



No Child Left Inside

BY LAUREL KALLENBACH

Plan an educational adventure that will have you and your kids learning *from* nature — not just about it.



When I was a child, my family took a camping trip every summer. As my parents packed knapsacks, rain ponchos and mosquito repellent, I checked out the maximum-allowed number of library books. Novels were my top gear pick.

I admit I dragged my feet on many hikes — until The Museum was born. Somewhere around age 7, I started collecting items from nature, identifying them and labeling them. At home, my curated treasures covered bookshelves: Florida tulip shells, Spanish moss from Georgia, a Petoskey stone from Lake Michigan.

The Museum engaged my intellect and fueled my enjoyment of ranger-led hikes, star-gazing sessions and sign-posted nature trails. Though I never became a

Clockwise from lower left: Finding a fossil is the ultimate prize for Junior Rangers in the Grand Canyon; a brave soul at family surf camp in Wrightsville Beach, N.C.; Jessica Thomson and her dad, Mark, on their Dino Dig in Moab, Utah; kids learn maritime skills aboard the *Stephen Taber* schooner in Maine.



From far left: Sailors-in-training in Maine; a guide leads boys on a game walk at the Masai Mara game reserve in Kenya.



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botanist or geologist, I did gain a real academic advantage in science class.

That's not surprising. Research shows that when kids spend time in nature, their concentration improves and they boost their science test scores.

One of the biggest new trends in family vacations operates on this very premise. Called "edu-ventures," these vacations blend outdoor physical activity with a mentally stimulating, educational component.

These hybrid trips come in all shapes and sizes and can fit any budget: Organize your own day trip close to home (see "Take It Outside," at right) or join a multiweek excursion in an exotic locale. Outfitter Tauck Bridges, for example, offers an 11-day family safari in Tanzania that combines wild-animal watching (giraffes, zebras, lions, elephants) and hiking in Kilimanjaro National Park with Swahili language classes and spear-throwing lessons in a Maasai village.

Although the majority of family vacation packages are scheduled in the summer, you'll also find plenty of

opportunities during spring, fall and holiday breaks. And there are trips to suit any learning style.

Dig Up a Dinosaur Tooth

Edu-ventures offer hands-on participation, which some educators feel is the most effective way for many kids to learn. Instead of heading to a museum, for instance, dinosaur lovers age 5 and older can become working paleontologists on a three- or five-day Dino Dig. Participants can learn to identify bones in the ground, help dig them out, and maybe even discover some fossilized remains.

Uncovering a bone is "total luck," says John Foster, PhD, curator of paleontology at the Museum of Western Colorado in Grand Junction, which runs the Dino Digs. "Kids discover bones as often as adults or our crew. Most exciting is when they find a dinosaur tooth, because it's small enough that we can remove it from the rock in one day, and they can get their picture taken with it."

Jessica Thomson was 13 when she and her parents traveled from Ellicott City, Md., to join Foster on a five-day dig in eastern Utah. She'd read lots about prehistoric animals, so this trip was a chance for real-life dinosaur exploration. Thomson searched the rocky terrain for miles and spent a day chiseling away chunks of rock from a bone discovered several months before.

"It's incredible digging up something that's been buried for millions of years," she says. "It's fun work, but it can get really, really hot outside."

Fortunately, the Thomsons enjoyed a great cool-down, too: the traditional end-of-dig river-raft trip — which concludes, as a rule, with a big water fight.

Hobnob With Wild Cranes

Some of the best edu-ventures are those that bridge generations. University of Maryland history professor Julie Greene remembers her father taking her family to south-cen-

tral Nebraska for the spring sandhill crane migration, when half a million birds rest in the region before continuing their flight from southern Texas to the Arctic. Five years ago, Greene and her husband, Jim Maffie, brought their own 8-year-old daughter, Sophie, to the Rowe Sanctuary near Kearney, Neb., to watch the cranes.

Before dawn, they and other visitors bundled up against the morning chill. To avoid startling the birds, they walked under cover of darkness to observation blinds set up along the banks of the Platte River. "The cranes roost on the sandbars, and when one takes flight, the whole flock — hundreds of birds — rises dramatically into the air," Greene says. "Watching them has provided my most meaningful interaction with nature." →

Take It Outside



Should you need to convince a kid to turn off the Xbox and head to the great outdoors, here are some tips from Rick Van Noy, author of *A Natural Sense of Wonder: Connecting Kids with Nature through the Seasons* (University of Georgia Press, 2008):

- Plug your ZIP code into the National Wildlife Federation's Nature Find (www.nwf.org/naturefind) and map out "green spaces" nearby.
- Encourage the kids to bring along their toys. Wouldn't Barbie love to shoot the rapids in the local creek?
- Have reluctant kids bring along a friend — they might be happier to try new things with familiar peers.
- Let the time be unstructured so kids can amuse themselves (hunt for four-leaf clovers, skip stones, watch clouds).
- Be willing to get as wet and dirty as the kids.



Sophie, now 13, was impressed seeing the huge cranes eating and doing mating dances in nearby cornfields later in the day. “We watched them gobble up corn because they were so hungry after flying,” she says. “My aunt sent me a book about the cranes, but I didn’t ‘get’ migration until I saw them eating.”

Close Encounter With a Condor

Visiting any of America’s 394 national parks and monuments is a popular and budget-friendly getaway. The Park Service’s free Junior Ranger program makes it easy for anyone to transform a simple camping trip into an edu-venture that you can take at your own pace.

When Karen Brock and her 11-year-old son, Ian, arrived at the Grand Canyon two summers ago, their first stop was at park headquarters to collect a Junior Ranger packet and rent a Discovery Pack so that Ian could earn his Coyote badge. The packs are stocked with a pair of binoculars, a magnifying glass, bird and plant guides, colored pencils, and a field journal.

Over the next five days, Ian recorded his field observations as the two hiked 10 miles. Their visit included a ranger-led night hike during which they compared their human senses with those of nocturnal animals. Ian also wrote a haiku about his experience and drew a picture of how he thought the Grand Canyon would look in 500 years.

“Ian’s not a great reader, but he is a great hiker — and he’s so engaged and creative when he’s learning outdoors,” says Brock, a Loveland, Colo., mag-



Sandhill cranes during migration at the Rowe Sanctuary in Nebraska.



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azine editor. “Every night in the tent, we lit a lantern, and he eagerly reviewed the day’s experiences and learned about environmental stewardship, which is a value I’d like Ian to share.”

On canyon-rim trails, Ian would knowingly point and say, “Look! There’s a ponderosa pine! There’s a California condor!” He also invented stories with ant, squirrel and snake characters. “Being outdoors without time constraints allows the mind to wander and be creative — in a way that kids *aren’t* at school,” says Brock. “Our goal is to visit as many national parks as we can before Ian graduates from high school.”

Explore History

You never know what sort of legacy a family edu-venture may produce. In

addition to having a vacation they’ll never forget, some kids give school reports about ziplining through the Costa Rican rainforest or kayaking among California’s Channel Islands.

For some others, like Will Carlough, a 16-year-old junior from Sudbury, Mass., an edu-venture triggers an ongoing passion. When Carlough was 11, his grandfather took him sailing along the Maine coast aboard the *Stephen Taber*, an 1871 schooner. It was a trip back in time: Aside from the addition of electricity and some tiny passenger cabins, the ship remains much the same as it was 140 years ago. Carlough learned New England’s maritime history, basic sailing and navigation, and how to tie a bowline knot.

“I was immediately bitten by the bug,” he says. “The crew taught me to hoist sails and to take the captain’s wheel — it’s like steering a piece of living history.” Carlough recalls being so excited that he got up every morning at 6 a.m. to polish brass and wash the decks.

The trip wasn’t all chores; working is an optional part of this type of cruise. Pure-fun activities include a trip to an island for hiking and swimming, followed by a lobster dinner steamed under seaweed in a campfire.

By the end of his trip, Carlough was so indispensable that the captain invited him to return as an apprentice deckhand. Now Carlough works full-time teaching sailing and sea lore to passengers. “Sailing will be part of my life forever,” he says, “but I’ll never forget the experience of that first trip with my grandfather.”

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A+ Adventures

Dino Digs: Three-day expedition in Grand Junction, Colo. (\$700), includes lunches, instruction, raft trip. Five-day expedition to Moab, Utah (\$1,199), includes lodging. 888-488-DINO; www.dinodigs.org

Maine Windjammer Association: All-inclusive vacation

packages (\$400–\$1,100) for a three- to six-day cruise aboard a historic schooner. 800-807-WIND;

www.sailmainecoast.com

National Park Service’s Junior Ranger Program: Check to see which parks offer Junior Ranger programs (free of charge): www.nps.gov/learn/juniorranger.cfm

Rowe Sanctuary: Guided sandhill crane field trips during March and early April near Kearney, Neb. \$25/person. 308-468-5282; www.rowesanctuary.org

WB Surf Camp: Three- or five-day summer day camps (\$285–\$395) in North Carolina include surfing instruction and equipment. Six-day family overnight camps also

available. 866-844-7873; www.wbsurfcamp.com

Tauck Bridges Tanzania Family Safari: 11-day, 10-night trip (\$5,654 and up, plus airfare) includes meals, lodging in tent camps, luxury wilderness lodges, ground transportation. 800-788-7885; www.tauckbridges.com