

Las Vegas for Families: A Planning Guide

by Terry Dagdagan, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Think all there is to Las Vegas is slot machines and glitzy shows? Worried that it is not a good choice for a family vacation? Take another look and you may be pleasantly surprised! Only a few miles down the road from the dancing waters, exploding volcanoes, and marauding pirates are some great places for the whole family.

Start with the Lied Discovery Children's Museum (<http://www.ldcm.org>) at 833 Las Vegas Boulevard North. Here, children of all ages may touch and test things to their heart's content. Two or three hours are sufficient to explore the museum's two levels without over-stimulating your kids. Lied Discovery Children's Museum is open Tuesday-Sunday (everyday in summer) from 10:00 am-5:00 pm. Admission is \$7.00 for adults and \$6.00 for children ages 1-17 years old.

Almost directly across the street at 900 Las Vegas Boulevard North is the Las Vegas Natural History Museum. There are wonderful displays of animals in different ecosystems from the past and present. The Dinosaur Room with the roaring Tyrannosaurus Rex is my favorite. Beyond this display is a hands-on area where children can dig for fossils or observe some live reptiles and rodents.

Amongst replicas of whales and sharks in the Marine Life Gallery is a baby shark tank -- careful with those little fingers as they can be a hungry lot!

The Natural History Museum is open daily from 9:00 am-4:00 pm. Admission is \$7.00 for adults, \$3.00 for children ages 3-11, and free for those under 2.

Around the corner is the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort located at 500 East Washington Avenue. Run by the Nevada Division of State Parks, admission is \$3 for adults and \$2.00 for children 6-12 years old. The fort was originally built by Mormon missionaries in 1855. A ranger-led tour provides visitors with a view of life in Las Vegas when the town was founded. The fort is open Monday-Saturday from 8:00 am -- 4:30 pm.

Directly behind the History Museum is Cashman Field. Here you can catch a baseball game of the Las Vegas 51s, the AAA League team of the Los Angeles Dodgers. The team is named after the mysterious Area 51

located 120 miles northwest of Las Vegas. Go to <http://www.lv51.com> for schedule and ticket information.

For those with a more adventurous heart grab a water bottle, lace up your sneakers and slather on the sunscreen. Some of the most beautiful rock formations in the desert are found at Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area located on Charleston Boulevard about 15 miles west of the Las Vegas Strip. The Visitor Center displays habitats and wildlife of the surrounding desert area. Park entrance fee is \$5.00 per vehicle, which includes the Visitors Center and a 13-mile Scenic Loop complete with parking areas, hiking trails and picnic areas. Be advised this is a one-way loop, which hasn't stopped us from encountering a car or two heading the wrong way. Oops!

The Lost Creek Trail is the perfect half mile hike for little ones that want to experience the desert. With so many picnic areas to choose from at Red Rock Canyon, you may want to pack a lunch. My favorite spot is Willow Springs Picnic Area. It provides plenty of shade and is also a popular spot for rock climbers.

Five miles past Red Rock Canyon is Spring Mountain Ranch State Park, also run by Nevada Division of State Parks. Once inside the park you may take a self-guided tour of the Ranch House/Visitor Center or follow one of the tours lead by a park docent. Keep a sharp eye out, and you may spot some wild burros.

This is another good spot to bring along a lunch, and take advantage of their beautiful picnic area that surrounds a large meadow. The park is open from 8:00 am until dusk, while the Ranch House/Visitor Center is open from 10:00 am - 4:00 pm. There is a \$5.00 entrance fee per vehicle. (This fee was recently reduced. How often does that happen?)

During the summer months Spring Mountain Ranch State Park offers a "Theater under the Stars." Information is available at <http://www.parks.nv.gov/smr.htm>. Book early as these tickets go quickly!

A short mile further on Charleston Boulevard is Bonnie Springs Old Nevada. This is a re-created western town complete with petting zoo and riding stables. A miniature train ride is an added attraction on weekends and holidays.

The small petting zoo allows children to pet the tame animals such as deer and goats. The animal pens range from exotic emus, llamas, and wallabies, to common species such as wolves, cougars and pot-bellied pigs. Be wary of turning your back on the goats and deer. I know from

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first hand experience that they have a taste for more than just the feed pellets available from the quarter-fed dispensers. Of course, the day a goat tried to eat Grandma's very loud paisley shirt, we were all rooting for the goat!

Red Rock Riding Stables, which are located on the grounds, offer one-hour trail rides for \$35.00 per person. Longer rides with or without meal packages are also available.

The old western town provides entertainment, which is also included in the park admission. A stage inside the Saloon features an old time melodrama complete with a villain and damsel in distress (who, on our last visit, had a goatee as all the actors are men). Outside the Saloon the show continues with a western gunfight, bank robbery and public hanging.

Admission to Bonnie Springs is \$10.00 per car. The petting zoo opens at 10:00 am while the town opens at 10:30 am. All areas close at 6:00 pm in summer and 5:00 pm during winter. Picnicking is not allowed, but there is a restaurant with the usual fare of burgers and sandwiches. Beverages and snacks may be purchased at the Saloon too. Additional information about Bonnie Springs and Red Rock Riding Stables are found at <http://www.bonniesprings.com>.

With so many options to choose from in Las Vegas, you may find you need to extend your stay. Good luck!

About The Author: Terry and her husband Gene live in Las Vegas with their two daughters. They recently returned from a stay at their favorite Disneyland Hotel, the Grand Californian, and look forward to their third Disney Cruise in September 2006.

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