

# family-friendly getaways

*Luxurious meals and juice boxes  
don't have to be mutually exclusive*

BY KATIE KELLY BELL

Most parents agree that it is richly rewarding to raise children. But let's be honest: There is a high level of servitude and sacrifice that factor into being a mom or a dad. Indeed, every now and then we parents need some pampering, too. After a hectic schedule of swim practice, PTA meetings, Boy Scout meetings and work deadlines, my husband and I decided the time for indulging had come. We needed a break, a luxurious break, *not* a trip to Orlando. Splurging a little is what makes life memorable, right?

Bereft of overnight sitters, we determined that it was time for Team Bell (ages eight, five and two) to try this luxury thing. After vetting various options, we settled on a Mobil five-star hotel: the Four Seasons Hotel in Midtown Atlanta. Their Web site did boast of its children's amenities. We decided to put them to the test.

Many friends questioned our sanity. Parents well know that children are like forces of nature, especially in sophisticated settings — writhing, squirming and using inappropriate “outside” voices to announce bathroom needs. Yet it was time to raise the bar and ask our children to reach for it. Still, we registered under a false name. Just in case.

## No Belching In The Lobby, *Please*

Upon arrival, a team of exceedingly courteous valets greeted us. So far, so good. I bravely walked in sporting a so-not-chic diaper bag and holding my son's clammy five-year-old hand, his cowboy boots click-clacking on the marble floors. What were we thinking? Movie stars stayed here, not regular people like us!

*Oh please, everyone be quiet. Be good. Don't burp, screech or shout “Mommy, I have to gooo, NOW!”*

Phew! We made it through the lobby, my fears unrealized. Apparently, my children were momentarily paralyzed by the lobby's grandeur and thus remained hushed and attentive.

Our suite with an adjoining room for the kids was plush and welcoming. A stuffed animal lay on each child's bed, along with a child-sized bath robe, a disposable camera and a personal carafe of milk. The *pièce de résistance* was a cookie the size of a dinner plate decorated with each child's name in chocolate. William and Harrison gave it their truest declaration of affection: “AWESOME!” Two year-old Maggie just clawed at the chocolate — endorsement enough.

The basket of movies and a kid's newsletter with concierge phone numbers (for them to call if they wanted a game to play or needed more milk for their cookie) put them over the top. David and I slowly began to exhale. We hired a sitter for the baby (they have them on staff at the hotel); now we only had to survive a three-course dinner with a 5-year-old and an 8-year-old. However, before any fancy dining was to take place, we needed to work off some excess boy energy with a family swim.

As we entered the fitness center, Michelle, the fitness center concierge, greeted us. She took one look at my three wriggling offspring, assessed the situation, and offered noodles, goggles, floaties and a ball. The boys were warming up to this exceptional-service thing. “Can we have a Frisbee too, please?” they inquired.

*Please??? Hello ... I never get a 'please' without some prodding. Weren't these the kids who shouted “Gimme the Game Boy! It's MINE!! MOM!!!” on the way over here?*

Hoping that the pool wouldn't be populated by amorous couples desiring a quiet swim, David and I pressed forward, Team Bell in tow. Yet again, we discovered more marvelous surprises. The pool had several other families in it (one from Marietta, Ga.), and it was treated with saline instead of chlorine — how nice on the eyes. David and I exhaled yet a bit more, floating around on our noodles, enjoying our children in public.

## Sundaes, Chicken Fingers And Eiswein

Later, showered and nattily dressed, Team Bell (minus baby) descended to the glorious Park 75 restaurant. So far, our children had been cheerful, chirping angels. Dinner, however, remained the true test. My husband and I love to eat out; we love wine and we love to experience fine food. As most American parents do, we've had to dumb down our notions of dining in order to keep everyone happy. But no turbo-dining this time. Tonight, we informed our boys, we intended to dine in style and savor our meal at our leisure.

It turned out to be a very special evening — because of the food, yes — but most importantly because I learned something about my kids. Expectations were high, but they rose to the occasion. Their manners and behavior were every bit as polished as the high level of service and ambiance that swirled around us. They were treated graciously, and they behaved graciously — in no small part due to the staff, which seemed to time everything perfectly.

While we ate our first two courses, the boys dined on their main course. At our entrée, the general manager appeared at my side with a Video Now (the hotel's on-demand video service), requesting permission to let the boys use it while they dined on gargantuan hot fudge sundaes. Who was I to refuse? The volume was controlled; we were seated a respectful distance from others, and we received nary a scornful look from other diners.

*God, thank you! As a mother of two pre-adolescent boys, I dread that look.*

David and I reveled in our stupor of elegant food and wine while William and Harrison floated in their video-and-sugar haze. It was a truly blissful Bell family meal.

I knew David and I would remember our luxury weekend, but I wasn't sure it would make much of a dent on my children. They're kids, for heaven's sake; toy stores and playgrounds are their touchstones. We knew we broke through Harrison's all-too-cool veneer, however, when he carried his Four Seasons stuffed panda to school for a week. What singular element made this one-night stay so unique and meaningful to them? When I asked my eldest, William, about his feelings on our getaway, he scrunched up his freckled cheeks, thought a minute and said, “I guess I just felt really special.”

*AWESOME!*

*Katie Kelly Bell is an Atlanta-based freelance writer covering the good stuff: wine, food and travel.*

## do's & don'ts For Trips With The Tykes



- **DO hire the hotel's sitter**  
If your child won't be bribed with sugar and videos, hire a sitter. Remember that this should be your time, too.
- **DON'T make reservations at the last minute**  
You may not be able to get the adjoining rooms that Mom and Dad need for privacy.
- **DO ask for a childproofed room**  
You will be surprised at how much more relaxed you are.
- **DON'T hesitate to enjoy all of the hotel's amenities**  
Swap off watching the kids so each of you can get a massage/spa treatment or sneak in a good workout.
- **DO give your kids an outlet for their energy before sitting them down for extended periods**  
Their need for movement is a fact of life, so work with it.

Image at left: Maggie and mom enjoy the non-chlorinated, eye-friendly pool at the Four Seasons, Atlanta. Center image: Five-year-old Harrison, left, and eight-year-old William enjoy ice cream and videos. Image at right: Two-year-old Maggie prefers apples to dinner-plate-sized chocolate chip cookies.



PHOTOS BY DAVID BELL



## where to go?

### Barnsley Gardens Resort, Adairsville, Ga.

Just north of Atlanta, Barnsley Gardens boasts an actual Fairy Godmother to pamper your children. Phone ahead to make reservations for activities such as a Mad Hatter's Tea Party (complete with dress-up items), kite flying in the meadow, tie-dye party or story time. The F.G. will even customize events and activities to suit your children's tastes. 597 Barnsley Gardens Road, Adairsville, Ga. (770) 773-7480; [www.barnsleyresort.com](http://www.barnsleyresort.com).

### Blackberry Farm, Walland, Tenn.

At Camp Blackberry, which runs June 15-Aug. 15, children of all ages can experience the fun of cooking school (chef's outfits included), discovery hikes led by a trained naturalist and backpacking nature walks into the Smoky Mountains. In addition to arts-and-crafts programs and ice cream socials, Camp Blackberry also offers supervised horseback riding and a petting zoo. Kids can experience the rewards of planting and harvesting vegetables with Blackberry's head gardener. Moms and daughters can enjoy an afternoon at the spa, while fathers and sons go fly fishing (or vice versa). Each evening there is a just-for-kids dinner and movie, while Mom and Dad sneak away for a gourmet meal prepared by chef John Fleer. 1471 West Millers Cove Road, Walland, Tenn. (865) 984-8166; [www.blackberryfarm.com](http://www.blackberryfarm.com).

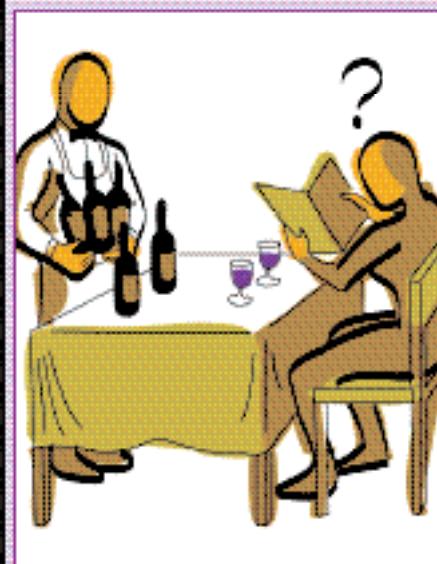
### Ritz-Carlton Lodge, Reynolds Plantation, Greensboro, Ga.

Situated on Lake Oconee, the Kids Campfires and Couples Candlelight package includes scavenger hunts for the kids, picnic lunches, goodie bags of games and a campout roasting s'mores. Parents are wooed with Champagne and an evening without the kids. Packages start at \$875 per evening. One Lake Oconee Trail, Greensboro, Ga. (706) 467-0600; [www.ritzcarlton.com/resorts/reynolds\\_plantation](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/resorts/reynolds_plantation).

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