

New ships, new parks, big events

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Disney Cruise Line

The biggest family trips to book in 2026, from Disney to Europe

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A new year always brings fresh possibilities, but 2026 feels especially rich with new opportunities for family vacations. Brand-new cruise ships are launching, long-anticipated attractions are opening, and popular destinations at home and abroad are unveiling fresh ways to welcome families.

Whether you're dreaming of a quick weekend escape, a bucket-list adventure, or a once-in-a-lifetime splurge trip, the year ahead offers no shortage of inspiration. To help you start planning, FamilyVacationist's team of travel experts is sharing the fresh [family vacation ideas](#) they're most excited about for 2026.

1. Disney Destiny

You might assume that if you've seen one Disney cruise ship, you've seen them all. But after embarking on its maiden voyage in late 2025, the [newest ship in the Disney Cruise Line fleet](#) is firmly positioned as one of the top family vacation ideas in 2026 precisely because it's a bit *different* than the others. When my family joined a preview sailing in November, we were surprised by how many elements are brand-new and exclusive to this ship.

In 2026, the all-new Disney Destiny will offer four- and five-night sailings to The Bahamas and Western Caribbean from Port Everglades, Florida, and it's packed with experiences you won't find anywhere else. Destiny's "heroes vs. villains" theme is central to everything onboard, from your first step into the Wakanda-inspired Grand Hall to a series of dramatic, full-production-quality encounters with Loki and Maleficent, among other notable Disney characters.

Dining gets a major upgrade with Pride Lands: Feast of the Lion King, a theater-in-the-round restaurant where rousing performances unfold between courses. The exclusive entertainment continues with Disney's Hercules, a new musical featuring jaw-dropping puppetry, plus two standout adult venues (De Vil's Piano Lounge and The Sanctum bar) designed for theatrical cocktails long after the kids are in bed.

[*The Witches of Willow Cove*](#) and [*Victoria Dare*](#) series for young adults

More Disney Cruise Line vacation ideas for 2026:

- [What's coming to Disney Cruise Line and theme parks in 2026](#)
- [Inside the Disney Destiny's one-of-a-kind dining, shows, and experiences](#)
- [Why the Disney Destiny was the perfect ship for me to reconnect with my adult daughter](#)
- [Castaway Cay: A complete guide to Disney Cruise Line's beloved private island](#)

2. California

With the FIFA World Cup and the Super Bowl coming to California in 2026 and Olympics preparations in full swing, this year's a big one for family vacation ideas in California. And a coming boost in flight service makes it easier and more affordable to get to cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, and even Sonoma (a great gateway for [Napa and Sonoma wine countries](#) and California's rugged and gorgeous northern coast).

I had forgotten how fun a California road trip can be until my family blended a long weekend in Los Angeles with a road trip up 101 to San Francisco. In LA, we packed a lot of kid- and adult-pleasing activities into a few days. We stayed in Santa Monica, where my teens headed to the Pier while the adults hung out by the pool. One day, we headed to the San Gabriel Valley for a tour of the Arts and Crafts icon, the Gamble House, and then, to keep things fun, stopped to pick up some books at Vroman's, California's largest independent bookstore, and then grabbed a drink on Pasadena's Boba Trail before heading to Burbank for a Warner Bros. Studio tour. There's the whole LA traffic thing, but if you're not commuting, it's easy enough to time drives for less crowded times.

For our trip north, we opted to take Highway 101. It's the Goldilocks of California north-south highway, faster than scenic-but-slow Highway 1 and prettier and more coastal than the fast-but-a-little-boring I-5. Our journey took us along the coast, where we could see the Channel Islands, and then on to Santa Barbara, Solvang, [Pismo Beach](#), and San Luis Obispo.

— *Christine Sarkis, Editor-in-Chief at FamilyVacationist*

More California vacation ideas for 2026:

- [7 budget-friendly California vacation ideas for the whole family](#)
- [10 kid-friendly family resorts in California](#)
- [8 best hotels on the beach in California](#)
- [Ultimate guide to Monterey beaches \(and where to stay\)](#)

3. Charlotte, North Carolina

With a \$608 million terminal expansion project at Charlotte Douglas International Airport continuing to roll out in phases, transiting through the Queen City is set to be more pleasant in the year ahead. But families looking for affordable urban family vacation ideas brimming with culture, nature, and big city pro sports games right downtown should step out and stay a while in this diverse yet distinctly Southern town.

In downtown Charlotte, stroll through an indoor rainforest at Discovery Place Science Museum or hit the race car simulators at the NASCAR Hall of Fame. In 2026, the Charlotte Museum of Nature opens in Freedom Park with a treetop canopy walk, owl aviary, frog bog and North American river otter habitat. The Sullenberger Aviation Museum wows with the sight of the “Miracle on the Hudson” US Airways plane, among other impressive aircraft housed inside a historic hangar. And nearby at CLT Airport Overlook, a new playground overlooks an active runway. Plan dinner at Topsy Pickle, with pickleball courts and Tex-Mex; or Puttery, with two indoor mini golf courses and great pizza and wings. And Midwood Smokehouse does the best barbecue in town.

The world-class Whitewater Center, which hosts the whitewater kayaking Olympic trials, is the place to SUP or try kayaking lessons in the center’s manmade rapids, hike scenic trails along the Catawba River, and go ice skating in the winter (you can even enroll the kids in school break and summertime camps with activities like rafting, climbing, and mountain biking). To stay in style and walkable to all of downtown’s highlights, the elegant [Ivey’s Hotel](#) is a French-inflected boutique property with just 47 rooms (including spacious suites for families) secreted away inside a former department store.

— *Terry Ward, Florida-based travel writer*

More East Coast family vacation ideas for 2026:

- [10 best family vacations on the East Coast](#)
- [America’s most charming coastal towns](#)
- [Top family beach vacations in the U.S. for sun, safety, and affordability](#)

4. Dollywood

Family fun meets a heaping dollop of Southern hospitality at [Dollywood](#), the one-of-a-kind theme park set to the backdrop of the stunning Smoky Mountains in East Tennessee. In addition to its record-breaking roller coasters, signature live entertainment, and famous foods (yes, the cinnamon bread is worth every bit of the hype you've heard), the ever-expanding resort is in an exciting period of growth. A \$500 million investment is evolving the once regional destination into a global hotspot for family vacations.

In 2026, new additions will include [NightFlight Expedition](#), the world's first indoor hybrid coaster and whitewater raft ride; and the first-ever Run Dollywood Race Weekend, a multi-day event with races for all abilities.

Dollywood has two award-winning on-site hotels that come with exclusive perks such as complimentary park transportation: [Dollywood's DreamMore Resort and Spa](#) is known for its inviting atmosphere, family-friendly pools, and nightly s'mores; the newer [HeartSong Lodge and Resort](#) charms with a rustic Smoky Mountain lodge vibe. For a budget-friendly option just off-site, the [Compass by Margaritaville](#) in Pigeon Forge is my top pick.

— *Carly Caramanna, theme park journalist and author of the forthcoming "Unofficial Disney Parks Retro Cookbook"*

More theme park vacation ideas for 2026:

- [Dollywood announces world's first indoor hybrid coaster and whitewater river raft ride](#)
- [Your theme park vacation could look very different in 2026. Here are 4 reasons why.](#)
- [12 best Disney World hotels for families, sorted by budget, group size, and vacation styles](#)

5. Columbia River Gorge, Pacific Northwest

Straddling the border of Oregon and Washington, the Columbia River Gorge is poised for a standout 2026 thanks to easier-than-ever access and a new wave of thoughtfully designed stays.

Expanded nonstop flights to Portland International Airport (just 30 miles away) are simplifying travel, making spontaneous long weekends and family getaways more attainable than ever. And the introduction in 2025 of glamping tents from [Under Canvas](#) and beautifully appointed safari tents (akin to modern cabins) from [Columbia Gorge Getaways](#) are making the 80-mile-long canyon *the* hotspot for multigenerational luxury camping in 2026.

The ultra-luxe safari tents from Columbia Gorge Getaways are my personal pick. Available in one- and two-bedroom layouts, the tents feature full kitchens, inviting living areas, and private outdoor spaces designed for relaxed mornings and star-filled nights. Set among

towering cliffs, cascading waterfalls, and sweeping river views, the property encourages you to unplug and reconnect with nature—perfectly aligning with 2026’s continued enthusiasm for refined glamping, digital detoxes, and immersive outdoor escapes without sacrificing ease or style.

— *Jean Chen Smith, Oregon-based travel journalist*

More Pacific Northwest family vacation ideas for 2026:

- [8 kid-friendly West Coast vacations with something for everyone in the family](#)
- [5 idyllic vacation spots for empty nesters and retired couples](#)
- [17 best lake resorts and hotels in the U.S. for families](#)

6. Caribbean and Bahamas cruises

Families have more choices than ever for a fun-in-the-sun Bahamas or Caribbean cruise vacation in 2026. Every family-friendly cruise line has its newest ships deployed in the tropics seasonally or year-round, including Norwegian Aqua and Luna, [MSC World America](#), [Disney Destiny](#) and [Treasure](#), Carnival Jubilee, and many of Royal Caribbean’s attraction-laden ships (like Utopia of the Seas, [Icon of the Seas](#), and the forthcoming Legend of the Seas).

Most sail seven-night itineraries, but more lines are putting new ships on [short cruises perfect for a quick getaway](#) or a combo cruise-and-theme park getaway. Plus, 2026 is the year several lines are opening or upgrading their private islands and beach resorts. You can enjoy glow-ups of Norwegian’s Great Stirrup Cay and Carnival’s Relaxaway, Half Moon Cay (with upgrades such as new pools, water parks, and VIP beach areas), as well as the debut of Royal Caribbean’s Royal Beach Clubs in the Bahamas and Mexico.

— *Erica Silverstein, travel writer and cruise expert*

More cruise vacation ideas for 2026:

- [8 most exciting short cruises you can take in 2026](#)
- [5 cruise ships that know how to keep teenagers happy](#)
- [The best couples cruises to take this year](#)
- [12 best family cruise lines for all ages](#)

7. Family vacations in Italy

Italy is always one of the best family vacation ideas, but 2026 is an especially great year to plan a trip. After all, the Winter Olympics will be held in Italy in February, and UNESCO has just recently recognized Italian cuisine with one of its most prestigious cultural honors as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (a first for an entire national cuisine).

Who doesn't love the shared community and seasonal flavors served at Italian tables? My family certainly does. We arranged our first trip to Rome and the Amalfi Coast with [Perillo Custom Vacations](#) and made pizzas in Marlon Brando's old apartment, zipped around Rome on a golf cart tour at night, and rolled cavatelli with our thumbs. We experienced the highlights of the Colosseum and the Vatican, then stayed in a small town on the Amalfi Coast to enjoy authentic, local experiences away from the crowds.

If *la dolce vita* is on your family's must-list for 2026, consider a stay at [Rose Garden Palace Roma](#) in Rome (which serves a bountiful breakfast buffet) and [Villa Romana](#) in Minori (whose pool is surrounded by pink flowers, lounge chairs, and a cocktail bar).

— *Cortney Fries, travel writer and family travel expert*

More Europe vacation ideas for 2026:

- [Popular European tourist attractions that actually live up to the hype](#)
- [The best family vacation spots in Europe for every age and interest](#)
- [This European beach destination looks and feels like the Mediterranean—but it's way more affordable](#)

8. Southern Africa with National Geographic Expeditions

Nature and wildlife have always been key fascinations for my family, and in 2026 [National Geographic Expeditions](#) is introducing a brand-new tour itinerary called [Southern Africa: Living History and Legendary Species](#) that checks all the boxes on our family travel wishlist.

Among the hundreds of species giving this tour its name are penguins (near Cape Town) and the African "Big Five" of cape buffalo, elephant, lion, leopard, and rhinoceros inside Kruger National Park. Following these explorations in South Africa, it's on to Livingstone, Zambia, to witness Victoria Falls, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

Because this is a NatGeo tour, you can count on experts in conservation, geography, and photography to accompany you every step of the way, ensuring you'll learn deeply alongside your explorations. That includes a deep dive into the traditions of local villagers and observing wildlife up close. National Geographic is offering five departures on this itinerary in spring and summer 2026.

— *Dave Parfitt, travel writer and family travel expert*

More tour ideas for 2026:

- [15 best group travel companies for guided tours in 2026](#)
- [8 best senior travel tour companies in 2026](#)
- [10 best travel companies for women-only tours in 2026](#)
- [10 best travel companies for solo travel tours in 2026](#)

9. Jackson Hole, Wyoming

Home to Grand Tetons National Park, Jackson Hole is one of the country's most popular family vacation destinations for its staggering natural beauty and varied opportunities for outdoor pursuits like hiking, kayaking, wildlife viewing, and scenic drives. With the recent opening of the Snow King Observatory and Planetarium, [astro-tourism](#) has become increasingly popular as well.

From the Snow King Mountain ski resort, a scenic gondola ride whisks you to state-of-the-art planetarium, where the wonders of the cosmos come to life. Immersive multimedia displays and live presentations by experts will have your family observing the skies in a whole new way.

It's the perfect stop after a day spent in the Great Outdoors with the guides at [Ecotour Adventures](#), my favorite local outfitter in Jackson Hole.

The area is pricey, but [The Lodge at Jackson Hole](#) has fair rates and family-friendly amenities, including an indoor/outdoor swimming pool, coin laundry, and free breakfast for kids.

— *Allison Tibaldi, Contributing Editor at FamilyVacationist and family travel expert*

More active vacation ideas for 2026:

- [10 best places to go with kids in 2026 \(no passport needed\)](#)
- [Top 5 travel companies offering immersive tours that let you live like a local](#)
- [11 best G Adventures tours for 2026: Machu Picchu, Kilimanjaro, Denali, and more](#)

10. Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas

With popular attractions like Meow Wolf, Peppa Pig Theme Park, Legoland Discovery Center, and Sea Life Aquarium, there are already plenty of family vacation ideas front and center in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. But this year promises to add a few more.

Set to open in 2026, North Texas will soon be home to the world's first Universal theme park designed specifically for families with young children. Universal Kids Resort in Frisco will feature lands themed to Shrek, Trolls, Jurassic World, and more, along with the 300-room Universal Kids Resort Hotel right outside the park's front gate.

And at the soon-to-open Dig World, you no longer have to tell your kids "no" when they beg to operate heavy machinery. Dig World lets kids operate full-sized construction equipment all by themselves (or with the help of a parent if they don't meet the minimum height requirement).

If you time your visit right, you'll have the opportunity to catch a World Cup Match in 2026, too. The Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex is playing host to nine World Cup matches between early June and mid-July. Even if you don't snag tickets, Dallas and its surrounding suburbs are planning several watch parties and events, so families can still join in the fun.

— *Tarah Chieffi, travel writer and family travel expert*

More vacation ideas for families with young children in 2026:

- [The best all-inclusive family resorts for toddlers](#)
- [16 all-inclusive family resorts with extraordinary kids clubs](#)
- [7 family resorts that welcome babies in their kids clubs](#)

11. Disneyland Paris

If you've never visited a Disney theme park outside of Orlando or Anaheim, 2026 is the year to finally make one of those far-flung family vacation ideas a reality. My pick is a trip to Disneyland Paris, which will see a [huge transformation](#) in the year ahead.

The resort's second park, currently called Walt Disney Studios Park, will get a new name: Disney Adventure World. Along with the rebranding, the park will open its new star attraction: World of Frozen, which will bring guests right into the heart of Arendelle with an entirely new ride telling the story of Anna and Elsa. Restaurants in World of Frozen will serve Nordic-inspired fare, shops will have plenty of Frozen goodies to buy, and you'll get a chance to meet the beloved characters from the film.

Besides World of Frozen, Disney Adventure World will also debut a new nighttime spectacular and a new central promenade with more than two dozen dining locations. All of this officially kicks off on March 29, 2026, which means you'll have almost all of 2026 to plan and visit Disney Adventure World in its inaugural year.

— *Megan duBois, Senior Theme Parks Editor at FamilyVacationist*

More theme park vacation ideas for 2026:

- [2026 is the perfect time to visit an international Disney theme park. Here's why.](#)
- [When should you visit Walt Disney World and Disneyland Resort in 2026?](#)
- [10-step guide to planning a Walt Disney World vacation in 2026](#)

12. Yellowstone National Park

What's a more iconic way to celebrate America's 250th birthday than by visiting its first national park? [Yellowstone](#) is perennially one of top family vacation ideas in the U.S., but most visitors do not venture more than half a mile from the road. Xanterra, which operates all the Yellowstone National Park Lodges, can take you deeper into the park for uncrowded views and increased wildlife spotting with any number of tours and packages in 2026.

The "Wild Yellowstone: Tracks to Talons" package explores the canyon region of the park with daily excursions to see predators (bears, mountain lions, wolves), hoofstock (bighorn sheep, bison, pronghorn), birds (eagles, osprey, falcons), and many more species that make their home in Yellowstone. Other tours focus on the wildlife of the Mammoth Hot Springs area, Lamar Valley, or Yellowstone Lake.

A shorter tour sure to please the kids is "Morning on the Range: A Yellowstone Wagon Adventure." This two-hour excursion takes a horse-drawn wagon into Pleasant Valley to the site of Uncle John Yancey's Hotel for snacks and campfire stories.

–Dave Parfitt, travel writer and family travel expert

More national park vacation ideas for 2026:

- [Beautiful and less crowded alternatives to the 10 most popular U.S. national parks](#)
- [America's 10 most stunning national park lodges are every bit as iconic as the parks they represent](#)
- [We love national parks, but these 12 state parks are just as awesome \(without the big crowds\)](#)

13. Universal Epic Universe

Universal's colossal new theme park, [Epic Universe](#), opened for single-day visits in 2025, but the big news for 2026 is that you can now book multi-day tickets. The ticketing change allows families to purchase three-, four-, and five-day tickets that include access to all of Universal's Orlando parks (Universal Studios Florida, Islands of Adventure, and Universal Epic Universe, with upgrades available for the Volcano Bay water theme park). Epic Universe is packed with worlds you can fully lose yourself in, and having multiple days to do so will give you the opportunity to appreciate the park at something less than warp speed.

Inside the park, monster lovers should head straight to Monsters Unchained: The Frankenstein Experiment, a five-minute masterpiece of animatronics, fire blasts, and jaw-dropping storytelling in the Dark Universe area. Families will love Hiccup's Wing Gliders in the Isle of Berk, a not-too-scary coaster that still delivers thrills. Harry Potter and the Battle at the Ministry is a standout for immersive world-building, even if you're not a Potter fan. For pure fun, Donkey Kong-themed Mine-Cart Madness delivers chaotic, kid-friendly excitement in the Super Mario area. And if you're a thrill seeker, don't leave without riding Stardust Racers, Epic Universe's fastest, tallest, and most intense roller coaster.

There are three on-site hotel options close to Epic Universe. Budget-minded families will appreciate [Universal Stella Nova Resort](#) and [Universal Terra Luna Resort](#). Both are Prime Value hotels with spacious rooms, large pools, walking paths or shuttles to Epic Universe, and Early Park Admission perks. For a splurge that gets you unmatched proximity to the new park, choose [Universal Helios Grand Hotel](#), which has its own dedicated park entrance and an impressive lagoon-style pool.

[*The Witches of Willow Cove*](#) and [*"Victoria Dare"*](#) series for young adults

This story was adapted from the article ["The best family vacation ideas: Where to go with kids in 2026,"](#) originally published at [FamilyVacationist.com](#).

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