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COVER STORY

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Active Family Vacations

By Kelly Gray

American families have precious little time to spend together between school, homework and working parents. Vacationing together is a rewarding experience that can bring families together and diffuse everyday stress. But planning a family vacation can become challenging as well. Research is time consuming. And with the advent of internet vacation marketing, how do you know who to trust? Leave it to the source for all things activity-focused – Charlotte Health and Fitness Magazine, of course.

Before families travel together, it's important to know about amenities, activities, and lodging. What activities are just for parents? What's available to keep kids busy so parents can relax? What activity-focused child care does a destination provide, if any? What can families do together?

Hundreds of vacation destinations are simply clamoring to welcome families and offer everything from luxury accommodations to bunk beds for every mom, dad and child. They are family friendly and seeking a family market with amenities that encourage people to get active.

We researched nearly 50 destinations and sought advice from some of the most trusted names in travel. On the following pages, we've listed our favorite picks for vacations that are perfect for active families, and given you some helpful resources to make vacation planning a little easier.



Rafting and river sports

At Appalachian Wildwaters in Oak Hill, West Virginia guests spend the day paddling two of the most beautiful rivers in the country, the New River and the Gauley River. Offering rafting for children Age 6 and up, Appalachian Wildwater also offers mountain biking, rock climbing and horseback riding. With three camping options on site including cabin tents, they also book rooms and cabins within five minutes of their facility. Kids can also enjoy the pool and game room while parents listen to live music every Saturday night in the Firecreek Tavern.

Ideal for kids as young as Age 4, the Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC) introduces kids to all sorts of water adventures. From half-day rafting trips to lake touring, the NOC is a complete adventure resort with three restaurants and a variety of lodging options. The NOC is active lifestyle-oriented and offers rafting, paddling, hiking, biking, riverwalks,



lake tours, flyfishing and more for beginners and experienced outdoor enthusiasts.

Canoe and kayak whitewater instruction through a renowned paddling school including half day workshops, full day introduction to whitewater (open to kids as young as Age 8 with an adult), private instruction and multi-day paddling school vacations are available. NOC lodging can range from affordable cabins with full kitchens for two to 20 guests, bunkhouse lodging that sleeps up to 66 guests and platform tent camping.

Just a few miles from the NOC is the Nantahala Inn which has 10 motel rooms with satellite TV, microwaves and refrigerators, along with upscale cabins that include full kitchens and hot tubs. The NOC is located on the banks of the Nantahala river, so younger kids can toss rocks and play in the water's edge while parents can watch and enjoy lunch at nearby picnic tables. All of the kids' activities at the NOC, with the exception of the kids kayaking camps, require adults to join them.

Dillsboro River Company is, to borrow from an old saying, kid tested and Mom approved. Kids get the experience of a lifetime and free popsicles when they finish their rafting trips on the Tuckaseegee River. A fleet of "ducks" otherwise known as inflatable kayaks, sit-on-top kayaks and rafts provide ample ways for everyone to enjoy paddling. Large custom groups of boy and girl scouts, camps, schools and church groups along with individual families or couples are welcome. Two guided trips are scheduled daily with a guide-to-guest ratio of one guide to every 10 guests. A light snack on the river is accompanied by swimming and tales of the cultural and natural history of the diverse Tuckaseegee gorge. Dillsboro is just 45 minutes from Asheville and truly is one of most charming mountain towns in North Carolina.

Mountains of fun

If skiing is your favorite activity, Ski Beech in Beech Mountain, North Carolina is yours for the asking. Their Snow Sports Learning Center offers "Learn to Ski" packages are perfect for families who want to "learn how to engage in winter sports or brush up" with certified ski instructors. Lessons are important so skiers can gain the confidence they'll need to enjoy the mountain terrain. Beech Mountain's Adaptive Snowsports Center (BASC) is host to the annual 4-day "Adaptive Learn to Ski and Race Clinic" sponsored by the National Handicapped Sports of Atlanta and Disabled Sports USA. And throughout ski season, Ski Beech has a whole host of other fun events for families looking to incorporate skiing into their vacation plans.

Carolina Family Adventures offers experiences that can be enjoyed by all ages. On their trips, everyone is engaged in creating memories together. How it works: families book a getaway for one price with Carolina Family Adventures and they make all the arrangements based on guest likes and dislikes. Aside from regular mountain activities, waterfall swimming, llama trekking and gem mining are available. Accommodations arranged by Carolina Family Adventures are all hand-picked with families in mind and have been personally experienced by the staff.

West Virginia is home to great resorts. Two of which include Stonewall Resort, a AAA Four Diamond property and Snowshoe Resort, which features the Big Top Family Fun Center. Stonewall features an Adirondack-styled lakeside lodge and cottages, a spa, 100-passenger lake excursion boat and an 18-hole Arnold Palmer signature golf course. Guests can also take advantage of the 300+ slip marina, Bright Star Park activity center and Mountain Laurel Spa.



Snowshoe Mountain is a prime destination for downhill skiing and snowboarding, snowshoeing, cross country skiing and snow tubing. In the summer months, cross-country and downhill mountain biking and scenic chairlift rides are available. Snowshoe is also next to the 900,000-acre Monongahela National Forest, near the historic Cass Scenic Railroad State Park and the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, which houses the world's largest steerable telescope.

Earthshine Mountain Lodge in Transylvania County, North Carolina was referenced as "Blue Ridge living at its natural best" by Vacations Magazine, which named Earthshine as one of its "Top Ten undiscovered places in the USA." A storybook mountain getaway, Earthshine features activities from dawn to dusk and even has a daytime on-site babysitter for Moms and Dads who long to traverse high ropes courses or fly through the treetops. This family resort is also a corporate retreat and outdoor education center. The 83 acre, 170 year old farm with breathtaking views was hand built in 1989 with cedar beams circa 'Little House on the Prairie' style lofts.

Off the beaten path

Red Horse Mountain in Harrison, Idaho is about 33 miles south of Coeur d'Alene. Against the backdrop of beautiful terrain, guests enjoy innumerable activities including horseback riding, mountain biking, fly fishing, kayak touring, hiking, archery, sporting clays, swimming, challenge courses, whitewater rafting and rock climbing. The western flair is what sets a Idaho family vacation at Red Horse Mountain apart from others with similar activities. Prior to arrival, guests complete "Family Planners" and each day are assigned two professionally licensed guides for private guided adventures. Wranglers, guides and ranch hands fit guests with equipment and horses and kids can learn how to kayak, archery, horseback and mountain bike riding, or even go plinking. Parents are welcome to join in the kids' fun or wander off to find their own adventures and the full program is available from May 1st through November 5th for children Age three to 11. The kids' program at Red Horse Mountain offers daily adventures to develop the senses, teach children to appropriately approach nature and foster team building skills.

Gordon's Guide, a great resource for family vacation planning had literally hundreds of destination suggestions. Just a few we found on their site for families include places like Spafari, whose Global Hiking Spa was voted one of the top ten "World's Best Adventure Spa" by A&E. Depending on what part of the world they're in, travelers can expect to stay in upscale jungle lodges and luxury tented camps in Africa, villas, hotels and even on private islands. Teen programs are available and travelers can customize trips to include child care and help for overweight children. Echo Valley Ranch and Spa in Jesmond, British Columbia, Canada is one of the world's premier eco soft-adventure ranches.

The Inn at Robert's Grove is a complete luxury beach resort located in beautiful Belize. Near Belize's top attractions like the Barrier Reef, Tropical Rainforest and Maya Ruins, it's situated on 22 lush acres and offers a luxurious Hacienda-style Inn. Robert's Grove has amazing wildlife tours that are ideal for children. An hour-and-a-half from Miami, The Inn at Robert's Grove opened in November 1997 and is an intoxicating cocktail of nature and the "softer side of life".

Crystal Cruises bucks the cruise trend with wellness-themed cruises. The line's 2007 Mind, Body, and Spirit sailings to the Caribbean and Mexican Riviera can help you get buff onboard with activities like yoga or Pilates and running on the outdoor quarter-mile track. On the list of "World's Best Large-Ship Cruise Line" awards by the readers of Travel + Leisure and Condé Nast Traveler magazines Crystal is the only cruise line, resort, or hotel to have achieved such distinction.

The shores of South Carolina's Grand Strand

Forget tromping through the woods. Today's families camp in style at places like Lakewood Camping Resort. This camping resort can boast two pools and waterslides, a full store with two snack bars, mini-golf, boat rentals, fishing, gem mining and entertainment. With full-hook ups for lush campers Lakewood has recreational activities for all ages year round. They even offer yoga and surf lessons.

Nearby North Myrtle Beach also in South Carolina, is home to championship golf, entertainment, fishing and boating among other activities. Places like Barefoot and Prince Resorts feature luxury suites and panoramic ocean views. Prince Resort is adjacent to the Cherry Grove Pier. Families who love watersports can enjoy surfing, water skiing, kayaking and snorkeling. There are approximately 12,500 vacation rental options in this area. Neighboring La Belle Amie Vineyard hosts festivals and wine tastings throughout the year and there are nearly 2,000 restaurants throughout the Grand Strand. Entertainment is easy to come by with numerous shows for all ages. The SportsZone, an indoor sports facility, offers league play, birthday parties, arcade games, food, private baseball and softball instruction and sports camps. The KidZone Summer Sports program is available to provide supervised activities while parents catch up on a round of golf or a quiet day at the beach.

The Sands Resorts offers oceanfront restaurants and lounges, Sands Waterpark, lazy rivers and indoor and outdoor pools, the Atlantis Spa, a children's program and evening childcare. At the Sands kids eat breakfast free and enjoy free summer recreation including bicycles, paddle boats, kayaks, table tennis and volleyball. All kids' programs are supervised by experienced staff and counselors. Evening childcare service offers nightly themed activities and games under the supervision of professional counselors.

Planning a family-style vacation is a great way to rekindle that family connection and spend time together. Following are online links to all of the destinations featured in CHF's above story on active family vacations. Be sure to check out the Cover Story Quick Reference in the middle of the magazine for additional information and contact numbers. Happy vacationing!



Our Top Pick for Travel Planning in Cyberspace

When planning for family travel, using the web can be a daunting task and some travel sites aren't reliable. That's why it's important to find a few good resources you can trust. At the Los Angeles Times Adventure Travel Expo, we got the scoop on four great sources including Johnny Jet. His web site, JohnnyJet.com, is a good place to start if you're planning a trip. Jet is one of the world's leading travel authorities and on his site you'll find practically every travel tip conceivable. Some of the best suggestion on travel we've found anywhere are courtesy of Los Angeles Times Travel Editor Catherine Hamm, Deputy Editor Vani Rangachar and The Internet Traveler himself, James Gildea. All of these recognized travel experts provide accurate and descriptive reporting on a variety of travel options and destinations. Check out LATimes.com and TheInternetTraveler.com for great suggestions on travel before you start planning. Listening to experts like these could save you valuable time and money when you're planning your next vacation.

CrystalCruises.com

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LakewoodCampground.com

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NorthMyrtleBeachChamber.info

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SandsResorts.com

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AWRafts.com (Appalachian Wildwaters)

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NOC.com

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DillsboroRiver.com

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CarolinaFamilyAdventures.com

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RedHorseMountain.com

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GordonsGuide.com

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StonewallResort.com

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Snowshoemtn.com

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RobertsGrove.com

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SkiBeech.com

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EarthshineMtnLodge.com