

WIN A DREAM DISNEY VACATION!

THE ULTIMATE FAMILY TRIP
TO WALT DISNEY WORLD

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YOUR BEST-EVER

FAMILY VACATION GUIDE

These are the places you ought to take your kids to before they grow up. Pick one and you'll have amazing memories for the rest of your lives; plan more and you'll be Mom of the Century. **BY MARY GILES**

NATIONAL PARKS

Arches & Canyonlands National Parks, UT

➤ You'd never think that rocks (seriously, rocks) could be this spectacular. At Arches, you'll be surrounded by a striking landscape of red rock, more than 2,500 natural stone arches, and balancing boulders that seem to defy gravity. Put Double Arch, an adjacent pair of arches, and

Landscape Arch, a thin one that stretches almost the length of a football field, on your must-photograph list—with Delicate Arch, the 65-footer that graces Utah's license plates, at the top. Up the thrill level with white-water rafting; Adrift Adventures offers trips for kids as young as 4, who will love spotting the bighorn sheep. If you stay at nearby Red Cliffs Lodge (from \$229), kids ages 10 and up

can horseback ride while you and the S.O. enjoy tastings at the on-site winery. Reserve a day or two for a visit to Canyonlands, just a half-hour drive from Arches. Its gorgeous canyons are filled with prehistoric buttes (narrow, flat-top hills) and sandstone spires. Borrow binoculars from Island in the Sky Visitor Center to bring to Grand View Point Overlook, where seeing the awe-inspiring geological layers is like staring back in time.

Acadia National Park, ME

➤ The Northeast has only one national park, and it is *stunning*. This park on the coast of Maine has some of the country's most unusual beaches—the sand is made of shell fragments; check out Sand Beach to feel it under your toes (it's soft!). Then take the four-mile round-trip

Ocean Path trail, which passes by Thunder Hole, a small chasm that emits massive booms when big waves roll in. Spooky and cool. Rent bikes at Acadia Bike in the nearby town of Bar Harbor (take the free Bicycle Express shuttle) and ride on the park's famous carriage road system, 45 miles of car-free roads that wind through the mountains. Or, try a boat tour; kids can touch sea life brought up by divers at the Dive-In Theater Cruise (\$15 to \$40). The stately Bar Harbor Grand Hotel, a replica of a long-gone historic resort (from \$245), is the perfect complement to the stately wonder of Acadia.

Mammoth Cave National Park, KY

➤ For the first time ever, the word *mammoth* may be an understatement. To date, more than 400 miles



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of this park (the world's longest known cave system) have been mapped—and there's probably even more down there. The six-hour Wild Cave tour (\$55; ages 16 and up) is a major adventure (get ready to squeeze through some tunnels), but kids as young as 6 can take the Domes and Dripstones tour (\$10 to \$15) to see underground geologic formations, such as icicle-like stalactites, as well as the Historic Tour (\$9 to \$14), where you'll get close to Native American artifacts and other evidence of visitors from centuries past. When you need a little sun on your face again, canoe down Green River or walk some of the 85 miles of trails to see sinkholes that hint at the maze of caves beneath. You can easily zip in and out of Mammoth from one of the cabins at Jellystone Park Camp Resort in nearby Cave City, which features two pools and free games (from \$109).

Yellowstone National Park, WY

America's oldest national park is pretty much overflowing with natural wonders—from more than 500 geysers to bubbling "mud pots" to hissing steam vents—that will reduce your vocabulary to "whoa" and "OMG." The Upper Geyser Basin lives up to its hype: There are 300 active geysers as well as hot springs that look like giant blue pools surrounded by rainbow rings. Easily view them at just the right close-but-not-scary-close distance from the boardwalks and trails. You can also witness a waterfall that's nearly twice the height of Niagara Falls (take the easy 2.6-mile round-trip Artist Point trail), plus wolves, bears, and herds of bison in Lamar Valley. Hotels in the area fill up quickly, so book now. The

scenery may be ancient, but more than half the rooms at the centrally located Canyon Lodge and Cabins (from \$209) are brand-new.

Olympic National Park, WA

Time-strapped families get three vacation spots in one at this nearly million-acre park. It spans multiple ecosystems, including snow-capped mountains, rainforests, and more than 70 miles of Washington wilderness coastline. Make Port Angeles Hurricane Ridge Visitors Center your starting point since there are several trails for families nearby, like Hurricane Hill Trail, which skirts wildflower meadows and provides panoramic views of the Olympic Mountains almost every step of the way. For entirely different scenery, hike the enchanted wonderland that is the Hoh Rain Forest, where

ferns blanket the forest floor and moss drapes from giant evergreens. The beaches: just as breathtaking. Fly kites and explore the sea critter-filled tide pools at Ruby Beach, and allow yourself to marvel at the incredible sea stacks (isolated rock columns shaped by wind and water). Spend your nights right in the park at Sol Duc Hot Springs Resort, with its three hot springs-fed pools (cabins from \$150).

FAMILY RESORTS

Cheeca Lodge & Spa, Islamorada, FL

If it isn't a vacation for your family unless there's sun, sand, and a whole lot of nothin' to do, this tropical resort is your happy place. But if you ever need a break from lying on the gorgeous beach, choose among the many activities included in your stay, like sea

kayaking, dinghy sailing, and catching snapper off the 525-foot wooden pier. The resort also has bikes to borrow for pedaling around the 27-acre property, plus tennis courts and par-3 golf. Camp Cheeca (\$45 for a half-day) is perfect for grade-schoolers, who'll learn about wildlife in the Keys by going on scavenger hunts and making nature-inspired crafts. Meanwhile, you and your teens can take a snorkeling tour at the nearby Florida Reef (\$50 per person). The sea urchins and multicolored parrot fish may momentarily cause you all to forget about your cell phones. *That's* a holiday. From \$249, plus \$45 daily resort fee.

Lost Pines Resort & Spa, Lost Pines, TX

Everything's bigger in Texas, including this



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405-acre spread 25 miles southeast of Austin—and the fun you can have there. Its list of activities is so vast, you may find yourself flipping a coin (or slinging a horseshoe, perhaps) to choose what to do next. Disc golf, tennis, or life-size chess? A hayride or sitting on a *bull*? Good luck deciding. Join in daily resort-wide games like kickball, or teach your kids a valuable lesson about defeat by beating them in an organized water balloon war. The proper way to mark the end of every (and we mean every) perfect day: a trip down the lazy river and roasting s'mores around a fire pit. From \$299, plus \$29 daily resort fee.

Smugglers' Notch Resort, Jeffersonville, VT

➔ Come summer, this family-focused ski resort transforms into a truly special warm-weather playground. The elaborate outdoor water park, with the lush Green Mountains of Vermont as the backdrop, houses eight pools, four waterslides (one is 30 feet tall and 300 feet long!), a floating obstacle course, fountains, and more. But you must venture to the resort's scenic reservoir, too: The giant water trampoline is a hoot. If you're feeling a bit waterlogged, head indoors to the recreation center, FunZone, where the little ones can jump around on the five bounce houses and slides before they join you for shuffleboard. Then, take advantage of that fresh mountain air by joining out-of-the-box lawn games (ever play life-size foosball?) and guided nature walks. From \$300.

Callaway Gardens, Pine Mountain, GA

➔ This nonprofit botanical garden started out as a daytime destination—that is,

until enamored visitors began asking to stay the night. Now families have many lodging options on-site, like modern country cottages, just a stroll away from the 14 lakes, concerts, and butterfly conservatory. The Summer Family Adventure program that runs in June and July is a Cirque du Soleil-meets-outdoorsy summer camp: Kids will have a blast zip-lining and doing trapeze lessons with Florida State University's Flying High Circus, while parents take part in gourmet cooking classes and golf clinics. In the late afternoon, families reunite for group scavenger hunts and beach games. You can also book a basic package anytime to gain daily admission to the gardens and enjoy free activities (like movies on the beach and circus shows) as well as a la

carte offerings that range from as little as 50 cents (mini golf) to \$70 (half hour of tubing behind a ski boat). From \$119; SFA program, from \$496.

Big Cedar Lodge, Ridgedale, MO

➔ Enjoy the great outdoors in a way that would make camping devotees reconsider their life choices. This sprawling wilderness resort offers log cabins, cottages, and more in the majestic Ozarks. Borrow one of the resort's paddle boats, canoes, or kayaks, sign the kids up for a fishing class (maybe don't tell them the pond is stocked to ensure success), or just float around in a lazy river unlike any you've seen before: At 875 feet long, it winds through caves and a waterfall. But what you must do is

reserve a night for the glow-in-the-dark scavenger hunt (\$30 per team) and another for a "dive-in" movie at one of the five pools. There's also mini golf, a 2.5-mile cave tour, and nature trails that pass by a turtle pond. This is the great outdoors as it really oughta be. From \$119.

AMUSEMENT PARKS

Kings Island, Mason, OH

➔ Satisfy your family's sense of adventure at this massive, thrill-a-minute park that boasts one of the best collections of coasters in the country. There are 15 in all, including Banshee, the world's longest steel inverted roller coaster, and The Beast, the world's longest wooden coaster. Little ones who fall under the rigid height line have no reason to pout. They can head over to Planet

