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5 Summer Vacation Tips for Single Parents
Travel: From Deals to Itineraries, Five Vacation Tips to Help a Single Parent
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It may seem like summer is still months away, but if you're planning a family trip, now is the time to start making your travel plans in order to insure you'll get the lowest rates, plus the best flights and accommodations. As a single parent, a summer family getaway can be the perfect time to bond, rebuild relationships with your kids after a divorce and temporarily escape from the responsibilities of everyday life. The following tips will help you plan and experience the best summer vacation possible.

Tip 1: Set your vacation goals.

The word "vacation" means vastly different things to different people. The first step in planning the perfect summer getaway is to determine exactly what you want to get out of the experience. Ask yourself if you plan to visit a popular tourist destination and participated in tourist-related activities? Will you be visiting theme parks with your kids and staying on the move until late at night? Will you be visiting friends or relatives, which takes on a very different dynamic than staying at a hotel and spending time with your kids. Are you looking to find a quiet place to relax like an all-inclusive resort or cruise? Would you like to experience new activities, learn new skills and try new things? There are countless destinations that involve hiking, fishing, scuba diving, boating, or participating in an Hawaiian luau. Would you like to experience a different culture? Visiting nearby countries, such as Canada, Mexico or any part of the Caribbean can be an educational experience.

Once you determine what experience you're looking for, it's easier to choose an appropriate destination, set a budget and plan your itinerary. If your children are old enough, letting them participate will help insure everyone has a good time. You'll also want to determine what type of hotel or resort accommodations you require. Will you and your children all stay in one hotel room (a strategy that's not recommended) or will you reserve a two-bedroom suite or connecting rooms? Two separate bedrooms gives everyone room to spread out. In one hotel room with double beds, the tight space and lack of privacy will add stress to any vacation.

Tip 2: Choose your destination.

Choose a destination that's appropriate for your travel budget, offers suitable accommodations and the type of climate you're looking for. "Because it's one of the best vacation options to help keep unanticipated expenses to a minimum -- such as typical a la carte items like ground transportation, meals and entertainment -- cruising may be more popular than ever in 2008," said Alex Goldman, vice president of cruises for Travelocity.com. Goldman added that due to the weak U.S. dollar, "cruising to Europe on a U.S. cruise line can provide great value and savings to travelers. With

everything onboard priced in U.S. dollars, including meals, taking a cruise versus a land vacation in Europe may be a great way to save a few dollars.”

Once you know your destination, the duration of your vacation and your budget, you can explore options by doing research on the Internet, reading travel guides or soliciting recommendations from travel agents. The information you’ll find on many online travel-sites, such as Hotwire.com, can help you narrow down your destination options. Last year’s summer hotspots, according to Travelocity, were: Las Vegas, Orlando, New York City, South Florida, Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, Honolulu and Chicago.

Tip 3: Save money when booking your travel.

When booking summer travel, families make their reservations in advance, according to Travelocity. “In 2002 the average trip was purchased 115 days before departure. This year, thus far, the average trip is being purchased 126 days before departure. International travelers tend to book tickets 17.3 days farther in advance than domestic travelers. Cost-conscious consumers have chosen to make some sacrifices this season, shortening their length of stay by four percent over last year in order to save on the final tab,” stated Amy Ziff, Travelocity’s editor-at-large.

In addition to airfares, accommodations, ground transportation and meals, you’ll need to budget for activities and extras. Even if you book an all-inclusive resort or cruise, plan on spending several hundred dollars per person on extras and upgrades to make the trip more enjoyable. Plus, you’ll want to purchase souvenirs. As you set your budget, allow for unexpected costs. When traveling overseas, for example, there may be a departure tax of \$25 to \$100 per person when you leave the country you’ve been visiting. Airport transfers and ground transportation may also be an added expense. If you’re purchasing an “all-inclusive” package, make sure you understand exactly what’s covered. You may discover that drinks are only included during designated meal times. At other times, you’ll be required to spend several dollars each. Also, activities at resorts and aboard cruise ships that require special equipment tend to cost extra. Your travel budget should include everything from airport parking to between meal snacks, plus activities, taxes, passport renewal fees (if applicable) and souvenirs. Running low on funds while traveling will add stress to your vacation.

As you plan your trip, take advantage of travel deals, including money-saving packages. Seek out special offers or sales from airlines, hotels/resorts and rental car companies, and when possible, use frequent flier miles. If you’re a member of AAA or AARP, many travel providers offer special discounts. Plus, by shopping for deals online (using the popular travel-related Web sites), it’s possible to save up to 60 percent off of published prices. The Entertainment Book (www.entertainment.com) is a series of city-specific coupon books. Each book costs between \$15 and \$35, but can save you hundreds. The book that covers your domestic destination city can be ordered online. Most travel providers offer the best deals to people who make their reservations at least 21-days in advance. However, you can almost always find last-minute deals online. You can also

typically save money by leaving and returning on a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Saturday, since Mondays, Fridays and Sundays tend to be busier.

Tip 4: Create a tentative itinerary.

Before leaving home, learn as much as you can about your destination and what activities you're interested in. Pre-planning your itinerary will allow you to see as much as possible, plus help you pre-calculate your travel budget. Instead of pre-planning, break up the day into sections (morning, afternoon, evening and nighttime), and schedule activities for each, focusing first on what you want to do most. Be sure to leave plenty of time for spontaneous changes. Especially if you're traveling with kids, build time in to relax. Take mid-day breaks. Allow three hours, between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. to have lunch, hang out at the pool, relax in the hotel room or take naps. Lack of sleep makes people cranky, which will take away from everyone's enjoyment of the vacation.

Tip 5: Be prepared.

No matter where your vacation plans take you, being prepared once you get there will save you money and time, plus help you enjoy the trip. Be sure that the clothing you pack is suitable for the climate. Check the weather forecast for your destination before leaving home. Pack extra pairs of comfortable shoes or sneakers, since most vacations involve plenty of walking. If laundry facilities will be available, plan on doing laundry one evening, so you can reduce the clothing you need to pack. If you're traveling someplace sunny, don't forget hats, sunglasses and plenty of sun block. You'll want to bring these items from home, since you'll pay a hefty premium for toiletries and other essentials when shopping at hotel, airport or tourist attraction gift shops. Have each of your kids pack a small suitcase, backpack or "carry-on bag" containing toys and activities. Don't forget to pack extra batteries and the chargers needed for iPods, cameras, handheld video games and other gadgets.

Summer vacation should be fun. By planning your getaway, you can avoid many travel-related hassles and extra expenses that can detract from your experience.