

Family Adventure Vacations

ISSUE 1 // BY THE FAMILY TRAVEL EXPERTS

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“It seems kind of obvious, but relationships thrive on shared experiences.”

Mutual adventures – and sometimes mutual misadventures – are the glue that holds families together when other forces try to pull us apart. My family's list includes the time we were served a chicken head in Hong Kong. And the gecko that dropped from the ceiling onto my daughter's head in Mexico. And the spectacular demise of my husband's aging swim trunks at a hotel pool in Spain.

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5 Common Myths about Group Travel

Worried about the bus, the schedule, and the other travelers? Don't be.

When I told friends that I was traveling to Scotland on a luxury escorted group tour, I got a lot of blank stares. Why would a savvy world traveler like me subject herself to a slow bus, a rigid schedule, and the company of strangers?

Obviously, group travel has a little bit of an image problem.

Now that I've been on a handful of these trips, I've become something of an evangelist. Why? Because group travel is fun and easy. And as a traveling mom, those are not adjectives I throw around lightly. Here are five common myths I hear all the time about group travel:

1. It's too expensive

People invariably get sticker shock when they price group travel. It's easy to get hung up on the big numbers without really thinking about what's included – I've done it myself.

Let's look at a 1-week trip to Costa Rica that costs \$14,400 for a family of four without international airfare. Ouch, right? Before you go breathing into a paper bag, consider that the price includes



exhaustive destination research, nice hotels, internal flights, exclusive activities, most meals, a couple adult-only dinners, and superb guides.

Could you organize a family trip to Costa Rica for less? Of course. Would you get high quality activities, luxury accommodations, and a completely hassle-free experience? Probably not.

2. It's not authentic

Some people believe that in order for travel to be authentic, it must be uncomfortable. To me, that's utter nonsense. Whether you arrive in an air conditioned minivan with leather seats or an overnight chicken bus, you'll still be an outsider in a foreign country. That's what you came for!

Also, independent shoestring travelers often follow the herd without even realizing it. Who do you think is more likely to have an authentic experience: a 20-something backpacker in a hostel full of likeminded people, or a tour group traveler with a local guide who really knows the place? I know which one I'd pick.

3. I won't like the other guests

As far as I'm concerned, this is the biggest variable. On the four group trips I've taken (Galapagos, Scotland, the Salmon River in Idaho, and Alaska), I've been very pleasantly surprised. It seems like these trips self select open minded, fun, adventurous people. There are always odd ducks, but I haven't ever encountered any jerks.

The real magic happens when your kids make friends with other kids and run giggling off into the sunset. Goodbye sibling bickering. Hello vacation.

4. I'm too experienced

Another stigma of group travel is that it's only for inexperienced travelers who've never owned a passport before. Funnily enough, just the opposite is true. People on group trips often travel more and better than independent travelers, because these trips are such good experiences.

When someone else is sweating all the details, making sure you don't miss your train, making dinner reservations, and tipping the Ziplining instructor, you are free to enjoy yourself. Once you've tried it, it's very hard to go back to independent travel.

5. I won't get to explore on my own

Speaking of independence, you will get time to explore on your own on group trips. Good tour companies know that you can't keep going without a break for days on end, so they build in plenty of down time. Even if you love your fellow travelers, your family will want a little privacy now and then.

The smaller the group, the more nimble it will be too. If you wake up one morning in Iceland and don't feel like biking to the geysers, talk to your guide. You'll be surprised how flexible they can be if you ask nicely.



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5 Reasons Kids Love Costa Rica

There are hundreds of reasons to take kids to Costa Rica – here are the top five

When your family is ready for something a little more exciting than an all-inclusive resort on a pretty strip of sand, tiny Costa Rica is a great place to start. For a very affordable price, you'll get beaches, jungles, volcanoes, and lots of exotic animals, all in one beautiful and relatively safe little package.

The family vacation we took there when our kids were 8 and 10 still ranks as one of our favorites – just far enough outside of our comfort zone to be fun. There are hundreds of reasons to take kids to Costa Rica -- here are the top five:

1. FREEDOM FROM JETLAG

It's hard to have a good time when you're headache-y with jetlag, but that's not an issue here. Because Costa Rica is in the same time



zone as Texas, you can arrive one day and hit the ground running the next. When we visited, we were able to cover a lot of ground in just nine days. If you're coming from Miami, Dallas, Los Angeles, Chicago or Washington DC, you may even be able to get a nonstop flight.

2. WARM, SAFE OCEANS

Whether you visit the Pacific or Caribbean side, Costa Rica is far enough south that the water is warm enough for swimming all year. With climate change, the weather patterns of the past aren't as reliable as they used to be. That said, if sunny conditions matter to you, the high season (roughly December through April) will generally be hotter and dryer, while the green season (May through November) will be slightly cooler with a couple hours of rain every day.

3. EASY ACCESS JUNGLES

Costa Rica takes conservation very seriously. How seriously? Over 25% of the country has been set aside as a national park or preserve. As you'd expect, some of the loveliest areas are remote, but many others have parking lots, canopy bridges, and paved paths. Families with young children can easily stroll around the coastal jungles of Manuel Antonio, the caldera at Poas Volcano, and the lowland rainforests at Saraquipi at very little inconvenience.

4. ABUNDANT ANIMALS

Costa Rica packs a lot of wildlife into its borders, though you may need some help actually seeing it. With a good guide and a pair of binoculars (not to mention a high tolerance for early mornings), you'll almost certainly see toucans, bats, sloths, monkeys, and colorful poison dart frogs. There are also caiman, iguanas, lizards, turtles, coatis, and snakes. Finally, Costa Rica is home to six species of wild cats, though they are rare and very good at hiding.

5. ADVENTURES FOR ALL AGES

Kids need to interact with their environments, not just look at them. When yours get tired of hiking through pristine jungles, schedule a family friendly adventure to mix things up a little.

We spent the day at a hot springs warmed by a volcano and explored a riverfront cattle ranch on horseback. For families with older children, Costa Rica offers river rafting, stand up paddle boarding, surfing, and zip lining too. For those who don't mind their wildlife on the creepy and crawly side, there are even night tours of the jungle.



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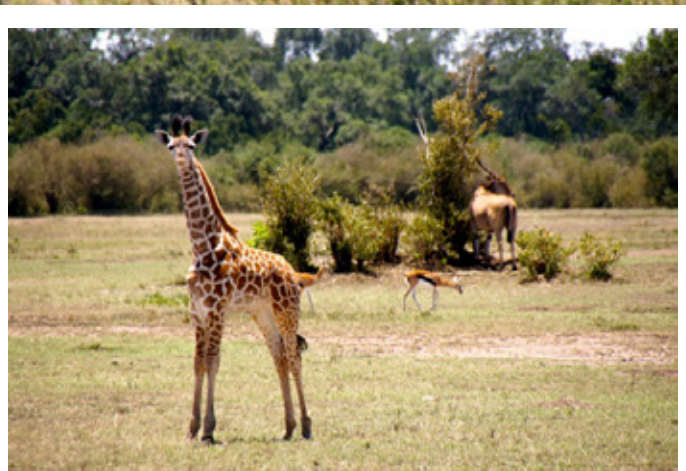


Planning an Age-Appropriate African Safari

Finding a trip that's safe, exciting, and fun

In the not-so-distant past, a family safari vacation was limited to families with teenagers. For reasons of safety and convenience, bush camps and guides didn't allow or encourage younger children. Times have changed!

Africa is a hot destination for families with kids of all ages in 2014 and tour operators are partnering with lodging companies to offer fun trips for school age kids, and in some cases, even toddlers. This is good news, as there's much more that goes into making a safari family-friendly than a tent that sleeps everyone.



First decide between East and South Africa

East and South Africa offer vastly different experiences. We've been to both and found that the animals in East Africa are more accessible, which means you spend less time scouting and more time viewing. Although part of the thrill is the chase.

Another significant consideration is malaria. Some camps are in malaria zones, which means families must decide if they are willing to give kids the strong prevention medication. Don't let the planning considerations dissuade you from going to Africa. A safari is one of the most exciting and memorable family vacations on the planet.

Next, choose a family-focused tour operator

There are vacations that are best planned with the help of a qualified tour operator — someone that handles everything including transportation, guides, and lodging — and this is one of them.

A vacation in Africa is expensive and the risks are real. Finding a tour operator who actively caters to families is key; select an operator who specializes in planning trips with children and uses family-



focused resources like kid-ready guides and itineraries to accommodate them.

Finally, consider which lodging amenities you need

Childcare: Because animal sightings on outings are never guaranteed, young children may not go on every game drive. A lodge that has babysitting or a supervised kids' club is nice perk for parents who want to see more wildlife.

Electric Fences: Many safari camps do not have electric fences to keep wildlife out. Granted, part of the excitement is staying in a place with lions living — literally — outside your door. But you need to have kids that are old enough to listen to instructions about where and when they can go. Many camps prohibit young kids if fences are not in place.

Kid-Friendly Guides: Not all guides are created equal when it comes to engaging kids. Although the animals are the stars of the show, a talented kid-friendly guide will keep kids interested, entertained, and educated about what they are seeing. Children don't always care about the same bits and bytes as adults and the best guides manage to please everyone. Ensure the lodge you choose hosts many families and offers customized family safari experiences.

Activity Options: Onsite activities are a plus for the times when kids are not on game drives. A pool is helpful, but other places for kids to relax are important too. Safari camps can feel confined because kids can't just run off into the wild and play. Walking and horseback safaris are also a great way to experience wildlife, and help break up camp days.

Lodge Location: In addition, if you stay at a property that is near a watering hole or overlooking a savannah, kids can view wildlife right from the deck without leaving the lodge.



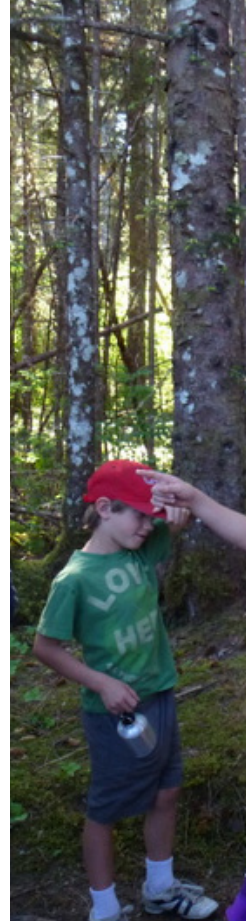
Small Ship Wilderness Cruising with Kids

All of the adventure and none of the annoyances

If you're an overworked parent of small children, traditional cruise vacations probably both intrigue and repel you. What's not to love about a vacation where you unpack once, travel while you sleep, and eat well without cooking? Plus, shipboard life is fun for kids! On the other side of the ledger are the midnight buffets, crowded casinos, and endless duty-free shopping in every port.

Are you nodding your head? If so, you'd probably be a great fit for a small ship wilderness cruise – it's one of the most relaxing and enriching ways for families to travel. Interested in seeing Alaska, Hawaii, or Mexico by boat? Here are a few reasons to choose a small ship cruise for your next vacation:





You'll see more. Much more.

Unlike big cruise ships, small ships can navigate shallow coasts and get you into isolated areas. Launching kayaks and zodiac boats directly from the ship (instead of on a shore excursion) is a big time-saver too. Finally, small ships can follow a more flexible schedule than vessels with thousands of passengers. If they spot a pod of dolphins, they can linger. If the weather is uncooperative, they can leave early.

You'll also see much more than you would on a land-based vacation, since there's no flying, driving, navigating, and checking into and out of hotels. Your small ship cruise can cover a lot more territory in a week than you ever could on dry land.

You'll have lots of options

Although small ship cruising is cozy, there is so much to do! Energetic guests and their kids can choose to hike, kayak, or take a yoga class. There

are also soft adventure options like port calls, cultural presentations, and (depending where you are) whale watching. Relax in the hot tub, or even nap in your cabin – nothing is compulsory.

There's a certain amount of bonding that usually happens on these trips, since they tend to self-select curious, adventurous travelers. If that sounds good to you, head up to the lounge for cocktail hour. If not, read in the library and choose a private table at dinner.





You'll avoid crowds

The worst part of big ship cruising is the omnipresent crowds. It can take hours to get all the passengers on and off the ship. Dinner reservations are a must in the better restaurants, and spa treatments and shore excursions often sell out in advance. Small ship cruising avoids all of this. Also, you and your kids will have a front row seat (or spot on the rail) for every wildlife encounter, which is unforgettable.

You'll really relax

Because someone else will handle the planning, guiding, cooking, and logistics, guests can really relax on a small ship cruise. You'll never have to open a map or consult a guidebook, unless you want to. Decision-making is very limited, and that's a good thing. Go bird watching or snorkel? Steak or salmon? Wine or beer? Sneakers or flip flops? It's heavenly.

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— Janie H., Palmer, TX
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The Perfect Thai Family Vacation

Tigers, temples, massages, and elephants

Thailand may seem very far away, but it's really not. With easy connections and a compact geography, it's actually a very civilized trip with kids. If you've got two weeks, you can easily see Thailand with your family and still have plenty of time for relaxing too.

Start in Bangkok (but don't linger)

Bangkok is noisy, busy, and chaotic. It will be your first stop in Thailand, but not your favorite.

There are a few unique things to see here, but most experiences (like riding in a Tuk Tuk or getting a foot massage) can be had elsewhere at less hassle and expense.

The most efficient way to see the kid-friendly highlights of Bangkok is to hire a guide to take you on a half-day river tour. Even in hot weather, a ride in a long tail boat through the residential canals of the Chao Phraya River is breezy and refreshing. It's kind of like Venice, but with golden



temples on the horizon instead of church towers.

Stop to feed fish along the way and keep your eyes open for the large, scaly monitor lizards who often lounge on residents' docks. Visit Wat Arun, the Royal Grand Palace, and the Emerald Buddha Temple, and then call it a day.

Take a side trip to Kanchanaburi

Had enough big city pollution and crowds? I don't blame you. Even though it's not really on the way to anywhere, go to Kanchanaburi province next. The town of Kanchanaburi (home to the Bridge on the River Kwai and the very poignant Hellfire Pass Memorial) is often advertised as a day trip from Bangkok, but you'll want to spend at least one night there.

The World War II sites are interesting, but the real reason to come here is to stay at the River Kwai Jungle Rafts, a series of anchored, connected rafts floating on the swiftly flowing River Kwai. You'll dine family style, sleep under mosquito netting, and light your way with oil lamps. Although the

resort doesn't have electricity or hot water, you won't miss them at all.

The most popular activity here is jumping into the river (with a lifejacket), floating downstream, climbing back onto the rafts via a ladder, and then doing it all over again. Even I loved it enough to do it all day, and I'm usually a chicken about these kinds of things.

The local village also offers elephant rides. If you'll be riding elsewhere in Thailand, you can still feed bananas to the elephants and pet them for free. The mahouts often bathe them in the river in the morning right in front of the rafts, which is nice to watch over a cup of coffee.

Fly to Chiang Mai, and settle in

Choose your accommodations wisely in Chiang Mai, because you'll be spending most of your time here – you could stay a month and not run out of things to do. Some of the more popular activities (such as elephant camps and ziplining) will need to be reserved in advance.



The major sights in and around Chiang Mai are the old town (where you should stay, if you can) and the gorgeous hillside Wat Phra Doi Suthep temple. The Chiang Mai Zoo is nice too, especially if you've never seen pandas.

Our family's favorite activities included ziplining, meeting tigers, a bike tour of a riverside village, and massages. We liked the massages so much, that we went every day -- you can easily find 1-hour foot, Thai, or head and shoulder massages for \$5.

We also got up early to offer alms to the novice Buddhist monks that walk down from Wat Phra Doi Suthep every morning, which was a wonderful experience. We considered a cooking class, but decided to try a fish spa on our last day instead.

If you go

Because families are tied to school schedules,





you'll probably have to go over winter break or summer vacation. We didn't want to skip Christmas, so we opted to go in July. Naysayers will tell you that summer is too hot and humid to be enjoyable. I disagree. We booked hotels with pools, stayed in the shade as much as possible, and cooled off with cold drinks. It was fine.

If you're connecting through Hong Kong on your way to Bangkok, consider staying and sightseeing for a few days. Because it's clean, safe, and beautiful, Hong Kong is a great place to recover from the worst of your jetlag before traveling onward.

Got another few days? Finish your trip with a few days on a Thai beach or with an excursion to Angkor Wat in Cambodia. It would be a shame to come this far and not see as much as you can.





Visiting Galapagos with Kids

Why it's totally worth the money

Planning a family trip to Galapagos is not for the faint of wallet – I should know, I did it a couple years ago. Even if you're lucky enough to be using frequent flyer miles to get to Ecuador, an expedition cruise for a family of four can cost as much as a really nice used car.

So, is Galapagos really worth it? Yes. Here's why.

Best field trip ever

My daughter's 7th grade science curriculum covered, among other things, evolution. It's one thing to watch a droning video about how different giant tortoises adapted differently on different islands. It's quite another thing to walk among those same tortoises as they hiss to pull their heads into their shells under the hot equatorial sun.



How many moments in your life have been simultaneously educational and just really, really fun? Not that many, I bet. Pretty much every moment on Galapagos is like that.

You'll learn about adaptation while snorkeling with an iguana that taught itself to dive for algae when no other food was available, and you'll learn about an ocean current that comes straight from Antarctica by swimming with penguins.

Try learning that in a classroom.

Less-than-wild wildlife

Those tortoises, iguanas and penguins aren't afraid of you either. Neither are the hawks, sea lions, and flightless cormorants. They've evolved without land-based predators, so they're all curious about you, but not scared. My son had to jump back quickly more than once to keep a not-yet-weaned baby sea lion from tasting his toes on the beach.

New experiences daily

From the moment you touch down, there are more new experiences for families in Galapagos than there are hours in the day. On our first morning, we stood three feet from a frigate bird who was inflating his bright red neck pouch and showing off his bachelor pad in the hope of attracting a mate. Later that day, we swam with docile turtles and enormous sea lions.

Then we took a sunset zodiac cruise where we saw whales, turtles, penguins, and the strange and wonderful ocean sunfish. Then we snorkeled with sharks. Then we crossed the equator. We kept expecting Galapagos to run out of surprises, but it never did.



If you go

When visiting Galapagos, time of year is relatively unimportant. There is really never a bad time to go. In general, the air temperature will range from low-80s to mid 90s, and water temperature varies widely, but in you will want a short wetsuit year-round.

A far bigger decision will be whether to take a land-based or boat-based trip. While expedition cruises are far more expensive, they can cover a lot more territory since the ship will travel while you sleep. If you stay in hotels and island hop, you'll see less wildlife but have more freedom. If you suffer from seasickness, neither travel style will offer you complete immunity, however. Even the land-based trips often include long ferry rides for excursions.

Finally, be sure to take out trip insurance and carry on your luggage instead of checking it if at all possible. Galapagos is an expensive destination, and it's smart to control as many of the variables as possible when spending this much money.



What Makes a Great Family Trip?

6 things to look for in an adventure vacation

Not a week goes by that I don't get an email from someone wanting trip planning help – these days, everyone seems to be looking for a shortcut to the perfect do-it-yourself family adventure vacation. I try to let them down gently, but the truth is, there's no such thing. Even when you have a lot of experience planning trips, research is a pain. You can spend hours quizzing friends, poring over guidebooks, and skimming online travel forums. Or you can just find an adventure travel company that really gets active families and book your trip with them. I prefer to do the latter, but both will work.

If you've already got a destination in mind, you're halfway there! Now here are six things to look for when choosing or planning a family adventure vacation:





1. A VIBE THAT FITS YOUR FAMILY

Some trips seem attract backpackers or partiers, while others get a lot of honeymooners and affluent retirees. While you probably don't want or need a place that caters exclusively to families, neither will you want to feel old and unfashionable or loud and underdressed. Choose carefully.

2. A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES

I learned the hard way (in Andalusia, Spain for those of you who are keeping score at home) that kids are seldom content with a day spent walking around looking at things. Can they do it? Yes. Will they enjoy it? Probably not. Somewhere between the ages of 20 and 30, most people gain at least a little appreciation for cobblestone streets, picturesque villages, and stunning views. Before that, they really need activities.

You can still visit museums and wander through cities on your family vacation, but be sure to schedule bike tours, canoe trips, elephant rides, river rafting, and as many other hands-on activities as you can find in and around your destination.

3. FLEXIBILITY WHEN YOU NEED IT

Plans are great, as long as they're somewhat flexible. I'm usually happy to stick with the program, but if someone gets sick, grouchy, or just plain tired of sightseeing—which happens at least once on every trip, I like having the option to change gears.

When we were on a private guided tour of Costa Rica, we found a rope swing over the ocean in Cahuita National Park. Unwilling to tear the kids away, my husband and I scratched the rest of our plans for that afternoon so the kids could repeatedly hurl themselves into the water, fully clothed.



4. A FAMILY-FRIENDLY PACE

When traveling with kids, one activity or outing per day is plenty. Two is possible, but not ideal. When choosing a trip, be sure to take jetlag into account. If you're crossing several time zones to join a group that gets started before the roosters every day, you may want to build in a few days to acclimate.

Consider flying partway to your destination, and then continuing on later. The five days we spent in Hong Kong before meeting our guide for a tour of Thailand ensured that we were well rested and ready to hit the ground running when we arrived.

5. PLENTY OF DOWNTIME

Yes, there is such a thing as too much fun. Whether your kids are morning people or night owls, they are going to need at least two hours every day to mess around. They should be free to read, watch television, or play video games. Please don't make them write in their travel journals either – that doesn't count! Little brains need to really rest.

6. HOTEL POOLS

Kids and hotel swimming pools go together like peanut butter and jelly. Nothing motivates a hot and tired kid better than knowing they can goof around in the water at the end of a long day of sightseeing. I almost never book a hotel that doesn't have a pool – it's just not worth it.

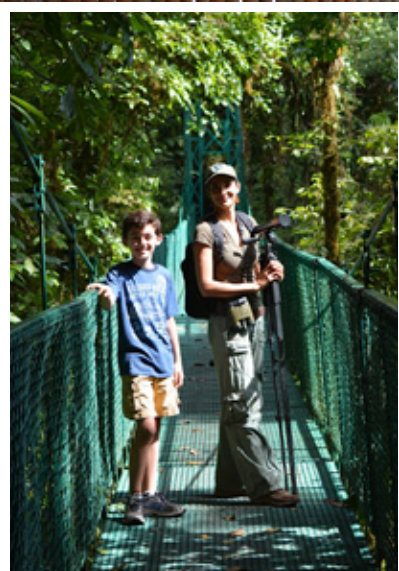
If you're staying at an upscale property, boost the fun factor by swimming during happy hour. You can order a rum and coke and check out the Jacuzzi while your kids sip smoothies and practice their cannon balls. After all, you're on vacation!



Your First Adventure Vacation

5 unforgettable entry-level destinations for families with young kids

If you're anything like me, there is a sharp demarcation between how you traveled before you had kids and how you travel now that you have kids. Before kids, I buzzed into Alaska's Talkeetna wilderness on a propeller plane and landed on a river sandbar with mostly eagles and bears for company. After kids? I rented a lot of condos on the quiet side of Kauai, at least in the early days. Now, there's absolutely nothing wrong with a relaxing week in Hawaii—who doesn't love a little aloha?—but once your kids get older, you might want to mix it up a little. Ready to dust off your adventure travel credentials and open your kids' eyes to the world? Here are some ideas to get you inspired and planning.



1. Costa Rica

Costa Rica makes a perfect first family adventure vacation. You can see sloths, monkeys, and toucans in their jungle habitat, watch molten lava roll down the steep slopes of a volcano, and still soak your cares away in hot spring-fed mineral pools after a long day of sightseeing.

If you have just a week or 10 days, we'd recommend splitting your time between the remote coastal Tortuguero National Park and the lowland rainforests around Sarapiquí. If you can stay a little longer, end your trip by relaxing on a beach – either the Caribbean or Pacific side is good. Even though Costa Rica is small, its roads can be rough. Flying is the best way to get around if you don't mind small planes.



2. Thailand

Postcard-perfect Thailand is another great choice, especially for families with kids eight and older who can handle new foods. In laid back Chiang Mai (where the weather is slightly cooler than Bangkok, and the pace of life slower), you can be blessed by a monk in a golden temple, meet baby tigers, ride elephants, and zipline through an ancient forest. If you're really brave, you can visit a fish spa where dozens of minnows nibble dead skin from between your toes.

On a two-week trip, spend just enough time in Bangkok to see the highlights. Then divide the rest of your time between Chiang Mai and one of Thailand's lovely beaches. If it's not beach season, add on a side trip to Angkor Wat in neighboring Cambodia instead.

3. Australia

Once your kids are in 7th or 8th grade, it becomes



very difficult to visit the southern hemisphere when the weather is warm there – their summer is our school year. That’s why Australia is a great destination for families with children under 12. Also, as an English-speaking destination, it’s an easy trip once you get there.

Pull the kids out of school in November or December, and then point your compass toward Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef. You’ll also be able to see crocodiles, kangaroos, and koalas. Next, explore Sydney and world famous Bondi beach. If time permits, visit Ayers Rock in the red center. If not, there’s always next time.

4. Alaska

Even when they’re expecting it, kids will be delighted with Alaskan summer nights. When we visited, we had to wear our sunglasses at a cookout dinner... at midnight. It was years ago, and we’re still talking about it!

There are two ways to explore Alaska: by land or by sea. If you decide on a land-based trip, you’ll want to spend time at a lodge in Denali (and the scenic train trip there is incredible). You may also want to add on a few days of river rafting or exploring the glaciers and fjords around the Kenai Peninsula.



If you decide to cruise, choose the smallest boat you can for the best access. Many ships ply the waters of Alaska's famed Inner Passage, but the smaller ships can get you closer to the scenery and habitats and put you on land more often and more easily.

5. Morocco

Looking for a safe, stable destination in North Africa? Consider Morocco where you'll feel like you've stepped right onto an Indiana Jones film set. With short, direct flights on EasyJet from many European cities, it's easy to get to as well.

You'll experience an exotic landscape, warm hospitality, and an ancient culture here. Since the country's infrastructure is highly developed, you'll experience it all in comfort too. From chic guest houses to lavish hotels, there's no shortage of interesting places to stay. Morocco's landscape is diverse for a country this size; in a single vacation you can experience the beach, desert, mountains, and lively cities, making it a great choice for all ages and interests.

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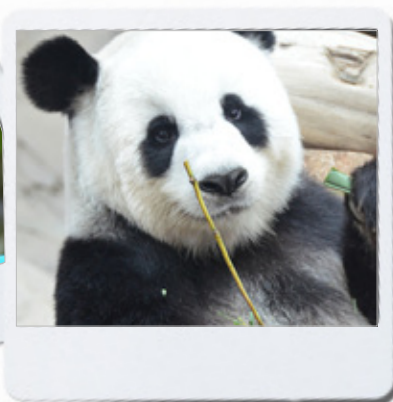
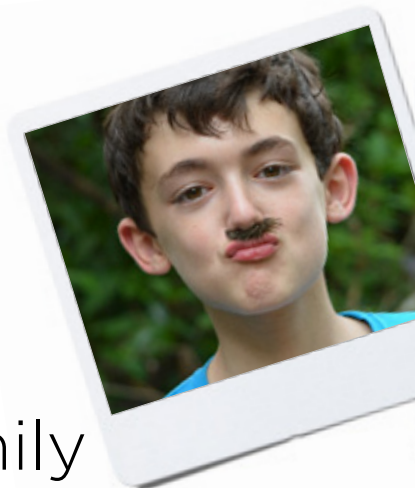
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