

Smugglers Notch, Vermont



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Ritz Carlton, Amelia Island

Top Five Holiday Family Vacations

By Kyla Steinkraus

IT IS THE TIME OF YEAR TO CELEBRATE THE HOLIDAYS AND BRING THE FAMILY TOGETHER, AND THERE'S NO BETTER WAY TO DO BOTH THAN WITH A FAMILY VACATION. BEFORE YOU BOOK YOUR TRIP, CONSIDER PARENTGUIDE'S TOP FIVE CHOICES FOR FAMILY VACATIONS THIS CHRISTMAS.

Amelia Island, Florida

Just over a four-hour drive from Tampa, Amelia Island is a small, beautiful island that offers a family getaway close to home. Located north of Jacksonville, the island features the quaint Victorian village of Fernandina Beach and the old-Florida natural beauty of Spanish moss-draped live oaks, salt marshes and pristine beaches sprinkled with shells and sharks' teeth. Family activities include taking a cruise along Egan creek to the Amelia Island lighthouse, stopping at Cumberland Island to watch wild horses roam the beach and riding bikes. Take in the beauty of the island by horseback at Kelly Seahorse Ranch or spot egrets, dolphins and manatees on a kayaking trip.

The Ritz Carlton and Plantation Island Resort are both family-friendly hotels with kids' clubs and plenty of holiday-themed activities starting around Thanksgiving. On November 26th, The Ritz celebrates with their annual lighting of the Christmas tree with music, refreshments, and a visit from Santa followed by a character dinner featuring elves and reindeer. Plantation Island Resort lights up on November 28th with cider, pictures with Santa and horse-drawn carriage rides.

Ritz Carlton, Amelia Island. www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/AmeliaIsland. For event reservations and information, call 904-277-1028.

Amelia Island Plantation Resort. www.aipfl.com. For event information, contact the Spa & Shops at Amelia Island Plantation at 904-432-2202.

Smuggler's Notch Ski Resort, Vermont

Voted the best family resort by SKI magazine nine years in a row, Smuggler's Notch offers a terrific "white Christmas" vacation for families. In addition to skiing and snowboarding, families enjoy ice skating, sleigh rides, snowmobiling, children's programs, a teen club and a nightly bonfire with hot chocolate.

On Christmas Eve, Santa skis down the mountainside in a torchlight parade before collecting last-minute wish lists and enjoying cookies and hot chocolate with the kids. Afterward, families can take part in a non-denominational candle-lit service or order a traditional roast turkey dinner with all the trimmings at the resort's Mountain Grill Restaurant.

Christmas week prices start at \$155 per adult and \$139 per youth (ages 3-17) per night for five nights. Package includes lift tickets, daily ski lessons, and many other amenities. www.smuggs.com/pages/winter/packages.php. 1-800-419-4615.



Royal Caribbean Christmas Cruise

The Royal Caribbean's *Grandeur of the Seas* departs from Tampa with trips ranging from four to seven nights and includes stops in Key West, Cozumel, Costa Maya, Mexico and Belize City, Belize. A Christmas week cruise features a ship decked out with twinkly palm trees, electric trains and gingerbread house displays, plus a smorgasbord of holiday activities.

Families enjoy caroling from the crew, a Christmas Eve "Twas the Night Before Christmas" reading, and Christmas classics on the big screen. On Christmas day, egg nog parties, holiday shows and a plump Santa bearing gifts celebrate the holiday spirit. At the Adventure Ocean kids club, kids create holiday crafts, snap pics with Santa and decorate Christmas cookies.

The four-night Western Caribbean Cruise departs December 22nd in 2008. Interior cabins start at \$579 per person. www.royalcaribbean.com. 1-866-562-7625.



Royal Caribbean Cruise

Beaches Resort and Spa, Turks and Caicos and Jamaica

These super all-inclusive resorts cater to families and are particularly great for young children. Unlike most resorts, Camp Sesame takes babies and toddlers and requires CPR-training for all of their nannies. Preschoolers love baking cookies with Cookie Monster, dancing with Zoe and enjoying story-time with Elmo. Older members of the family will appreciate the fantastic snorkeling and scuba diving (included in the price), huge pools and plentiful restaurants. Evening programs include live Sesame Street stage shows, dive-in movies and parades.

For the holidays, Beaches plans a special "12 Days of Christmas," featuring Christmas crafts, beach parties emphasizing the island's culture (in Jamaica, Santa arrives on a donkey), caroling and tree-lighting ceremonies. www.Beaches.com. 1-888-BEACHES.



Beaches Resort and Spa

Disney World

Like everything Disney, the Mouse goes all out when it comes to Christmas. The merrymaking begins November 10th with the unveiling of 200,000 twinkling jewels bedecking Cinderella's castle and the first of 18 nights the Magic Kingdom hosts "Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party" (tickets extra). The festivities feature a spectacular fireworks show orchestrated to classic holiday songs and a parade of twirling snowflakes, marching wooden soldiers and dancing gingerbread men.

Epcot presents a "Holidays around the World" show as well as the Candlelight Processional, which includes a celebrity narrating the Christmas story interspersed with music from a live choir and 50-piece orchestra. At Hollywood Studios, spinning carousels, colorful wreaths, marching toy soldiers and Santa and his reindeer dance to high-energy music and 3-D effects in the Osborne Family Spectacle of Lights.

Visit disneyworld.com/holidays for advance tickets and information or call 407-W-DISNEY.



Osborne Christmas, Disney

Osborne Lights: Photos courtesy of Walt Disney World