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By Traci Suppa

Cool SUMMER FUN ...

Tampa, Florida



Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo is a park designed with kids in mind. Animals are easy to see, and there are ample locations to get up close

Since taking my son out of school to go on vacation is considered an “illegal” absence, like most families with school age children, we travel in July and August.

It's very convenient to fly to the Tampa Bay area in Florida and the attractive prices during the summer months made the trip especially appealing. The only downside was the weather, unless you like yours hot and humid. I do not, so our most recent trip became a quest to find family-friendly activities, while trying to stay cool and comfortable. Fortunately, there were more than enough attractions that fit the bill.

Naturally, you'll find that every indoor attraction in Tampa has air conditioning, so plan your itinerary around midday visits to these places. They're also great options for rainy days.

Super Science

The **Museum of Science and Industry** offers scores of hands-on, interactive exhibits providing fun-filled education. In the summer, it's least crowded Monday through Wednesday.

An **IMAX theater** is located in the main building, as is the planetarium and exhibits covering weather, space and health. Older kids will dare one another to ride the high wire bike that departs from a platform on the third floor onto a 98-foot-long cable suspended 30 feet above the ground (over a net and with plenty of safety precautions). The laws of physics, and counterweights, make it impossible to fall off. We took their word for it and just watched.

Children 12 and under will enjoy *Kids in Charge!*, an expansive center in a separate building. There are four exhibit areas; Activate!, Investigate!, Kids Create! and Fields to Meals. We spent more than two full hours here. My 7-year-old Leo played in the replica food processing facility, placing imitation food on rolling conveyor belts, then taking orders behind the restaurant counter (he charged us \$6.50 for a fake shish kebab and an apple). Our toddler Emilia clambered over soft building blocks in the Crawlers' Club area.

● **FAMILY-FRIENDLY AMENITY:** *Pint-sized potties in the rest-rooms, and built-in step stools in front of sinks.*

Something's Fishy

Set aside several hours for the **Florida Aquarium**, located in Channelside. You'll need the time to experience the indoor activities and exhibits, as well as the two-acre outdoor water park, **Explore A Shore** that's included in the general admission fee.

The interior is separated into themed galleries; wetlands, bays and beaches, coral reefs and sea hunt. The Coral Reefs Gallery was a favorite; it's basically a tunnel through an aquarium, with views on all sides, even overhead. As we walked through the other galleries, exhibits were placed at varying levels so children of all ages could press their noses against the glass. We didn't even need to take Emilia out of her stroller to get a great view of a shark gliding by.

Save the water park for the end of the day so your children can take their time getting thoroughly soaked. The main event here is a two-story pirate ship with water cannons, surrounded by bubbling fountains and misters. If you forget swim diapers, swim-shoes or towels, visit the gift shop. The outdoor Cantina is several steps above the usual snack bar, serving real drinks and light fare.

● **FAMILY-FRIENDLY AMENITY:** *Single-occupancy nursing room on lower level.*

Shady Animals

My own barometer of an attraction's kid-friendliness is based on the number of times I have to go into my "mommy bag" for a distraction; i.e., a snack, toy or shiny metal object. Happily, at **Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo**, I didn't even need to bring it. As soon as we encountered the Manatee Fountain past the ticket window, my son levitated out of his shoes and ran barefoot through the fountains bubbling up from the ground.



Nickelodeon Family Suites by Holiday Inn

If you've done any Orlando travel planning, the Nick Suites hotel has undoubtedly appeared on your radar. Your kids don't even need to watch the Nickelodeon network to appreciate the bright and zany ambiance that they will be reluctant to leave.

Not one, but two immense pool complexes with slides, climbing nets and water jets are the main attraction here, but when you need a break from all that water fun, there's a mini-golf course, arcade, basketball court, shaded play area, kids spa, and theater. There is also a full calendar of events, from character breakfasts to contests and sing-alongs. Everyone has the chance to get covered in the infamous green slime everyday at the "Mass Sliming" at the Lagoon Slide Tower.

Over 700 Nickelodeon-themed Kidsuites are available in one, two or three-bedroom configurations with kitchen space, flat screen TVs and plenty of amenities. For further information see www.nickhotel.com.

— Traci Suppa

This is a park designed with kids in mind. Animals are easy to see, and there are ample locations to get up close, including the Lorikeet Landing and Stingray Bay. It was here that Leo plucked up courage to touch a ray as it swam by. This apparently was a life-changing event for him; he claimed a newfound connection to wildlife and swore he could talk to the animals.

The crown jewel here for kids is the Wallaroo Station Children's Zoo, which recreates an Australian outback. Good luck moving them along past the Billabong water play area. Bring a change of clothes and swim shoes, and prepare to stay awhile.

There are just enough rides throughout the zoo, spaced between the animal exhibits, to break up the activity. We relaxed on the shady Safari Ride tram, which includes a behind-the-scenes tour. We found out the animals are most active in the cooler morning hours, but we did have a thrillingly close encounter with an elephant.

Many of the zoo's observation decks are shaded, and there are canopies over the Reptile Encounter and Birds of Prey

amphitheaters. The complex is lush with trees, compact and easy to walk.

● **FAMILY-FRIENDLY AMENITY:** *Small scale Fisher-Price picnic tables at outdoor cafés.*

Big Time Sun

Busch Gardens Africa is a major attraction, and necessitates a full day to cover. It is also a large theme park, with a lot of open ground to cover and not a lot of shade. Strollers, hats, sunscreen and water are not optional!

There are, however, several entertaining places to find relief; our favorite being the comic “Pirates 4-D” movie in the Timbuktu Theater. The Congo River Rapids is a thrilling and wet ride along swift-flowing white water. Your children need to be at least 42-inches to ride it, but the Stanley Falls log flume ride is open to accompanied kids ages 2 and older. In the shady Land of the Dragons, there is a small water play area, as well as a three-story tree house and tot-sized rides.

We sought mid-day refuge from the sun by dining in the cavernous Desert Grill, where we not only found an impressively diverse selection of entrée options and healthy fare, but were also treated to live entertainment on stage.

The Lory Landing, a free flight aviary, enchanted my son. Fresh from his stingray encounter and ready for another chance to commune with animals, he allowed colorful birds to land on his arm. I guess our Dr. Doolittle didn’t hear them say “watch out below,” because he exited with a soiled shirt.

Busch Gardens held greater appeal to our grade-schooler than our toddler. With five world-class coasters, this is a goldmine for thrill seeking ‘tweens and teens. If you’re bringing preschoolers advance planning is advisable. The Busch Gardens Web site offers an age-based itinerary, which outlines appropriate rides and entertainment.

● **FAMILY-FRIENDLY AMENITY:** *The “Baby Swap” procedure at major rides allows adults to take turns riding the coasters and water rides.*

If you really want to get wet, try the 30-acre **Adventure Island** water park, located adjacent to Busch Gardens. We didn’t get there on this trip, but it bears mentioning as a cool attraction with water slides and a wave pool. If you plan to visit both, multi-park discount tickets are available on either Web site.

Nearby Beach

We wanted a beach experience without the high noon heat, but Tampa doesn’t have beaches in the sense of waves and sandy expanses. At 4 p.m., we headed a half-hour west to St. Petersburg, toting a picnic supper.

Friends recommended **Fort De Soto Park Beach**, “America’s Top Beach, 2008” on TripAdvisor.com, and number one on “Dr. Beach’s” 2005 list of Top 10 U.S. beaches. It’s open until dark, around 8 p.m. in the summer. There’s no admission fee, only tolls totaling less than a dollar.

We found an ideal stretch with parking across from the Arrowhead Picnic Area. There is a sandbar separating the beach from the deep water, leaving a shallow pool perfect for little ones.

We chose to eat on the beach, until Leo tossed a potato chip to a sea gull, which then spread the word to his feathered friends. Again, my son's newfound ability to talk to the animals failed him. We retreated to the picnic tables shaded by palms and pines and visited the nearby snack bar for some basics (hot dogs and soda).

● **FAMILY-FRIENDLY AMENITY:** *Clean public restrooms, with showers.*

For Grown-ups

If your plans allow for a night out in Tampa without the kids, you have plenty of options: the nightlife of the Ybor City district or Channelside, or going to see a major professional sports team like the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Lightning or Devil Rays. We spent an evening at the **Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino**, open 24/7 in East Tampa.

The rock n' roll vibe is everywhere, with plenty of the memorabilia the Hard Rock restaurants are known for, including the drum set used in Elvis' Hawaii concerts. There are gaming machines as far as the eye can see, from nickel slots up to high roller machines. There's also a non-smoking room for live action poker, but no other table games. Sundays and Mondays are the best nights of the week to quickly get a spot at a table.

There are several dining options, from a food court with five eateries (including Cuban cuisine – a nod to local culture), to a new fine dining experience at Council Oak Steaks & Seafood. We enjoyed the Mediterranean-inspired menu at Floyd's, a restaurant that doubles as a nightclub in the later hours.

There are upscale accommodations in the hotel, as well as a full-service fitness center and spa, and a pool with a sand-bottom beach entry at one end.

Tampa is truly a kid-friendly city. Even on our day of departure, we found a play area within the airport ("E" gates) with soft sculptures to climb that easily killed an hour. Cool summer fun in Tampa? No sweat. ♦

Traci Suppa is a writer specializing in parenting and travel topics.

WHEN YOU GO ...

Admission fees are subject to change. Check online for current pricing, and to purchase tickets in advance (a time and money-saver). Use your AAA membership for discounts, if available. For additional information:

www.visittampabay.com

www.mosi.org

www.lowryparkzoo.com

www.buschgardens.com

www.adventureisland.com

www.flaquarium.org

www.pinellascounty.org/park

www.hardrockhotelcasinotampa.com