

# explore

IDEAS FOR GETAWAYS BIG AND SMALL

THE  
HAPPY  
ISSUE

## SECRETS OF HAPPY TRAVELERS

Though every family vacation is special, some are simply more amazing than others. What makes the difference? Five writers and a photographer share the strategies behind their favorite getaways in hopes of inspiring your own excellent adventures. ▶



↑ The pictures seen here capture photographer Julia Vandenoever's family trip to Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve in Colorado. Her story appears on page 61.



→ The photographer's daughter, Madeleine, celebrates their arrival at the park last June for a multifamily camping trip.

## TURN EXPLORING INTO A GAME

BY PAOLA VITA

**"WHY ARE GONDOLAS black?"** "Find a fruit you've never seen before and ask what it's called." "List four steps used in making glass." These were just a few of the challenges in a scavenger hunt I created for our extended family's week-long vacation in Venice, Italy, last summer. Matteo and Amalia, then ages 11 and 6, were skeptical at first. But once I explained they could earn points for their answers—and combine them to win such prizes as postcards, an Italian dessert, or a much-coveted gondola ride—they were hooked. Within minutes of beginning our first walk, they were obsessing about how many lion figures they could spy and where we might find a fruit stand.

Searching out answers to detailed questions helped our whole family get off the beaten track and experience Venice as a living city, not a museum. It also kept our multigenerational group working together. Each day, the kids partnered with a different grandparent (we had three with us), who kept score, answered bonus questions, and awarded extra points for cooperation, attitude, and quality of answers. And as the kids bravely interviewed locals and searched for offbeat items and places, we all got an education. By the end of the week, we had a deeper appreciation and understanding of that magical city, and a lot of fun memories we revisit every time we gather.

## FIND SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

BY JEFF WAGENHEIM

**I'M HANGING OUT** with a Neil Young autobiography on the screened-in porch, a breeze wafting up the hill from the lake. I've just spotted my wife's kayak heading in toward the dock, past the swim class where our daughter, Rebecca, is practicing the backstroke with the rest of the 8-year-olds. I figure I have another half hour to myself—just me, Neil, and the rocking chair—before the whole crew returns. Like a hurricane.

I actually love family time. That's why we return every year to Silver Bay YMCA center in the Adirondacks: to strike a balance between togetherness and personal space. Both are in abundance here. After enjoying our separate afternoon activities, we'll grill dinner together outside our four-room cabin. Then I have a shuffleboard date with Aaron, my 10-year-old, while the womenfolk work on their weeklong stained-glass projects in the crafts building. We'll meet later at the campfire, where the college kids on staff will lure us into singing goofy songs. We'll retire early, though, so we can wake up in time to join Tom, a gray-bearded college professor who's here every summer, on his morning nature hike, which is storytelling in motion.

Between the kids' day camp and the activities—and downtime—for grown-ups, we follow our passions on parallel paths here. But they always converge, and we love it when they do. This vacation feels like a way to live.

## MAKE PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

BY LAURA BILLINGS COLEMAN

**OUR FAMILY'S VACATION** road map began to materialize last summer, when 9-year-old Finn asked for a membership to Ancestry.com (go figure). The two of us went right down the rabbit hole, turning up sailors and Puritan settlers up and down the East Coast, including in Groton, Massachusetts, the destination for an October family wedding.

Thus inspired, we took 10 days off from school for a study of colonial America, diving deep into the places tied to our forebears' arrival in the New World. Starting on Cape Cod, we tracked familiar names around Massachusetts, from Concord (my tenth great-grandfather was a founder of that town in 1635), to Salem (where the wife of our eighth great-uncle was the first to be hanged at the witch trials), to Boston-area Revolutionary War battle sites (where some of our forebears fought as minutemen, and others sided with the crown). My three sons, ages 9, 11, and 12, dutifully documented their discoveries for their history teachers at home, but we were happy being tourists, too, watching whales, visiting art galleries, and eating lobster rolls.

New England in the fall is a fantastic destination for many reasons, but having family connections to uncover gave our travels there an added dimension that kept all three boys curious and full of questions. Seeing family names on gravestones—and even watching a reenactment of the trial of our "Auntie" Bridget Bishop in Salem—brought history home in a whole new way.



## VACATION WITH FRIENDS

BY JULIA VANDENOEVER

**LIVING FAR AWAY** from immediate family, my husband, Casey, and I have created a family of friends over the years. All our kids are like cousins, having known one another since they were babies. I'd been wanting for years to gather the group at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve for the spring runoff, when the melting snowpack creates wide, shallow pools and little streams through the dunes, safe enough for little ones. It's like Colorado's beach.

Last June we piled into cars with four other families and made the five-hour trek from our home in Boulder. With 10 adults and eight kids, ages 2 to 12, among us, there were playmates for everyone. We set up tents in a group campsite and over the next two days splashed in the shallow water, climbed the dunes, jumped in the sand, hiked to a waterfall, and explored a cave with the older kids, which was pretty scary but memorable. A few dads even snowboarded down the dunes, and my kids added a new stamp to their National Parks Passports.

But it was the unplugged time together—cooking, hiking, and hanging out around camp—that really made it special. As a parent, being able to let go of that running-around-with-your-head-cut-off feeling and just sit with friends is a rare treat. Now it's a new tradition, and we've already booked the dates for this year. I look forward to many more memorable vacations with this crew of friends.



*The melting snowpack creates wide, shallow pools and little streams through the dunes.*





## EMBRACE THE UNEXPECTED

BY LESLIE GARISTO PFAFF

**LURED BY PHRASES** such as “waterfront” and “great room,” we’d rented the cottage on Cape Cod sight unseen. But as we approached it, the only water we could spot was filling the ruts in the unpaved driveway. Inside, there was nothing “great” about the cramped living room except for its vaulted ceiling. Even worse, the stuffy little house was filled with an odor that my then 4-year-old daughter, Lily, accurately compared to the aroma of the Easter egg that had gone undetected in our dining room for six months.

After some exploring, we discovered the source of the smell: the advertised waterfront, a broad marsh below a wooded bluff, reachable by a perilous set of wooden stairs hammered into the cliff side. We’ve always been drawn to water, so, stink or no stink, Lily and I gingerly eased our way down the steps. It was low tide, and across the mossy rocks, fiddler crabs ducked and danced, tiny glittering fish darted in tide pools, and piles of shiny razor clam shells littered the shore.

That week, we whale-watched, wave-jumped, and bodysurfed, but all our days began and ended at the marsh, which generously yielded up its treasures: a horseshoe crab “shell” that, when prodded, lumbered away under its own steam, a family of snails beneath a tangle of salt marsh hay, a slippery sand eel. On our last morning, as Lily pointed out an egret fishing for its breakfast, it occurred to me that we often find the greatest joy in the unexpected—an observation that applies equally well to salt marshes and family vacations.



↑ Julia’s daughter, Madeleine, makes a sand angel. ➤ An alien-themed tourist attraction down the road in Alamosa. ← 7-year-old Embla, one of eight kids on the trip, shows off her nature ID cards. ↓ The group hikes along a stream on the way back from Zapata Falls, located just outside the park.

## BUILD ON A CHILD’S PASSIONS

BY ALISSON CLARK

**OLDER KIDS CAN** be notoriously hard to please on vacation. There’s no instant joy from a newly discovered playground, no napping in a stroller while mom and dad take in a museum. So when our son, Owen, started playing trombone in middle school, we planned a trip around his passion for jazz. Our destination: New Orleans, which offers plenty of kid-friendly opportunities to explore the city’s legendary musical heritage.

We arrived during a free festival that drew performers from around the world and began our visit watching a parade of middle- and high-school brass bands. We also saw drum circles and dance groups. And when a strolling band broke into an impromptu show on a street corner, Owen saw that performances don’t have to wait for an end-of-year school concert. Sharing music can always be part of your life.

We had envisioned the trip as a way to deepen Owen’s interest in music, but my husband and I learned things, too. Playing to our son’s expertise meant that he got to teach us (a great way to get older kids to open up). Not only did he explain the difference between a tuba and a sousaphone and what puts the swing in a swing rhythm, he shared more about band, and his life in general, on that trip than he had the whole year!



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