

FAMILY TRAVEL

Are we there yet?

Want to help families plan a trip that doesn't resemble *National Lampoon's Vacations*?



For busy parents, planning a family getaway can be a daunting task. There's picking a trip everyone can agree on, coordinating travel arrangements, keeping the kids entertained—and ah yes, finding some rest and relaxation somewhere in between.

These 5 tips can help you create a family trip for your clients that will take the work out of traveling:

1. Keep it close to home

In a recent study, 94% of Americans agreed that family vacations are worth the money, even when faced with the recent economic downturn. However, travel agencies nationwide have noticed a decline in international holidays in favor of nearby destinations. Families are trading in the sites of Paris and Rome for the lights of Broadway in New York City or Boston's Freedom Trail. Many large cities now offer GO! Cards that provide families with discounted or free admission to popular attractions, tours and restaurants.

2. Give tiny travelers the run of the place

These days, Eloise, the girl who lives in the "room on the tippy-top floor" floor of the Plaza Hotel, is no longer the only child given free range of hotels. Many hotels have amenities and programs for children and teens, while some, like the Nickelodeon Suites Resort, are specifically designed with kids in mind. Some family resorts offer camps for children of parents looking for downtime, such as the Maui Ritz Carlton Hotel, which offers a Jean-Jacques Cousteau Ambassadors of the Environment Program, providing children with snorkeling and underwater photography lessons. The Peninsula New York Hotel offers several "Silver Spoon" itineraries, such as "Fifth Avenue Fairy Princess" for young girls, which include VIP passes to attractions throughout the city and an engraved Tiffany silver spoon. While the Holiday Inn began its "Kids Eat Free" program in 1993, many hotels have since followed the trend, giving parents more bang for their buck.

Checklist for family travel before take-off:

All children, regardless of age, are now required to have a passport to travel outside the US. [Check the State Department Web site](#) to ensure that even the youngest travelers will be ready for their trip abroad.

-Visit the CDC's Web site to check for required or recommended vaccinations and immunizations before departure. Go the extra mile by offering clients a 'pediatric travel health kit' and travel insurance for the whole family.

-Book non-stop flights and inform the airline if clients are traveling with young children requiring Child Safety Seats. Request bulkhead seating for young families to give them more floor space. Many airlines also offer first-time flyer keepsakes or certificates to help calm the nerves of tiny travelers.

-Encourage parents to store important family records on a site like <https://www.axcesspoints.com/> in case of an emergency.

-When booking rooms in hotels, ask if they offer baby proofing kits. These kits usually consist of electrical outlet covers, padded covers to protect children from sharp table corners, door locks to prevent children from going out into the hallway, and even netting to stretch across a balcony so a tiny one can't slip through.

-More and more holiday destinations are accommodating children with autism and other disabilities. Check with cruise lines and resorts about special, inclusive activities or excursions. Walt Disney World and several other theme parks provide front-of-the-line passes for autistic children who may find it very difficult to wait in line.

3. Offer a vacation on cruise control

According to the Cruise Lines International Association, over 25% of those on board cruises in 2008 were under the age of 18. With endless entertainment options and clubhouses for children and teens of all ages, cruises are an appealing option for clients traveling with little ones. Nearly half of all young cruisers in 2008 sailed aboard Carnival Cruise Lines, which recently added a fleet wide "Club 02" teen program that provides access to spa treatments and exclusive shore excursions. Check cruise line minimum age requirements, as many ships have age restrictions for infants or require travelers under 21 to book a room with a parent or guardian.

4. Give them a taste of the local culture

A great way to make family getaways extra special and boost commissions is through organized activities and tours, available in most tourist destinations. Suggest enriching activities that will be fun and appropriate for all ages. Book tickets to the Mary Poppins musical in New York City or an interactive Spy Tour in Washington, D.C., for elementary school-aged children. Teenagers might enjoy a parasailing excursion in Key West or an Ice Walk through the canyons of Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada. Or recommend an activity that the entire family might enjoy, such as a Your Love of Food Tour to discover the culinary delights of Chicago or a helicopter ride over the island of Maui.

5. Help, please!

While family trips are all about creating memories together, sometimes parents need a 'vacation from the vacation.' Gulf Air recently introduced Sky Nanny, a free in-flight childcare service, and be on the look out for other airlines to follow. Many hotels and resorts also offer similar services to parents needing a break, and independent nanny services are available at many popular vacation spots. For those clients who chose to bring their own childcare with them on vacations, stress the importance of purchasing adequate travel insurance to cover their caregiver.

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