

On the go – on a budget!

With a little research, you can find a budget-friendly family vacation

By Camilla Cornell



Every year, Heather Kenalty and her husband, Brendan, spend at least one summer weekend at a friend's cottage with their kids, Keagan, 6, and Ayden, 4. Although they look forward to the visit, they've found themselves constantly on edge, particularly when the boys were toddlers. The problem: The cottage has a long series of steps down to the water and no shoreline at all. "We couldn't relax. We couldn't even sit down," says Kenalty. "We were afraid to take our eyes off the kids for a second."

Kenalty discovered what numerous parents before her have learned: A vacation with young children is different. "We've been taking them places since they were babies," she says. "Now we look for cottages with a flat grassy area by the water or a sandy beach." In addition, she steers clear of hotel rooms because when the kids go to bed at 8 p.m., she and her husband don't have much choice but to do the same. She also advises travelling with other families so everyone gets to socialize and the adults can spell each other off. A final tip: For a good time, just add water. Even Walt Disney World may pale next to the pool for teensy travellers.

Now that you know what to look for, read on for tips on how to get a great family vacation and still contribute to your kids' RESPs:

1 Spread out. Cottages and condos provide a little extra space and a kitchen so you can eat in. To top it off, they can sometimes be as cheap as single rooms. Check out: www.vacationrentals.com for rentals in Canada, the U.S. and the Caribbean; www.bellstar.ca for rentals in Alberta and B.C. to visit the Canadian Rockies; and www.vrbo.com for worldwide vacation rentals by owner.

2 Get an off-season discount. Travel in spring or fall, suggests Jessica Harcombe-Fleming, marketing manager for Bellstar Hotels and Resorts. "You'll pay less for accommodations, there are fewer crowds, and there's no waiting in line at local attractions."

3 Trade places. Participate in a home exchange and swap your own digs for an apartment, house or cottage elsewhere. An annual fee gives access to exchangers around the world. Good bets include www.homelink.org (yearly membership: \$170 for Internet and catalogue listings; \$130 for Internet only) and www.homeexchange.com (yearly membership: \$99.95 US).

4 Bundle and save. Whether you long for a little beach-blanket bingo or a visit with Mickey, you'll get more bang for your buck by combining features. For example, Walt Disney World's Magic Your Way packages include six nights' accommodation and week-long admission to the parks for a family of four starting at \$1,700 US and up. And Caribbean beach resorts offer value by packaging flights, accommodations, food and drink, activities and entertainment.

Take advantage of early-booking bonuses or go last minute to get the best price, advises Martha Chapman, spokesperson for Sunwing Vacations. And look for kids-stay-and-eat-free deals. "Kids usually fly free up to age two," Chapman points out. "But they have to sit in an adult's lap and receive no baggage allowance." Infrequent deals allow older kids to fly free, but "don't forget, you still have to pay taxes totalling several hundred dollars."

5 Pitch a tent. Campsites can be had for \$13 a night. The s'mores: priceless. Check out the range of options in Canada at www.campcanada.com (private campgrounds) and www.pc.gc.ca (national parks), or search for the name of your province along with "provincial parks." Want to go farther afield? Sites at Walt Disney World's Fort Wilderness Resort and Campground rent for \$43 US a night in low season.

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6 Get the lowdown from other travellers. Before booking, check out the independent traveller reviews at www.debbiescaribbeanresortreviews.com and www.tripadvisor.com. Relying on a resort or hotel kids' program to keep the wee ones amused? Other parents will tell you if it's well supervised or it basically consists of one adult trundling 10 toddlers off to the beach to play in the surf. Gack!

7 Track down the lowest airfare. There's no one source for the best cut-rate tickets, but the following tips may help: Book early when there's a seat sale or within seven to 14 days of departure for sell-offs. Travelling on a scheduled airline? Fly on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, when flights are generally cheaper. Mondays and Fridays are more expensive and weekends top the chart. Charter airline tickets can be \$30 to \$80 cheaper, depending on destination and timing. Comparison shop on www.bookingbuddy.com and www.cfares.com. Travel sites like www.travelocity.ca and www.expedia.ca offer "fare watchers" that notify you of airfare price cuts. Fare predictors like www.farecast.live.com forecast whether fares will rise or fall, and whether to buy now or hold out for a better deal.

8 Nosh for less. Restaurant bills can boost vacation costs astronomically. To keep costs in line, check tourist information booths or online visitors' bureaus for restaurant coupons. Lunch out; it's cheaper than dinner, and the wee ones won't pass out in their spaghetti. Opt for restaurants with low-priced kids' menus or where kids eat free with paying adults. Bring refillable water bottles and snacks, and save \$20 to \$30 a day.

9 Nix the insurance. If you have a gold or platinum credit card, you're likely already covered for trip cancellation and interruption, rental car insurance and out-of-country medical. Check with your credit card company.

10 Compare rental car prices online. Check rates from several providers on websites like www.car-rentals-canada.com and www.carrental.greatnow.com. For the best price, check those figures against the rental car agency's own website, and book at least a week in advance during high season. ☑