

## Smart Vacations

The scoop on summer trips that combine leisure and learning.

By Laura Hilgers



A wagon trek provides old-time fun in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. (Courtesy Wagons West)

As the school year ends, parents get a welcome break from carpooling and homework. There's no need, though, to close the books on learning. Summer can be the best time to take that rich, educational vacation your children will talk about for years -- the trip where they not only have fun but develop a spirit of adventure or explore their creativity.

If learning something new on your next vacation is a priority, you're not alone. More than 30 million people have taken an educational trip in the last three years, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. "Adventure and experiential travel are on the increase," says Kyle McCarthy, editor of the online newsletter Family Travel Forum. Pressed for time, today's working families expect more for their vacation dollar, she adds. A carefully planned trip can ignite a child's passion for history or the arts, and can even inspire parents to develop a new skill. **Asheville, North Carolina**  
Music and Dancing in the Blue Ridge Mountains

Every summer, the hills of the Appalachians come alive with the sound of folk tunes as music lovers from around the country descend upon Asheville, NC, for the Swannanoa Gathering. Now in its 10th year, the gathering is an eclectic music camp held at Warren Wilson College in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Families will want to visit during the three weeks that offer children's programs for ages 4 and up (this year, it's July 8 to 28). While parents learn how to play the Celtic harp, do

an Irish step dance, or discover the mandolin, kids can spend the day exploring music too. For musicians ages 4 to 7, the gathering offers a morning-long Kindermusic class; for 6- to 12-year-olds, the all-day program includes crafts, swimming, and a chance to learn such unusual instruments as the pennywhistle (an Irish flute) and the mountain dulcimer.

Janis Antonek, a Greensboro, NC, mom of a 9- and a 5-year-old, has attended the gathering with her family for the past three years. "It's great because the kids hear music everywhere," she says. "Literally everywhere you look, there's an adult with an instrument in his or her lap."

Tuition for adults is \$340 per week. Kindermusic is \$115; the 6-and-up program costs \$105. Housing and meals are \$260 per week per adult. For more information, call 828-298-3434 or visit [www.swangathering.org](http://www.swangathering.org). **Cooperstown, New York**  
Big-League Fun and Much More

The National Baseball Hall of Fame may be a mecca for hard-core fans -- and a lot of fun for kids -- but it's just one of many reasons to plan a long weekend in Cooperstown, NY. This bucolic town, 70 miles west of Albany on the shores of Lake Otsego, brims with family-friendly historical and cultural sites.

"We were blown away by how wonderful Cooperstown was," says Andrea Gabor, a New York City college professor who visited a year ago with her husband and two daughters, then 8 and 5. To the delight of her kids, Gabor's family visited Cooperstown during sheep-shearing season at The Farmers' Museum, a living-history museum that includes an entire 1845 village, the Main Barn, and the Lippitt Farmstead, where Gabor's daughters plunged their hands into freshly shorn wool and then watched as it was spun into yarn. Throughout the museum, educators in historical dress bring the past to life, performing such tasks as working antique printing presses, milking cows, and baking bread in brick ovens.

Not far away, the Fenimore Art Museum gives a firsthand look at 18th-century Native American ways. On the lakefront behind the fine-arts museum -- which has a special art room just for kids -- there's a kanonhsa, an Iroquois "bark house." Inside, staffers carve canoes out of logs and make clothing from animal skins, just as Native Americans did centuries ago.

Places to stay include the 15-room Cooper Inn (double rooms start at \$185, including breakfast) and the larger, lakeside Otesaga (double rooms start at \$325, including breakfast and dinner). Babysitting and family-oriented suites are available; for information on both inns, call 800-348-6222. For details about Cooperstown, call 888-875-2969 or visit [www.cooperstowngetaway.org](http://www.cooperstowngetaway.org). **Jackson Hole, Wyoming**  
A Taste of the Old West via Covered Wagon

What could be a more authentic way to experience American history than taking a covered wagon trip? Wagons West, an outfitting company in Afton, WY, offers two-, four-, and six-day wagon journeys along former logging roads in the breathtaking Teton

National Forest. The wagons are replicas of the ones used by pioneers but with rubber wheels and comfortable cushioned seats. Kids of all ages are welcome (a nursing infant went along on one jaunt), but the trip can be enjoyed most by children ages 4 and up who are old enough to sit on a horse with an adult.

This trek is a true escape from civilization, with nothing but the Grand Tetons and endless wilderness in every direction. Guests, many of whom have never been in the saddle before, do plenty of riding, taking turns for up to half the day on the company's gentle horses. (If you want a horse full-time, you can pay an extra fee.) For adults and older children, there are even guided rides into the high country, where you might glimpse a buffalo, elk, moose, or deer, not to mention a riot of wildflowers and sagebrush.

When Cynthia Grandquist of Des Moines, IA, took her two sons, ages 9 and 6, on a Wagons West trip last year, they discovered a few things that a city kid would never know. Like what? "To talk loudly when we were riding," she says with a laugh, "to scare away any bears." Her sons also learned how to use a lariat, throwing a knotted rope over a model steer head that the tour guides keep at camp.

The fun doesn't stop at night, either. After a chuck-wagon meal of hearty stew or roast chicken, the guides gather around the campfire and entertain guests with old-time cowboy songs, tall tales, and stories of famous Native Americans and cowboys. After that, guests fall asleep in the wagons, in tents, or under the stars -- which, in this Wyoming wilderness, illuminate the sky like Christmas lights.

If you want to make a longer trip of it, consider visiting nearby Yellowstone National Park and Jackson Hole, which is the jumping-off point for the Wagons West trips. A four-day trek costs \$650 for adults and \$555 for kids under 14. For more information, call 800-447-4711 or visit [www.recworld.com/wagonswest](http://www.recworld.com/wagonswest). **Snowmass Village, Colorado** Creative Paradise at an Artists' Community

This is the place to go if you fantasize about spending a week with your family painting, sculpting, or snapping photos. Anderson Ranch, an artists' community nestled in the Rocky Mountains, is a veritable beehive of creative energy each summer, when it offers more than 100 workshops for adults and children ages 6 and up. Adults (including those with no artistic experience) can take classes in ceramics, watercolors, woodworking, or art history. Kids can enroll in classes such as "Global Art: Exploring the Art of Other Cultures," "Wild Animal Art," or "Bookmaking and Storytelling."

Ginny Bishop, a mother of six in Littleton, CO, has taken her three oldest children (now 10, 9, and 7) every summer for the last three years, mostly because she's so impressed by the caliber of the creative types on campus. Past visiting artists have included the performance artist Laurie Anderson, painters Red Grooms and Jim Dine, and Japanese ceramist Takashi Nakazato. "When you're there, you're literally walking among artists," says Bishop. Even better, she adds, the artists who teach children's classes "are really invested in the kids."

Anderson Ranch's setting alone is a work of art. Located 10 miles from Aspen, the community is housed on a former cattle and sheep ranch. Many of the studios were once barns or three-sided sheep sheds -- which means that one wall is missing, with Rocky Mountain views in its place.

There's limited housing at the Ranch, but the center offers nearby condominium apartments to families. Two-bedroom condos are \$1,050 per week. Adult weeklong classes start at \$395. Children's classes start at \$125. For more information, call 970-923-3181 or visit [www.andersonranch.org](http://www.andersonranch.org). **Sierra Club Outings**  
Adventures on Land and Sea

A pioneer of adventure travel, the Sierra Club offers trips for even the youngest family members. And what better classroom could there be than an ocean, a mountain, or a lake? That's what Josie Adams, a research and development manager in Cincinnati, thought when she signed up her family -- which included a 3- and a 1-year-old at the time -- for the Sierra Club's Cape Cod Family Trip.

Adams was not disappointed. On a boat trip with naturalists, her kids used nets to catch fish, which they were allowed to touch. They played in a freshwater pond, went whale-watching, and participated in a turtle-tracking adventure. "The trip had a great combination of activities," says Adams. This summer's Cape Cod trip runs July 8 to 14; participants bring their own tents and equipment and stay at a campground in Wellfleet, MA.

For families who prefer altitude to sea level, there's a family camp for kids ages 5 and up at Clair Tappaan Lodge, the Sierra Club's facility in California's stunning Sierra Nevadas (this year, it's August 19 to 24). Activities include hikes to pristine mountain lakes, swimming, boating, and language lessons for the kids. There's also a weeklong outing for grandparents and grandkids (July 29 to August 3).

Elsewhere, the Rocky Mountain Ramble, in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, offers treks to meadows, waterfalls, the Continental Divide, and a 14,255-foot peak. There's even a daycare program for children ages 2 and older to enable parents to take the more strenuous hikes while kids learn about nature back at the lodge.

The Cape Cod and Clair Tappaan Lodge trips cost \$445 for adults and \$345 for children. The Rocky Mountain Ramble costs \$950 for adults and \$695 for children. For more information, call 415-977-5522 or visit [www.sierraclub.org/outings](http://www.sierraclub.org/outings). **Caribbean and the South Pacific**

For families willing to stray from our shores, several resorts offer brain stimulation for the kids (and Mai Tais and massages for Mom and Dad).

The Lodge at Chaa Creek Adventure Centre, Rainforest Reserve, and Spa, nestled on a 330-acre nature reserve in the Central American country of Belize,

is like an instant immersion course in rainforest ecology with a jungle river for swimming, a butterfly farm, and more than 200 varieties of birds. One-bedroom cottages start at \$135 a night. For more information, call 501-92-2037 in Belize or visit [www.chaacreek.com](http://www.chaacreek.com).

The Atlantis Resort in the Bahamas' Paradise Island features the Discovery Channel Camp for kids ages 4 to 12. Among the camp's offerings are a state-of-the-art science center with live-animal touch tanks and high-powered microscopes, as well as an 11-million-gallon marine-life tank that circles the perimeter of the hotel property. Families can also enjoy six pools (two for kids), five water slides, and a "lazy river" ride in which guests are pulled by a gentle current as they float in rubber tubes. Double rooms start at \$185. Half-day camp sessions start at \$30. For information, call 800-ATLANTIS or visit [www.AtlantisResort.com](http://www.AtlantisResort.com).

The Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort, run by Jacques Cousteau's son, has a wonderful day camp for infants to 9-year-olds called the Bula Camp, in which kids learn about marine life, ocean ecology, and Fijian customs such as coconut-leaf weaving. Room rates start at \$425, camp included; babysitting is available at about \$2 an hour. For information, call 800-246-3454 or visit [www.fijiresort.com](http://www.fijiresort.com).

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