. An incredible mix of fear and longing, excitement and sadness, holding back and surging forward lives in these young people. For a young person (or a class) to face such complexity unassisted can be difficult. The guidance of experienced mentors can make all the difference.

### Guides

Tom and Debra Weistar are the directors of Synergia Learning Ventures. They founded and for 15 years directed and ran the outdoor program of another northern California non-profit organization. The Weistars are uniquely qualified as guides because they are educators, as well as being highly skilled and experienced in the wilderness. They understand young people and organize and lead wilderness trips that are designed specifically to meet the needs of the young people, as individuals and as a class. They operate a Challenge Ropes Course in addition to the Wilderness program where they are well known for their skillful and sensitive guidance in the critical areas of class dynamics and interpersonal concerns. They have led 8th grade trips for Waldorf and Waldorf inspired schools every year since 1994.

### The way of the journey

A trip with Synergia is a *journey*. A journey is different from a trip or vacation. The memory of a trip or vacation fades over time, while a journey stays with you for the rest of your life. On a journey you leave your ordinary life behind in the quest to discover something new and essential. Even your guides are outside your familiar territory, an important component for true change. From campfire myth and storytelling to interactive games to creating metaphors from the journey itself (be it reading the river, choosing a route, rock climbing, peak ascent, etc.) each step we take carries with it a sense of purpose, growth and passage for the group and for each individual.

### The Basics

Designed as a journey, the core component of the trip has a strong physical adventure and travel element. It may be a river canoe journey, a backpacking trip, a winter snow-shoeing expedition, a white water rafting/kayak adventure, or travel to another culture. Added to each core element are options that can include peak climbing, rock climbing, rappelling, swimming, and sweat lodge. We use additional components to create the heart of the experience such as solo time, personal reflection and journaling, service work and more.

### Choices and Locale

Every class is unique and therefore every trip is unique. Synergia works with the class, teacher and parents to determine the best trip for the class. Each trip is designed with the following considerations in mind: class needs, capabilities and aspirations; time of year; length of trip; budget. Locales include the Eel River in northern California, the Lower Colorado River on the Nevada/Arizona border, the North Coast, Baja California Mexico, Ventana Wilderness near Big Sur, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Anza Borrego Desert State Park, Death Valley National Monument, Yosemite National Park, and others.

### Canoeing

On a canoe journey, students learn the art of canoeing down river, including route choosing and reading the river in order to assure safe passage. Living together in a totally self contained situation, we bring everything we need

for the entire trip with us in the canoes. The students must take responsibility and make decisions that could have far reaching effects. We travel deep into the wilderness using specific skills, working with a partner to get downstream.

### **Backpacking**

A backpacking trip provides an excellent opportunity for true self-sufficiency and learning to survive and thrive with minimum dependence upon external support systems and the trappings of our everyday lives. Skills such as route finding, and map/compass work add to the student's sense of independence and development of inner capacities.

### **Cultural Immersion and Marine Mammal study**

Traveling to a distant land offers a rich opportunity to explore a different culture, speak a different language and study wildlife such as Gray Whales, California Sea Lions, Harbor Seals, Sea Turtles, and dolphins up close in their native habitat. For more information on study trips to Baja California, Mexico, ask for our interactive cd.

### **Service Learning**

While many Synergia programs are specifically designed as service and work study projects, all trips incorporate service work, care of the environment and minimum impact living at every level of what we do. We hold an ethic of leaving a place more beautiful than we found it, and this has manifested in many forms over the years. On the Lower Colorado River we cleaned up and beautified a large campsite area; in the Ventana Wilderness we completely re-built an unattractive and inefficient fire pit; in Mexico we work with younger school children and at the sea turtle rescue and research station, to name just two projects. Service is built into every program in a way that is appropriate to the class, the environment, and the community we are in, guided by the attitude that we have a responsibility and the privilege to see what is needed, and then do it.

### **Trip Timing and Duration**

Although we speak of the trip as the "end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade", Waldorf 8<sup>th</sup> grade trips can take place successfully anytime in the last half of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, though are generally between the months of March and June. An earlier trip has the advantage of bonding the students well before they say goodbye at graduation. Experience has taught us that the students become so close on their 8<sup>th</sup> grade trip, and discover so much about one another, that most regret not having had the experience sooner so that they can continue to grow in friendship. This bittersweet realization is a poignant lesson. Generally, the minimum length of a trip is eight days. Most are ten, and some are as long as fifteen.

### **Pedagogical Value**

Most teachers and parents are looking for an experience for the students that will meet them in a powerful, engaging and enjoyable way. Most students are looking for a combination that includes relaxing, having fun, interesting and challenging activities, socializing, and going away to a different and exciting place. A journey of this kind provides for everyone's needs in a well thought-out, well executed way.

### **Details**

The cost of the trip depends on factors such as locale, duration, and size of class. The costs include everything except student's personal gear such as sleeping bags, backpacks and specialized clothing. All arrangements, food, reservations, transportation, etc. are handled by Synergia.

### **Closure**

Part of any journey is recognizing where you have been. We create a space within the trip for the teacher and class to pause in self-reflection, with guidance, and then proceed with a distinct culmination. The closure is a moment set aside to acknowledge relationships within the class, recognize who they have been together, and offer appreciation as well as allowing an opportunity (always with support), to clear any leftover difficulties or feelings. Over and over we have found that young people thrive on this kind of interaction and have met us every step of the way.

### **Lasting Effects**

A journey of this kind is difficult to describe. It is the type of experience that an individual looks back on with an understanding of the profound positive effect it had on his or her life. After leading twenty-two Waldorf eighth grade trips for the past ten years, we have a unique perspective on what the class needs are, and how students are impacted by such an experience. Countless students have contacted us over the years to tell us how important the trip was for them personally--many of them the same students that started out reluctantly.

## Trip Costs

The cost of a trip depends on many factors: the type of trip (canoe journey, travel out of the country, backpack...), the length and location of the trip, and how many students are in the class. Even the month chosen can make a difference. May and June dates are premium times, so trips in March and April can be a bit less expensive overall.

Cost per student/per day usually ranges from 95.00 to 125.00 depending on the size of the class (if a class is 20 students or less, the per-student cost tends to run a little higher than larger classes), what type of trip it is, (backpacking is the least expensive) and the location (the farther away, more time is needed for travel, and fuel costs are higher). Eight days is the minimum length of time for an 8<sup>th</sup> grade trip, and not all of the trips we offer can be done in 8 days.

Some schools have told us from the start that they have a set budget. Sometimes we can work within their budget and plan the trip around the amount they have to spend. Usually we can do this, but sometimes the budget is just too low, and we will let you know if this is the case. Other classes decide on the trip they want, we draw up a proposal, and they then have a goal to aim for in terms of fund raising or individual commitments. Always it is a matter of weighing the various factors and coming up with the right trip for the class, for a cost that also works for the class.

We have experienced the cost issue in many classes, and the approach to money and fund raising is as diverse as the classes themselves. Some classes have been fund raising since first grade and are pretty well set financially. Others start in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade year. Still others just pay for the trip individually, with very little in the way of collective funds. We have seen class after class pull it together in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, step into serious fund raising and reach their goal with one or two major events. We have ideas if you are interested, and can send you a write up on one approach for students to get help within their extended families and community. There are other, highly creative projects and events that have yielded thousands of dollars in one day or evening. One class was fortunate to have a class mom that had lived in Morocco for several years and was a gourmet chef of the regional food. The class staged a Moroccan feast complete with atmosphere (they decorated the room as if it were a huge tent), music, belly dancing, and floor seating. It was a huge success and people loved it. That's just one example—there are lots more. Drawing on local talent and skill is always a plus.

Usually we ask for a down payment to secure your place, then there are two more payments—one due a few months before the trip, and the final payment which is generally about half the cost of the trip is due at the time of the trip start date.