

Explore the Natural Wonders of Fort Lauderdale

By Kyla Steinkraus



Usually the first thing that pops into a parent's head when she thinks of Florida is Disney World. The second thing? A giant headache. This year, escape the headache-inducing crowds and commercialism and head south to Fort Lauderdale for a family vacation steeped in natural wonder and adventure.

With more than seven miles of sun-dappled, pristine beaches, 300 miles of intercoastal waterways, plenty of restaurants, unique shopping districts and a plethora of family-friendly activities on and off the water, Fort Lauderdale is fast earning a reputation for high-class fun in the sun.

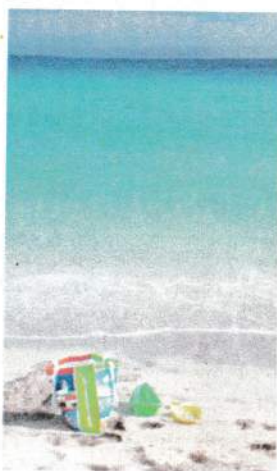
Centrally located, Fort Lauderdale is also a great starting point for exploring South Florida's natural wonders, including snorkeling the vibrant coral reefs of John Pennekamp State Park and gator-spotting in the marshes and swamplands of the Everglades.

BEACHY GOOD FUN

The city's beaches are highlighted by Fort Lauderdale Beach's signature wavewall and promenade studded with swaying palm trees. The blue-green waters of the Atlantic and platinum sand beckon. When the family gets tired of swimming, sunning and sand castle building, head to one of Aloha Watersports' three

locations to get active. Their main outfitter is located on the beach next to the Marriott Harbor Beach Resort. We had an amazing time parasailing off their

Coast Guard-certified boat. We brought our 2-year-old son, Caleb, on the boat with us and took turns holding him. Aloha also rents jet skis, Hobie cats, a water trampoline with a slide and surf and boogie boards.



UNDERSEA ADVENTURES

We booked a snorkeling trip from ProDive, which also included a guided tour through the intercoastal waterway to see mega yachts and million-dollar mansions on our way to the open water. Caleb wore a life vest, and we brought him in the water with us and took turns snorkeling. The staff gave Caleb chunks of bread to feed the birds and the fish, which he loved. While we saw hundreds of fish, including angelfish, parrotfish and trumpet fish, there was little coral but for a few sea fans along the mostly-sandy bottom 20 feet below us.

If you have the time to drive a couple of hours south, I highly recommend John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, home to the only living coral reef in the continental U.S. While you'll enjoy snorkeling in Fort Lauderdale, the snorkeling at Pennekamp is simply spectacular. Teeming with more than 600 types of colorful fish and 50 kinds of coral, Pennekamp encompasses over 178 nautical miles of coral reefs, mangrove swamps and sea



grass beds. Glass bottom boat tours and scuba diving are also available.

SWIM WITH THE DOLPHINS

There are two dolphin encounter programs close to Fort Lauderdale. The first is the Dolphin Odyssey at the Miami Seaquarium. Participants are divided into small groups in shallow water where they touch, feed and help train a dolphin with the guidance of a trainer. Admission to the park is included, so plan to spend a few hours enjoying the dolphin, killer whale and sea lion shows. (Since you're already in Miami, head to the Miami Metrozoo

after lunch to feed the giraffes and enjoy the animals in unique, cageless habitats.)

The second dolphin experience is at Dolphins Plus, an educational and behavioral research center in Key Largo where visitors can



choose from two programs. In the 30-minute natural swim, participants don snorkeling gear and swim and dive alongside the dolphins, mimicking the way dolphins interact with each other in the wild. Although you aren't allowed to touch the dolphins, they'll swim so close you'll be a little afraid they'll bump into you (they won't). The structured swim allows physical contact, as each participant gets individual time in the water as they perform activities like belly rubs, kisses, and dorsal tows at the direction of the trainer. Kids too young to take part in the program can observe, although the staff was kind enough to let Caleb touch the dolphin and receive a kiss.

If you don't have a car, Dolphin World of Keys Adventure Tours provides transportation to both Dolphins Plus and the Miami Seaquarium.

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Fort Lauderdale borders the marshes, swamplands and mangrove jungles of the Everglades, the largest subtropical wilderness in the U.S. Families can get up close and personal with the Everglades' inhabitants, mainly alligators, at Holiday Everglades Park and Sawgrass Recreation Park, both of which offer airboat tours about 40 minutes from Fort Lauderdale.

At Billie Swamp Safari, the airboat tour took us through tangled mangrove forests as several alligators glided past only feet from the side of the boat. Alligator shows, campfire stories, and spending the night in an authentic



chickee hut are a few of the additional activities families can do. Make sure you try the Gator Tots, made from real alligator tail, at the Swamp Water Cafe. Billie Swamp Safari is about an hour and fifteen minutes from Fort Lauderdale, but spotting gators in the canals along the road helps pass the time.

JEWELS OF THE SKY

Caleb just stared as hundreds of beautiful butterflies fluttered around his head. We all enjoyed the three acres of aviaries and gardens at Butterfly World, the largest butterfly house

in North America. Kids especially will love the Bug Zoo, featuring live exotic bugs, spiders, and scorpions from around the world, and the Lorikeet Encounter, where kids can feed the jewel-toned birds as the birds alight on their arms and shoulders.

WHERE TO STAY

The new Hilton Fort Lauderdale matches modern luxury with top-notch service. Suites include a kitchenette, whirlpool tubs and flat-screen TVs. Cribs and high chairs are available along with a kids program for children 6 to 15.



For larger families or families on a budget, renting a condo is a good bet. We found several two-bedroom condos for \$1000 to \$1500 for a week on www.vacationrentals.com. Also try www.vrbo.com. We saved money by utilizing the fully equipped kitchen for some meals. Rentals on nearby Hollywood and Dania beaches are usually cheaper.

WHERE TO EAT

While there is an abundance of terrific family-friendly restaurants, bistros and sidewalk cafes in Fort Lauderdale, two in particular were our favorites. Jaxson's Ice Cream Parlor and Restaurant is an old-fashioned eatery with license plate-lined walls, a country store and enormous ice cream confections smothered in real, home-made whipped cream.

At the Polynesian-themed Mai Kai, dinner is an experience straight from the South Seas. The decor recreates a Polynesian village complete with tiki torches, thatch roofs held up with totem poles, a wooden bridge entrance and a lush jungle trail kids will love exploring when they need a break from the table. The Polynesian Islanders Revue mesmerized my son for the entire 45-minute show. He loved the authentic Polynesian dances with colorful costumes, the Tahitian drummers and the thrilling fire-twirling routine. The show is free for kids under 12, and a children's menu is provided. The food is top notch for grown-ups as well.

For more great information on Fort Lauderdale, visit www.sunny.org or call 800-227-8669.

Kyla Steinkraus is a freelance writer and mom.

All photos courtesy of Ft. Lauderdale CVB & Kyla Steinkraus.

IF YOU GO:

ALOHA WATERSPORTS
3030 Holiday Drive
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33316 | 954-462-7245
www.alohawatersports.com
Children 6 and up

BUTTERFLY WORLD
3600 W. Sample Rd.
Coconut Creek, FL 33073 | 954-977-4400
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