

With a family of five, four or even three, a trip to the movies is enough to empty the wallet, let alone a family vacation with airfare and lodging. But, as military families know, the memories that stem from solid days of togetherness are worth more than any dollar amount.

There are, however, some great ways to stretch your vacation dollar to ensure that an overload of fun and laughter are the only things you'll pay out in large amounts.

Don't forget to ask for the savings. Many hotels, restaurants and attractions offer military discounts all the time. Some have deals for military families on certain days, so consider being flexible with your dates.

Kids can sleep and eat for free. Find hotels where kids stay free and seek out a room with a fridge so you can make the most of leftovers.

Travel when it's not cool. Planning your vacation during the off-season can be beneficial in several ways. Not only will it cut costs—you will most likely have fewer crowds to battle in your pursuit of family fun.

Do your homework. Sitting at the computer for hours and putting those dialing fingers to good use will pay off in the end. You'll never find that great deal if you don't search for it, so don't forget to check less popular websites and call the hotels yourself for last minute specials.

Vacationing near your home is "in." For this reason, here are just a few picks from around the country. Be sure to check your local area for some other ways to save. Drum roll...

Climb in the Time Machine

For those of you on the East Coast, did you know you live in a hot bed of history? Of course you did. So make your way to D.C. already! The 19 museums of the Smithsonian Institution are all absolutely free, a cultural experience that could make up your entire vacation. There's something for every child and adult, from airplanes to mammoths to postage stamps. If you or your children are fans of the recent *Night at the Museum* movies, challenge each other to find the famous exhibits from the latest film. If you haven't had your fill of history, a walking trip around the city is sure to find you more monuments and historical sites than can be fit into one day. Lots of hotels in the area offer military discounts or consider staying outside the city and hopping on the Metro to save on cash. No matter how you get there, your family will definitely leave full of knowledge and fun. Visit www.si.edu for more information.



Smithsonian Air and Space Museum Photo by Lynda Modaff

The Family that Farms Together...

Little ones love the hustle and bustle of a working farm, especially one where they can get their hands dirty. Fort Drum and the rest of the Northeast can

milk some cows, gather some eggs and dance some squares at The Inn at East Hill Farm. Built in 1834, the vacation resort sits in the southwest corner of New Hampshire and offers family weekends with a host of activities depending on the season. Meals are home cooked and you'll fill up with all you can eat at your own family table. With hiking, fishing and even ice skating, the farm is sure to be a great fit for any family. Visit www.east-hill-farm.com for more information.

Saddle Up at the Dude Ranch

Grab your cowboy hat and head on over to Tennessee. French Broad Outpost Ranch in Del Rio, Tenn., to be exact. Specializing in a family atmosphere, the ranch houses guests in their "John Wayne" Old Western Hotel (which isn't really old at all, it was built in 2006), in lodge rooms, or in cabins that sleep five to nine people. The all-inclusive packages don't just give you the horseback ride, you'll also enjoy white water rafting and the kids spend time doing scavenger hunts and a rodeo just for them. Time by the fire, meals out on the trail and real live cattle drives, this is sure to be a family vacation no one will ever forget. Better yet, military personnel visiting in 2010 receive a 20 percent discount. Visit www.frenchbroaddriver.com for more information.

Pitch a Tent

Listen up, Fort Carson, the Air Force Academy and Peterson and Shreiver Air Force bases. The YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, Colo. is even better than the song. With 860 acres at the Estes Park Center and more than 5,000 acres at the Snow Mountain Ranch, there's enough space for all your family fun. During

autumn, winter and spring, the YMCA of the Rockies offers themed family weekends. Reasonable rates include lodging, meals and activities, plus you'll be relieved of the stress that comes with planning your activities. Check out their website at www.ymcarockies.org.

Get your Goggles

With 12 locations nationwide, chances are that military families will be able to find a Great Wolf Lodge right in their own backyard—from Niagara Falls to Grapevine, Texas, to Grand Mound, Wash. The gigantic indoor water park is great for the kids, but that won't be all they'll notice. Wolf Den Suites give the kids their very own "rustic" area, while making sure the adults are nice and comfortable. Some lodges offer a spa for that much needed massage and most have themed restaurants and snack bars for good eats all the time. With special deals offered year round, there's no reason your family can't start enjoying the great outdoors—indoors. Visit www.great-wolf.com for more information.

Be Swampy

Billie Swamp Safari, located on the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation in Clewiston, Fla., invites you to explore 2,200 acres of the Florida Everglades, swampy style. Tours run day and night, along with an alligator and snake show. After campfire storytelling, if you're a true adventurer, you can head back to your Chickee lodge



Sheeps Lake, Colorado Photo courtesy of the National Parks Service

for the night, a thatched roof dwelling without running water or electricity. The best part—active military personnel are free and their families enjoy a 50% discount. That's right, 50%. Visit www.swamp-safari.net to plan your adventure.

Theme Parks

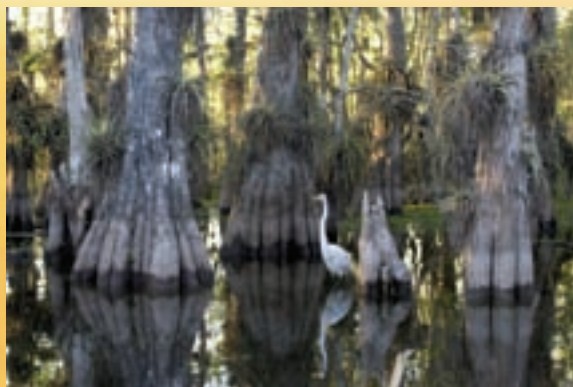
With theme parks such as Disneyland, Disney World, Busch Gardens, Six Flags and a multitude of other smaller parks—think Knotts Berry Farm in California or Kings Island in Ohio—there is likely a theme park near your own backyard. So go online and look around—there's an adventure just waiting to happen! Visit www.themeparkcity.com to find theme parks, water parks and even zoos near you.

National Parks

From sea to shining sea, our national park system is simply awesome. From the better-known Yellowstone and Yosemite in the West to Gettysburg and the Everglades in the East, and literally hundreds of places in-between, there are national parks in all 50 states and several U.S. territories. So pack some snacks and visit some of the finest sites our country has to offer. Visit www.nps.gov to find a park near you.

With so many locations for all kinds of activities and interests all over the United States, there's no excuse to not spend some quality family time enjoying each other. Just remember, it's not the journey you take, it's the memories you make on the way. ●

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Great Egret, *Ardea alba* National Park Service Photo by Rodney Cammauf