ON ISLAND TIME

We found five U.S. destinations that let families really get away from it all—including their cars!

BY MATT VILLANO
Sometimes, less is more. There’s something special about slowing down and taking the kiddos somewhere with simple pleasures—no cars, fewer people, and a quiet vibe. You read that right—even in 2018, there still are a handful of places across the country that don’t allow vehicles. Many of the spots are islands, where families leave their minivans on the mainland and explore instead by foot, bike, boat, or the occasional golf cart. With no traffic in sight, kids are free to roam, and parents are free to truly relax. (Exhale now.) Here are five to consider, with a rundown on how to get there and what to do once you arrive.

1. NORTH CAPTIVA, FL
   Size: About 2 square miles
   Location: In the Gulf of Mexico, just west of mainland Florida, just north of Sanibel Island
   Getting There: Ferries from Pine Island cost $20 each way. See northcaptivaport.com for schedules.
   Lodging: Mostly vacation home rentals; prices start at $189 a night.

   As far as islands go, North Captiva is a relative rookie. It was cut off from the larger Captivas during a hurricane in 1921, and has remained separate—and accessible only by boat—ever since. Today most of the island’s family-friendly offerings revolve around the great outdoors. There are about 5 miles of white sand beaches, where visitors can spot shells, pink and purple seastars, yellow cockies, korkershaped avars, and spotted jurniors (although you are not supposed to actually take said beach treasures). The island also has a 700-acre tract of conservation land, where families can go to spot tortoises, birds, snakes, raccoons, and bobcats.

   Dining on North Captiva is an intimate experience—with only four restaurants, you’re bound to run into the same families again and again. Most moms and dads swear by Bamie’s Fish (239-472-1200), an island-style diner that specializes in comfort food and key lime pie.

2. SANTA CATALINA ISLAND, CA
   Size: About 76 square miles
   Location: Pacific Ocean, south of Los Angeles
   Getting There: Ferry service from Long Beach, San Pedro, and another Point Cost $37 each way (catalinaxpress.com). Loews rentals start at $129 a night; the Holiday Inn Resort Catalina Island (holidayinnresorts.com) has family rooms with bunk beds. Rates start at $129 a night.

   Catalina Island bills itself as “Kiddiiland” for families, and the nickname fits. Noisy activities are in and around the main town, Avalon. Beaches are serious business there, and the four most family-friendly options—South, Middle, Strep, and Descanso—are all within a short walk of downtown. Activities range from swimming and snorkeling to standing-up paddling and kayaking.

   The water is so clear, you can see orange garibaldi fish darting beneath you as you go. You can spot even more colorful fish on popular glass-bottom boat and semi-submersible submarine tours. (Check out catalinaadventures.com or visitesstlucia.com.)

   But perhaps the most popular activity on Catalina is watching the sea lion set. Make a reservation for the overlook patio at Avalon’s Blue Water Grill (bluewatergrill.com) for a front-row seat.

3. FIRE ISLAND, NY
   Size: About 32 square miles
   Location: A barrier island off Long Island, east of New York City
   Getting There: Ferry service from Sayville, Bay Shore, and other towns on Long Island cost $10 each way for adults and $5 for kids (fireislandferry.com). Lodging: Mostly hotels, with rates starting around $89 per night; both the Mission Point Resort and Grand Hotel have family-specific packages.

   Fire Island is made up of 17 communities linked by narrow boardwalks over the sand. Technically, the western end of the strip—near Robert Moses State Park—allows cars. The rest is completely car-free.

   Head to the Atlantic Ocean beaches on the south shore for long stretches of sand perfect for building sand-castles, playing Frisbee, wave-riding, and more. Another day, explore the island’s north shore, which faces the calm Great South Bay and is perfect for kayaking, canoeing, and stand-up paddleboarding.

   The main attraction on Fire Island is its eponymous lighthouse, built in 1858. On ground level, the museum exhibits pant a picture of Long Island from before the housing explosion of the 1950s. If your kids are feeling adventurous, climb the 182 steps to the top of the tower. On a crystal clear day, you can even see the New York City skyline 40 miles out.

4. MACKINAC ISLAND, MI
   Size: About 4 square miles
   Location: Lake Huron, between the Michigan “mainland” and the Upper Peninsula
   Getting There: Ferry service from Mackinaw City and St. Ignace is about $24 (mackinacferry.com). Lodging: Mostly hotels, with rates starting around $99 per night; both the Mission Point Resort and Grand Hotel have family-specific packages.

   The most important detail about Mackinac Island is how to pronounce it—it’s “Mack-in-aw,” with a silent c. Once you’ve got that down, you can move on to the area’s three distinct diversions: history, carriage rides, and fudge.

   Fort Mackinac, much of which is still intact, dates to the American Revolution, when the island was under British rule. Today, interpreters dressed in period costume retell stories, fire cannons, and do reenactments. Horse-drawn carriage rides offer quite an adventure, spanning nearly 90 minutes and taking passengers on tours that cover most of the island.

   Finally, of course, is the fudge. The sweet treat has a mainstay on the island since the 1880s, and today shops up and down Main Street sell variations. Visitors gravitate toward the selections at Rhyan’s, Murdock’s, JoAnn’s, and May’s. The back of the bunch? You’ll just have to decide that for yourself.

5. SMITH ISLAND, MD/VA
   Size: About 6 square miles
   Location: In the middle of Chesapeake Bay, about two hours by boat from Washington, D.C.
   Getting There: Ferries from Crisfield, on the Delmarva Peninsula, service the island’s two main towns; fares are $20 each way. See visitsmithisland.com.
   Lodging: Inns, vacation rentals, and a motel; most rates start at $99 a night.

   Family fun on Smith Island is all about the water. Visitors spend hours “proogie” or beachcombing, for sea glass, arrowheads, shark teeth, buoys, and driftwood. Private-boat captains, who families to nearby Shanties Island, a great place to glimpse baby pelicans, or to the adjacent Ellen Martin National Wildlife Refuge; ask for names and numbers at the Drum Point Market (drumpointmarket.com) in Tydertown. There’s also kayaking and canoeing—many overnight accommodations come with these water vessels, and rentals are available from outfitter Crisfield Kayaking (443-783-2488).

   For on-land action, head to the two main towns of Ewell and Tydertown. Ewell is the larger of the two, with a visitor center that has exhibits detailing the history of the island, as well as a clutch of vacation rentals. In Tydertown, the Drum Point Market is the center of activity and serves up some pretty epic crab cakes.