

Unplug and Unwind

By Carrie McLaren

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Read on for your guide to a tech-free, family-time-filled Florida vacation.

With families becoming more and more attached to their computers, phones and other devices, it's important to find time to unwind and reconnect with one another. Spend time at the dinner table, experience new things and just have fun.

We've put together six destinations to inspire you to turn off the phone, leave your computer at home and soak up that Florida sunshine together as a family.

Sanibel Island

Sanibel Island is famous for its shell-laden shores, and what better way to get the family together than searching for one-of-a-kind gems. To learn more about the shells you find, the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum educates visitors on shells and the natural environment of southwest Florida. Throughout the year, families can join shelling experts for walks on the beach to find and identify shells. For a bird's-eye view, take to the skies with Air Expeditions – a seaplane

nature tour exploring the beaches and estuaries from a different vantage point.

Steinhatchee Landing Resort Steinhatchee

Located in the Big Bend region of the state, Steinhatchee Landing Resort features Victorian and Florida Cracker-style cottages, surrounded by nature and free from distraction. Each cottage has a full kitchen, allowing families to have meals together at the table and reflect on their day of Sunshine State adventure. And there are myriad adventures to have: Activities at the resort include kayaking, tennis, fishing, nature trails, biking and a petting zoo. For the ultimate Steinhatchee adventure, scalloping season (typically, early July to mid-September) is a great time to visit. The whole family can participate in snorkeling to catch the evening's dinner!

Timucuan Ecological & Historic Preserve Jacksonville

Known to have the largest urban park system in the country, Jacksonville is home to the Timucuan Ecological & Historic Preserve, which is part of the National Park Service. Visitors can explore the state's oldest standing plantation home, Kingsley Plantation, as well as other ruins of days past. Just down the road, relive history at the regal Ribault Club and picnic under the majestic oak tree. For those who truly want to unwind, Kayak Amelia provides guided and self-guided kayak tours through the Preserve. The Yoga and Kayaking Eco Experience takes visitors through the salt marshes to a secluded beachfront yoga session.



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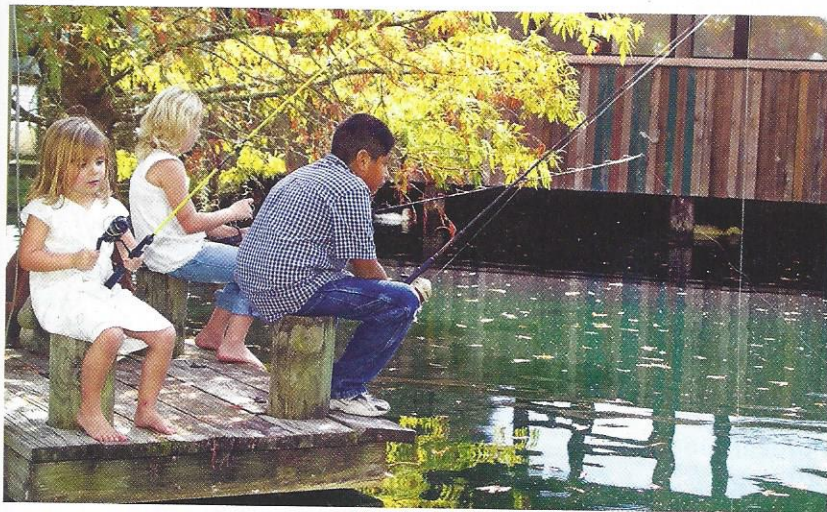
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Steinhatchee Landing Resort



Florida EcoSafaris at Forever Florida, St. Cloud



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Caladesi Island State Park Dunedin/Clearwater Beach

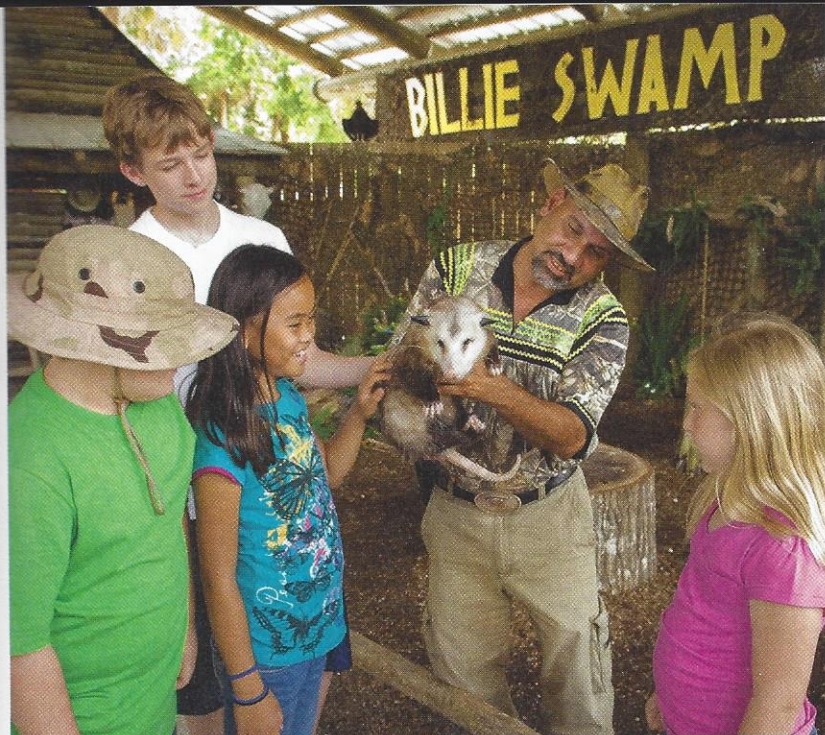
There's no better way to unplug than spending the day at the beach. Named America's Best Beach in 2008, Caladesi Island State Park is accessible by ferry boat from Dunedin's Honeymoon Island State Park and features pristine, white-sand beaches. Rent an umbrella and beach chair and read a book with your feet in the sand while the kids

enjoy searching for shells and exploring nature trails along the waterfront. This quiet island getaway brings nature, the beach and families together.

Florida EcoSafaris at Forever Florida St. Cloud

For those craving adventure, Florida EcoSafaris at Forever Florida in St. Cloud features a zip lining safari

located 68 feet above ground and surrounded by nature. Above the treetops, adventurers will soar at speeds up to 30 mph. The adventure park is also home to the only zip line roller coaster in the country, the Rattlesnake. For those looking to stay closer to the ground, the Cypress Canopy Cycle offers a unique view pedaling over the terrain. Visitors can also tour the 4,700-acre conservation area on guided horseback tours and a safari coach.



Billie Swamp Safari, Clewiston

Billie Swamp Safari

Clewiston

Billie Swamp Safari, located on the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation, features an up close look at the Everglades with airboat rides, swamp buggy ecotours and wildlife shows. Sleep beneath the stars in chickee huts, which are traditional thatched-roof dwellings. The camping village is truly rustic; that means no running water or electricity. For a bite to eat, dine at the Swamp Water Café featuring Seminole delicacies such as frog legs and gator tail, and end the day with a storytelling session around the campfire. This is the ultimate tech-free getaway. *

Backstage Pass: Behind-the-Scenes Tours

By Dalia Colón

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Some of Florida's most beloved theme parks, theaters and other attractions become even more alluring when you go behind the scenes.

Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park Fort Walton Beach

What child doesn't dream of working with animals? The VIP Trainer Program offers an opportunity for budding trainers ages 13 and up to — excuse the pun — get their feet wet. In this five-hour program, apprentices work alongside the pros to learn all that goes into training and caring for dolphins and other sea life. gulfarium.com

Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens Jacksonville

Of the zoo's behind-the-scenes offerings, the African Plains Tour is the most popular. Learn how keepers care for rhinos, elephants and other

larger-than-life creatures in the zoo's African Plains area. You can even go inside the night house to peek at animals taking a break from the sun. jacksonvillezoo.org

Walt Disney World Lake Buena Vista

Walt Disney World offers tours for every age and interest, but the Marceline to Magic Kingdom Tour is ideal for those who want to learn more about Walt Disney himself. On the three-hour walking tour, you'll learn all about the Marceline, Mo., native. You'll also get to enter the park before it opens to the public — ideal for taking a picture on Main Street USA without getting photo-bombed. disneyworld.com

Tampa Theatre Tampa

Tampa's historic cinema recently went digital, but it still maintains



Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park, Fort Walton Beach

all the splendor of a 1926 movie palace. The Balcony-to-Backstage Tour journeys through the history of the silver screen, the building's Mediterranean architecture and how the theater fits into an evolving downtown Tampa. Visitors will also get a demonstration of the Mighty Wurlitzer Theatre Organ. To cap it all off, on some tours, interested folks can climb the stairs to the projection booth for a spectacular view of the theater. tampatheatre.org

Monkey Jungle Miami

No monkeying around here. Serious primate fans can sign up for the Rainforest Adventure Tour, a 45-minute guided tour inside the Amazonian Rainforest area. You'll make direct contact with squirrel monkeys and capuchins, and you can even feed them. monkeyjungle.com *