

Feature Story

BY DEBBIE LAVDAS

Plan the ultimate family vacation

Get ready for your getaway – whether it involves two weeks in Paris or two hours in San Diego.

Picture this: You and your family lounging and laughing with everyone on “island time,” sipping something fresh and fruity. Who doesn’t love a good “Hey, we’re on vacation” vacation? The rules are bent, the chores are chucked and everyone gets a chance to reconnect and unwind as fond memories become etched in sand – or your getaway landscape of choice.

TripAdvisor, the world’s largest travel site, says over 90 percent of Americans are planning to take more than two leisure trips this year, with 79 percent planning to spend \$3,000 on their vacations.

My family and I tend to do the weekend escapes. But I must say that every time a dreamy Atlantis commercial comes on and that aqua eye-candy splashes across the screen, my whole family starts dreaming of a long, lazy week in the Bahamas.

So with Spring Break near, I hunted around for the best trips tips, apps, sites and getaways, from the U.K. to our own backyard. It’s time to break out the brochures, websites and passports, and let the planning begin.

At Rancho Bernardo Inn, in North County San Diego, the Kids Rule! package might be the perfect option for your family.

10 TRIPS TIPS:

- 1. Get the kids their own suitcases** – It helps keep things organized, and they’re cute, too.
- 2. Unpack when you arrive, and give the kids a drawer** – It’ll make things less messy.
- 3. Discuss the daily itinerary** – Get the whole family involved and avoid the kids’ hourly “What’s next?!” questions.
- 4. Pack favorite snacks** – Food solves a lot of problems.
- 5. Invite another family for playmates** – The friendly interaction is great, and kids love fun company.
- 6. Bring meds** – Be prepared for any emergency, from bee stings to bandages.
- 7. Think on the go** – Playtex drop-in baby bottle liners, for example.
- 8. Have a no-TV rule** – You’re bonding, remember?
- 9. Bring puzzles and board games** – It’s a great down-time remedy.
- 10. Visit the concierge** – After all, they know kids!

SOURCE: WALL STREET JOURNAL REPORTING ON TRIPADVISOR’S ANNUAL TRAVEL TRENDS SURVEY OF MORE THAN 2,700 U.S. TRAVELERS, NOV. 2011

Tap these apps:

Beautiful Planet – Pics and facts of amazing travel destinations (\$1.99)

myTSA – Reminds you what is and isn’t allowed when flying (free)

GateGuru – It includes comprehensive airport terminal info (free)

iStoryTime – The best children’s books (.99)

Top Trips For 2012

Beach trip – 44% • Cultural trip – 42% • Road trip – 40% • City trip – 36%

SOURCE: TRIPADVISOR, VIA ONLINE.WSJ.COM

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WEEK-LONG DREAM VACATIONS: GLOBAL GETAWAYS

Escape to Atlantis

If you're a Bahama Mama whose family loves the tropics, Atlantis does look pretty dreamy. The palatial resort sports 140 acres of water thrills, 13 pools, a 7-acre snorkeling lagoon and 50,000 aquatic animals. To reward your selfless planning ways, there's a spa for you, and Dad can golf. It's all-inclusive, so there is less worry about daily costs. To get going, check out atlantis.com; kayak.com; and tripit.com, which keeps travel plans in one spot.

Visit London & Paris, Adventures by Disney

Perhaps a trip across The Pond might be a smashing good time. The Summer Games will be held in London in 2012, and it's a hot travel destination. Adventures by Disney offers an England-and-France family vacation (as well as trips to Italy, France, Germany and Greece). Trained Disney guides deliver an active, unique experience with just a touch of Disney magic while seeing Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower. adventuresbydisney.com

Did you know?

44% of U.S. travelers plan on using their smartphone more as a travel resource during trips in 2012.

SOURCE: TRIPADVISOR AT ONLINE.WSJ.COM

The App - Solutes:

Postino - Create a real postcard and send it (**free**)

Trip Journal - Track, record, document and share your travels (**\$2.99**)

Pack & Go Delux - Family to-do's, tasks and packing lists (**\$2.99**)

Indulge your island dreams at Atlantis Resort, Bahamas.



Did you know?

The top three international cities U.S. travelers plan to visit are **Paris, London** and **Rome**.

SOURCE: TRIPADVISOR

What's your travel site type?

Backpackers:

lonelyplanet.com

Luxury types:

travelandleisure.com

Green families:

ethicaltraveler.org



Say "ouli" to the trip of a lifetime!

Local La Costa can be a destination of tropical family fun.

ULTIMATE WEEKEND ESCAPES

La Costa Resort

A little closer to home is this Spanish Mission-style resort in Carlsbad. The La Costa Resort & Spa furnishes lots of water fun with a resort pool, Sandy Beach Pool for toddlers, water play zone and three waterslides. There's also the kids' club, Kidtopia and a teen gaming lounge, Vibz. La Costa is newly renovated (to the tune of \$50 million). Check out the La Costa Experience package for savings. lacosta.com

Rancho Bernardo Inn

The Rancho Bernardo Inn, in northern San Diego, is another family gem. They have a Kid's Rule! Parents Drool package (Memorial Weekend through Labor Day), in which children get a wristband good for food, drinks and activities during their stay. Or check out the S'mores & Snores good times (an in-room tent, sleeping bag and s'mores kit), dive-in movies and water games. KidsRule! lounges have numerous activities, too. ranchobernardoinn.com

St. Regis Resort Monarch Beach

What's not to love about a vacation at the lovely St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort & Spa? It's stunning, with the beautiful beachside near the bluffs of Dana Point. The resort has an exclusive beach club, Surf Butlers (really) and three swimming pools and the Sandcastle Kids Club. For spring, the St. Regis is having a Spring Into Luxury getaway, which includes a daily \$150 resort credit. It, indeed, makes for an ultimate O.C. weekend. stregismb.com

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PERFECT DAY TRIPS

Only have a day to play? No worries. This is Orange County, and we're blessed with oceans of things to do right here. Laguna Beach, in particular, is a family paradise with too many sights to cover, so here's a handful of family ways to go day-tripping, provided by the Laguna Beach Visitors & Conference Bureau. lagunabeachinfo.com

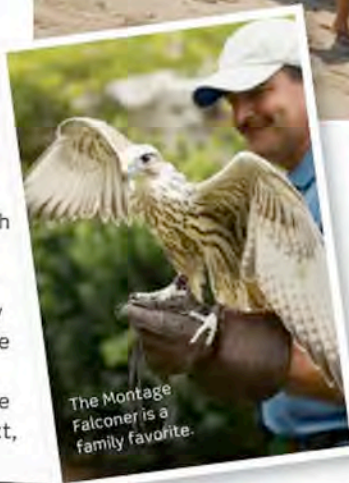
Get away at The Montage

Also in Laguna Beach is another idyllic retreat, The Montage. Did you know that you can play without an overnight stay at the Montage? They love locals at the resort. Your ultimate day starts with a family lunch at Mosaic. Then stop and chat with the Montage Falconer to learn about the amazing birds at the property (my kids love doing this and still remind me about it).

After that, take a walk down to the beach and explore the tide pools. Next, Mom and Dad can enjoy a spa treatment (always divine), while the kids get creative at Paintbox, the activities-based children's program. Finally, everyone can meet to watch the sunset and play checkers in the Lobby Lounge. montagelagunabeach.com



Dig your toes in the sand in Laguna Beach.



The Montage Falconer is a family favorite.



Disney Magic: a lifetime of memories.

Sites to surf

travelingmom.com – Ideas for affordable family vacations, including such tips as house-swapping.

Head to goby.com for 6 million things to do and discounts on attractions.

Check Out theoceanfrontca.com for your insider source to luxury experiences in coastal Orange County.

Fun Laguna Beach Excursions

- Thalia Street Beach surfing/skim boarding
- * Laguna Coast Wilderness Park hiking *
- Sawdust studio art classes *
- Pacific Marine Mammal Center *
- Dana Wharf Sportfishing & Whale Watching *
- O.C. Wildlife & Beach Tour *
- La Vida Laguna sea kayaking tours
- * Crystal Cove State Park mountain biking

Disneyland Resort

It's a big year for the resort, with many new changes and more fun for families. (We really are so lucky to have Disneyland in our own backyard with no planes or trains required.)

Just a short drive, and the family can play and unplug; everyone is a kid at heart. This year brings the new magic of Cars Land and Buena Vista Street, which will complete the five-year expansion of Disney California Adventure Park. And the Mad T Party dance club is coming, too. (If you should stay overnight, The Disneyland Hotel just completed its two-year renovation; the Adventureland Suite is highly recommended.) For O.C. offers, call the Travel Planning team at 866.43.DISNEY. disneyland.com/offers

Conclusion: Wherever you decide to go, and however long you opt to stay, just remember to have fun, relax and reconnect. And, hey, a vacation is only as good as the stories you come back with – so live it up! **OCF**

App These:

Disneyland Explorer – The sights and sounds of the park, for iPad (**free**)

Mom Maps – Kid-friendly places when you're on the go (**\$2.99**)

Travel + Leisure – Easy trip ideas, itineraries and insider info (**free**)

DEBBIE LAVDAS is a Southern California freelance writer, mother of three and avid vacationer. Keep up with her at debbieintheoc.com, on Twitter @DebLvdas and at her OC Family blog.

BOTTOM PHOTO BY SERGEI KHACKMULLIN / POTOPIA.COM; ALL OTHERS COURTESY OF VENUE