

10 Low-Cost Family Vacations

Family getaway costs add up fast. But more economical choices are out there. Here are some to consider.

by Penny Musco, **AARP**, September 27, 2016



Jeffrey Brown/Atlantis

Warm Up to the Islands

Assume you can't afford a Bahamas vacation? Think again. Two great things about the Comfort Suites Paradise Island in Nassau—its daily complimentary American breakfast buffet and, even better, complete access to the nearby but higher-priced Atlantis Resort. Those Atlantis amenities include marine exhibits and a huge waterpark; when your toes become too wrinkled, hit the tennis courts or take a gaming lesson. Casual eateries are on the property (you pay for meals). Or just amble around the luxurious grounds and soak up the ambience and free entertainment. Check out Comfort Suites' packages (including one with airfare) to possibly save even more.



Glenn Asakawa/Denver Post/Snow Mountain Ranch

Go to Sleepaway Camp

The YMCA of the Rockies Snow Mountain Ranch has so many complimentary or moderately priced activities throughout the year that you'll never want to return home. Mini golf, ice-skating, and tubing are just a sampling; ski equipment rentals won't break the bank. An hour-long climbing wall session or archery lesson costs a mere five bucks. After a full day, devour s'mores by the campfire, then cuddle up with a book from the library. Casual dining spots are on the premises. Rooms, cabins, and yurts (unheated) are among the lodging choices, and Y members receive a discount, along with other benefits.



Pat & Chuck Blackley/ALAMY

Travel on Two Wheels

The Rail-to-Trails Conservancy lists bike paths nationwide, many following old train lines or canal towpaths, ranging in difficulty from easy to more challenging. Search for routes by state or activity, read reviews, and find links to a variety of places to stay and eat. For example, Colorado’s Rio Grande Trail is a 42-mile, heavily forested path mostly along the Roaring Fork River, with only a slight slope. The 25.6-mile High Trestle Trail through central Iowa features a bridge that gives rider the impression they’re traveling down a mineshaft. Towns along the route offer several attractions, including a scenic railroad outing.



Mike Goldwater/ALAMY

Jump in a Lake

Lake Havasu City bills itself as Arizona's most affordable vacation spot, with reasonably priced accommodations and eateries. The area boasts 300 days of sunshine annually, and plenty of ways to take advantage of it. Hiking trails cut through the desert scenery are suitable for casual strollers as well as mountain climbers, and wild animal sightings are always a possibility. Two of the city's three beaches charge no entry. Near them is the old London Bridge of nursery-rhyme fame, purchased by Lake Havasu City's founder, then disassembled and relocated there in 1971. The Visitor Center conducts an inexpensive 90-minute walking tour October-April.



East Hill Farm

Get Down on the Farm

At the base of Mount Monadnock in southwest New Hampshire lies The Inn at East Hill Farm, bustling with goats to be fed and cows to milk. You can even collect your own eggs for breakfast. Rates at this all-season country compound cover housing in rooms or cottages and family-style meals. Inside and outside pools ensure you can go for a swim anytime of the year. Mountain climbing, sledding, and hay or sleigh rides claim your attention outdoors, while the farm's main buildings host a slew of craft classes, games, and demonstrations. Saturdays often end with contra dancing to live music.



ISTOCK

Visit the Parks

Head for the hills—South Dakota’s Black Hills, that is—and see six national park sites in one trip. Devils Tower (in Wyoming), Mt. Rushmore, Minuteman Missile, Badlands, and Wind and Jewel Caves are all within a couple hours of each other. Base yourself in Rapid City, Keystone, Hill City, or Custer, S.D. for budget-friendly accommodations. Only Badlands and Devils Tower charge entrance fees; at Mt. Rushmore you pay just for parking, and at the caves for the underground tours. Other low-cost attractions in the vicinity include Custer State Park, where bison roam freely, and the work-in-progress Crazy Horse Memorial.



Len Holsborg/ALAMY

Conquer the Big City

New York City abounds in free museums; others have complimentary admission on select weekdays at specific times. A discounted seven-day unlimited ride subway pass gets you to them. The no-cost Big Apple Greeter program offers treks through different neighborhoods—and has a no-tipping policy— while Free Tours by Foot operates on a pay-what-you-like basis (both require advance reservations). Don't miss the Central Park Zoo, more intimate and less expensive than its sister menagerie in the Bronx. And consider hotels just across the river in New Jersey, where rooms aren't as pricey, and express buses or trains whisk you into Manhattan.



Malibu Ranch

Get Your Yee-Haw On

Northeast Pennsylvania looks a lot like the Old West at Malibu Dude Ranch. Horseback riding, skeet shooting, and much more are included in the rates, along with meals. You can opt to stay in the main lodge, a private cabin, or a boathouse. At the lake, enjoy fishing and boating during the day (the swimming hole is inside), and a bonfire at night. For a little extra, attend the rodeo on summer Saturday evenings, followed by country music in the saloon. Or splurge a bit: bring out your inner cowpoke and take part in a cattle drive.



Ronnie Kaufman/Getty Images

Loll at the Beach

Galveston, oh Galveston... This historic Gulf city in Texas, on a barrier island about 50 miles from Houston, promises sun and fun on a budget along its thirty-two miles of shoreline. Hop aboard the Bolivar Ferry for a free 20-minute ride to see dolphins at play, and watch a taffy-making demonstration at La King's Confectionary, with its 1920s soda fountain. Pay a modest entrance fee at Galveston Island State Park, and enjoy ranger talks and kayak expeditions *gratis*. Pitch your own tent at the park or stay in one of its two cabins, which sleep up to eight people.



Ace Adventure

Have an Adventure

Tackle West Virginia's picturesque New River Gorge at the Ace Adventure Center with specials all year round. Reserve the fall Triple Play Whitewater Package, and get three days rafting on both the New and Gauley Rivers, plus three nights camping and all meals. The Double Dare package in the spring offers a full day on the water and two nights in a tent (bring your own or rent equipment and bedding from Ace). Stay elsewhere and choose from several other rafting, zip line, and waterpark deals. If you like paintball, the half-day walk-up fee is discounted, with gear extra.