

Sea-Worthy!

These destinations deliver all the ingredients for a magical stay with the kids: pristine ocean water, nature activities, and a boatload of inland fun.

by KAREN CICERO



2013
Parents
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10 BEST
BEACH
TOWNS

A trip to the beach never feels like a family-vacation compromise—the kids want to go as much as you do. But what are the shore bets? We combed thousands of beaches looking for clean water and low rates of closings. Once we narrowed the list to 100 or so, we factored in other deal-breakers, like lifeguards and restrooms, then turned our attention to the fun, low-cost attractions, nature activities, and family vibe of the rest of the town. Whether you're looking for somewhere to visit for the day or stay for the week, these picks provide the perfect combo of land and sea. Bon voyage!

1 Hilton Head Island, South Carolina

*** Oceanfront Fun** You can't really go wrong with any of Hilton Head's 12-plus miles of white-sand beaches. "Driessen and Islander Beach Parks are particularly good choices for families because they also have playgrounds and picnic shelters," says Steve Riley, town manager. While you'll likely spot tiny ocean critters, sea-turtle nests, or even dolphins at any of the beaches, Driessen's wooden boardwalk actually takes you over a tidal marsh and sand dunes, so it's home to the most creatures. On the other side of the island, don't miss the candy-striped lighthouse (it's a manageable 114 steps to the top) in the Harbour Town area.

*** Inland Hot Spots** With few streetlights (so you can easily see the stars!) and rules prohibiting neon signs and buildings over five

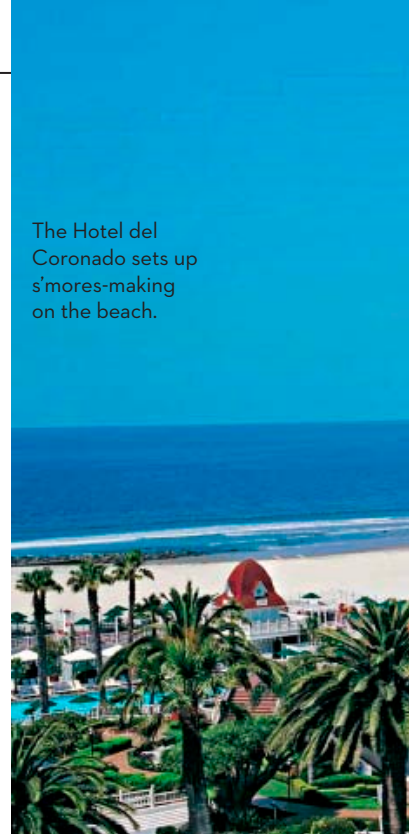
stories tall, Hilton Head has retained its Southern charm. Check out The Sandbox, a children's museum with a pretend plane, bank, and supermarket café; it appeals most to kids 6 and under (\$6 admission for kids and adults, free for babies under 1). School-age kids will have a blast at the Coastal Discovery Museum, which offers scavenger hunts, costumes, and a butterfly exhibit (free admission; hour-long, guided tours \$10 for adults, \$5 for children). For dinner, try The Harbour Town Grill (its kids' menu features everything from pizza to grilled salmon) and stay in that end of the island afterwards for Gregg Russell's evening sing-alongs. "He plays guitar, teaches the crowd silly songs, and then the kids can volunteer to belt out their favorite tune," says Allison Burns, of Atlanta, who has vacationed in Hilton Head with her husband and

6-year-old daughter for the last four years.

"It's a sweet way to end the night."

*** Castles In the Sand** Many resorts have recently been renovated. You'll get the most space for the money at Omni Hilton Head Oceanfront Resort located in Palmetto Dunes, a quiet coastal area that doesn't have a public-beach access point, so there's plenty of space for hotel guests. At more than 530 square feet, Omni's deluxe rooms are about one third larger than others on the island, and include a kitchen area with a mini fridge, a microwave, cabinets to store snacks, and a dining table. A new family pool starts at just a few inches deep and The Ocean Tides spa features unique

The Hotel del Coronado sets up s'mores-making on the beach.



A perk of kayaking in Hilton Head: dolphin sightings

treatments, such as bamboo massage. (Rooms with two queen beds start at \$169 per night; omnihotels.com.) If you're torn between staying at a resort or a renting a house, consider a villa at Disney's Hilton Head Island Resort, also in Palmetto Dunes. Each villa has a full kitchen, separate sleeping area for the kids, and many





2 Coronado, California

*** Oceanfront Fun** Just over the bridge from San Diego, Coronado's 7 miles of coastline encompasses five main beaches. All beaches have lifeguards and, except for South Beach, restrooms. The most popular choice: Central Beach in the heart of town, just a short stroll to restaurants and ice-cream shops. For something more serene, head to the 4½-mile Silver Strand State Beach. The ocean side of the strand is strewn with shells, while the bay side has warmer water, gentler waves, and a nature preserve. Kids ages 7 to 12 can earn a Junior Ranger badge at Silver Strand on Saturdays.

*** Inland Hot Spots** Grab an ice cream at MooTime Creamery—it's made fresh daily—and walk to the Coronado Children's Library, where there's a whimsical Wizard of Oz exhibit. (L. Frank Baum wrote some of the story in Coronado.) Or catch a flick at the old-timey Coronado Village Theatre and then take your kids to Delux Gourmet Hot Dogs, a new restaurant serving up franks (plain or with all sorts of zany toppings, like Thai peanut spread and carrots) plus salads and organic ice-cream sandwiches. The town also has tons of great shopping—Seaside Papery is a must-stop for any Etsy fan.

*** Castles In the Sand** The Loews Coronado Bay Resort is just a ten-minute walk or short shuttle ride to Silver Strand State Beach; in fact, the hotel has raised

more than \$1 million to help its nature preserves. On the property, Loews hosts outdoor kids' yoga, pool games, and marshmallow roasts; kids 4 to 12 can participate in the children's club, which entertains them with magic tricks, GPS-led scavenger hunts, and sand castle-building while you get a treatment at Sea Spa or take a fitness class. (Rooms with two queen beds start at \$189 per night. Get a 20 percent discount when staying three or more nights; loewshotels.com.) The Hotel del Coronado, a 125-year-old Victorian-style resort is on Central Beach. Its Kidtopia program offers one-hour drop-off craft activities (like making a birdhouse) and three-hour camps for kids 4 to 12. (Rooms with two queen beds start at \$289 per night; hoteldel.com.)

3 St. Pete Beach, Florida

*** Oceanfront Fun** St. Pete Beach is the closest town to Fort de Soto Park—home to miles of lifeguard-patrolled white-sand beaches along with nature trails, fishing piers, a fort, and playgrounds, as well as kayak and bike rentals. "The North Beach area is like nature's wading pool," says Jim Wilson, park supervisor. "The gentle gulf water and gradual slope makes it perfect for little kids." St. Pete Beach itself also has 6 miles of beaches but lifeguards aren't on duty.

*** Inland Hot Spots** The Dali Museum's treasure hunts, stories, and craft projects occupy the kids so you can appreciate the



The sand at St. Pete Beach is ideal for castles.

activities ranging from Goofy bingo to wildlife tours that are led by a naturalist. (Villas start at \$261 per night; disneybeachresorts.com.) To be close to Islanders Beach Park, stay at The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa. Its

jam-packed schedule of family events includes nature walks, potato-sack races, and poolside movies. (Rooms with two queen beds in the Sunsational Savings package start at \$275 per night. The fourth night is free; westin.hiltonheadisland.com.)



4

You can tour the Nobska Point Lighthouse near Falmouth.

Win a beach vacation!
Crave a trip for five to Hilton Head Island? See how to enter on page TK.



5

Victorian houses abound in Cape May.

nearly 100 paintings by the famed artist. The outdoor waterfront garden adds to the kid appeal (\$21 for adults, \$7 for kids 6 to 12, children 5 and under are free; thedali.org). For a sure hit with preschoolers, consider Great Explorations Houghton-Wagman Children's Museum (\$10 admission, babies under 1 are free) or drive ten minutes to the Clearwater Marine Aquarium (\$20 for adults, \$15 for kids 3 to 12, children 2 and under are free), home to Winter, who was featured in the movie *Dolphin Tale*. Back in St. Pete Beach, eat at Snapper's Sea Grill, which has outdoor seating, free baked pita chips and hummus, and a kids' menu.

*** Castles In the Sand** Right on the beach, the budget-friendly Postcard Inn offers a kiddie pool, free loaner sand buckets, and rooms decorated in surf-style retro. (Rooms with two queen beds start at \$99 per night; postcardinn.com.) For a full-service resort, book a room at the Loews Don CeSar Hotel—aka the “pink palace.” It has a new oceanfront pool area with a



splash pad; chic, child-proofed guest rooms (just request a kit); and loads of loaner baby and toddler equipment. (Rooms with two queen beds start at \$249 per night; loewshotels.com.)

4 Falmouth, Massachusetts

*** Oceanfront Fun** Located in southern Cape Cod, Falmouth's nine beaches cover 12 miles of shoreline. “During low tide, Wood Neck

Beach has shallow warm wading areas and a marshy sandbar area with crabs and other little creatures,” says Kimberly Kane, a mom of three in Bedford, New Hampshire. “My kids love this place!” If you want to do more swimming than exploring, try Old Silver Beach, which isn't as rocky.

*** Inland Hot Spots** Hit the trails at the Ashumet Holly Wildlife Sanctuary. You'll see 65 varieties of holly

trees, frogs and birds, and, if you come in late summer or early fall, rare wildflowers. (\$3 for adults, \$2 for children 2 to 12, babies are free). Or explore the shops and galleries in downtown—don't miss Eight Cousins Books and Bella of Cape Cod (all its jewelry and accessories are \$25 or less). Grab dinner at the Silver Lounge, where you can eat in a railroad car. If you're staying over on a Friday night, head to Coonamisset Farm for a buffet under a pavilion overlooking the fields.

* Castles In the Sand

Located on Old Silver Beach, the newly renovated Sea Crest Beach Hotel offers cupcake decorating, family movie nights, and a new kiddie pool. It also gives you a Plan B—an indoor pool for days when the weather doesn't cooperate. (Rooms with two double beds start at \$199 per night; seacrestbeachhotel.com.) Or stay at the cozy Beach Breeze Inn, located just 100 yards from Surf Drive Beach, where your rock-and-shell collector will be in heaven. (Rates for a room with two full beds and a kitchenette start at \$289 per night; beachbreezeinn.com.)

5 Cape May, New Jersey

*** Oceanfront Fun** Spared by Hurricane Sandy, the five main beaches in this historic town have 24 access points. You can't go wrong with any of the picks, but Sunset Beach, on the western side of the town, is a resident fave for its “Cape May diamonds,” pretty pebbles that kids (and



6

Amelia Island
is bike-friendly.

adults!) collect. Don't miss one of the town's best-kept secrets, the Nature Center of Cape May, which offers drop-off and family programs that take kids to the beach across the street to explore. (Most programs are \$5 and up.)

★ **Inland Hot Spots** Full of Victorian houses and charming shops, Cape May isn't Snooki's Jersey Shore. Hop on the trolley to get the lay of the land (\$10 for adults, \$7 for kids ages 3 to 12, free for younger kids) as guides point out cultural attractions, historic areas, and beaches. You might hear about the family tours of the Victorian museum Emlen Physick Estate (\$10 for adults, \$7 for kids ages 3 to 12), the 1859 lighthouse at Cape May Point State Park (\$7 for adults, \$3 for children

ages 3 to 12), the free Cape May County Zoo, and the shopping and restaurants at Washington Street Mall. For dinner, try the Lobster House, where Taylor Swift ate during a recent trip in town. "You can sit in the dining room, go to the casual raw bar, or get take-out and find a table along the harbor to watch the boats go by," says Vivian Daly, a local and mom of four.

★ **Castles In the Sand** Just a block or so from the beach, Congress Hall offers free towels and lounge chairs oceanside for hotel guests. A jam-packed lineup of family activities ranging from Monday-night carnivals with face-painting and balloon-making to Zumba classes on the lawn will keep your family busy and happy. (Rooms with

two queen beds start at \$179 per night; congresshall.com.) If you want to cook some of your own meals, consider the Marquis de Lafayette Hotel, which offers apartment suites with a kitchen and balcony. (Apartment suites start at \$257 per night; marquiscapemay.com.)

6 Amelia Island, Florida

★ **Oceanfront Fun** On the island's 13 miles of coastline, Main Beach Park is a gem because it has a playground, restrooms, picnic areas, and volleyball courts. "It's also an excellent place for kids to try to find shark teeth," says Nan Voit, director of parks and recreation.

★ **Inland Hot Spots** Take a 30-minute horse-drawn carriage ride through the

historic district as a guide tells you about the island's past—your kids will perk up when they hear about the pirates (\$15 for adults, \$7 for kids 2 to 13; free for kids under 2). Then catch dinner at Timoti's Seafood Shak, which serves up local fare. Eat outside and, after dinner, your kids can let off steam at the on-site pirate ship playground.

★ **Castles In the Sand** Set on 3½ miles of shoreline, The Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort just reopened after an \$85 million renovation. The resort offers a kids' water playground, a nature center, and three golf courses. (Rooms with two queen beds start at \$249 per night. Use the code PARENTS for 10 percent off and a free round of mini golf for four; omnihotels.com.) Or look into the Residence Inn—Amelia Island, which is just two blocks from the beach. You get free breakfast daily, a free cookout once a week, and a full kitchen. (One-bedroom suites with two double beds start at \$149 per night; residenceinnameliaisland.com.)

7 Kitty Hawk, North Carolina

★ **Oceanfront Fun** Part of the Outer Banks, Kitty Hawk boasts 3 miles of uncrowded beaches. Use the Kitty Hawk Bath House and Byrd Street beach entrances because they're nearest the restrooms and lifeguards.

★ **Inland Hot Spots** Spend a morning at the Outer Banks Children at Play

Hapuna Beach's clear water is great for snorkeling



Museum; kids can explore the teddy-bear hospital and lighthouse (\$7 per person, kids age 1 and under are free). Then check out the Wright Brothers National Memorial in nearby Kill Devil Hills. There are kite-flying demos and Junior Ranger programs.

* **Castles In the Sand** All rooms at the Hilton Garden Inn Outer Banks/Kitty Hawk have a balcony and ocean views. The resort supplies free beach chairs and umbrellas. (Rooms with

two queen beds start at \$199 per night; hiltongardeninnouterbanks.com.) Or book one of the hundreds of beach houses in the town; go to outerbanks.org for a list of rental companies.

8 **Kamuela, Hawai'i, The Big Island**

* **Oceanfront Fun** The 3 miles of shoreline at Hapuna Beach State Park is everything you envision when you think of Hawaii: turquoise water, clean white sand, and stunning views. Plus the waves are generally calmer here than nearby. Go the southern end of the beach; there's a cove made from black volcanic rock where kids will have no trouble spotting little fishes.

* **Inland Hot Spots** Catch a free Polynesian Hula on Monday and Thursday nights at The Shops at Mauna Lani. From 5 to 6 P.M. daily, the shops also offer free 4-D movies for families staying at nearby hotels. Don't leave without going to a luau. The Mauna Kea Beach Hotel has a great one for families, where kids can sit in front of the stage and even participate at the end of the show (\$96 for adults, \$48 for kids 5 to 12, children 4 and under are free).

* **Castles In the Sand** The Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel offers stargazing with telescopes, a family-friendly pool, a club for children ages 5 to 12 and free or low-cost hula lessons, lei-making, and Hawaiian crafts. (Rooms with two queen beds start at \$199 per night; princeresortshawaii.com.) Find local vacation rentals at hawaiiioceanfront.com.

9 Gulf Shores, Alabama

*** Oceanfront Fun** On Gulf State Park's guarded coastline, families can join in beanbag tosses or hula-hoop contests. "The beaches are clean and the sand is sugar-white," says Sarah Barnhill, a mom of a 3-year-old in nearby Adger, Alabama.

*** Inland Hot Spots** The Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo is the perfect size for kids—you can get a good view of its 300-plus creatures and drop in for its summertime animal shows during a three-hour visit (\$10 for adults, \$7 for kids 3 to 12, free for younger kids.) Drop by Fort Morgan, where kids can see real cannons and learn about Civil War history. (\$7 for adults, \$4 for kids ages 6 to 12, younger kids are free). End a great day with dinner at LuLu's at Homeport Marina, which has a beach-sand area to occupy kids and a food-allergy menu.

*** Castles In the Sand** Vacation rentals are abundant in Gulf Shores. A great pick: a condo at The Beach Club Gulf Shores; all units have full kitchens, access to pools, and a fitness center. (One-bedroom condos that sleep four start at \$231 per night; thebeachclub.spectrumresorts.com) If you'd rather stay at a hotel, options a few miles from the beach include Staybridge Suites (rooms with two queen beds start at \$139 per night; ihg.com) and Courtyard by Marriott Gulf Shores Craft Farms (rooms with two queen beds start at \$89 per night; marriott.com).

10 Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

*** Oceanfront Fun** Replenished with sand and beach grass, the 1½-mile stretch of guarded beach attracts a sea of families. But there's plenty of space for sand castle-building and kite-flying.

*** Inland Hot Spots** On the boardwalk, kids can ride on the carousel, the Ferris wheel, and antique wooden boats. "My kids love the haunted mansion from the 1940s," says frequent visitor Christy Hume, a mom of four in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. "It's so cheesy, it's fun." But just a couple of blocks away, in this 1-square-mile town, there are more than 200 boutique shops.

*** Castles In the Sand** Steps from the beach, the Avenue Inn & Spa recently finished a face-lift of its breakfast room and lobby, where you'll find free cookies for the kids and wine and cheese for you at nighttime. (Rooms with two queen beds start at \$219 per night; avenueinn.com.) The Hotel Rehoboth offers free shuttle service to the beach including chairs and towels, free breakfast, and a heated outdoor pool. (Rooms with two double beds start at \$249 per night; hotelrehoboth.com.) 😊

Parents

PARENTS MAGAZINE NAMES 2013'S 10 BEST BEACH TOWNS

NEW YORK, NY (May 6, 2013) *Parents* magazine has named America's [10 Best Beach Towns](#). Whether you're looking for a day trip destination or a weeklong respite, *Parents'* list provides the perfect combo of land and sea. This summer, *Parents* has designated family vacation hotspots that deliver all the ingredients for a magical stay: pristine ocean, beach safety, and a boatload of inland fun. As a bonus, despite their paradisiacal locations, the 10 Best Beach Towns are affordable –no hotel room starts at a higher price than \$289 per night, and several come in below \$200.

Introducing the **2013 *Parents* 10 Best Beach Towns** in ranked order:

1. **Hilton Head Island, South Carolina**
2. **Coronado, California**
3. **St. Pete Beach, Florida**
4. **Falmouth, Massachusetts**
5. **Cape May, New Jersey**
6. **Amelia Island, Florida**
7. **Kitty Hawk, North Carolina**
8. **Kamuela, Hawaii, The Big Island**
9. **Gulf Shores, Alabama**
10. **Rehoboth Beach, Delaware**

"Successful family vacations are about finding a balance," says Dana Points, Editor-in-Chief of *Parents*. "If you find a spot that has something for everyone, you know you've struck gold. This year, our picks have it all: beautiful beaches, great dining, activities for all ages and interests, and all without breaking the bank."

Upload images of your favorite sandy spot to *Parents'* Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest pages using the hashtag **#ParentsBest**. Your selection may appear in an upcoming *Parents* 10 Best Beach Town list!

Methodology

Parents compared the nation's beaches using the Natural Resources Defense Council's water quality reports, focusing on low rates of water contamination and beach closings, and narrowed down its list to the top 100 beaches based on water quality. After ensuring water safety by eliminating any beaches without lifeguards on-duty, *Parents* reviewed the number of public restrooms, changing areas and beachside amusements like nature activities and playgrounds. Those towns without an extensive list of inland activities for families were omitted. Finally, the editors culled the site's accommodations to provide a range of wallet-friendly lodging and entertainment options for families.

For more information and to view an exclusive video of the **2013 *Parents* 10 Best Beach Towns**, visit [Parents.com](#).

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About *Parents*:

Parents was founded in 1926 and, along with American Baby, FamilyFun and Ser Padres, makes up The Meredith Parents Network portfolio of parenthood brands. *Parents* is the leading voice for a community of more than 15 million moms who are engaged and inspired by the brand's trusted content. In turn, these moms enlighten and inspire others by joining ongoing conversations about parenthood via Parents.com as well through *Parents'* robust presence on Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr. *Parents* is dedicated to engaging and inspiring moms with the information they need, wherever they go.

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