

Soft Adventure Travel : For Families!

by Julia Elzie, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Soft adventure travel is capturing the imagination of families, thanks to reality television shows like "**The Amazing Race.**" Escaping from the busy days of regular life is becoming more alluring to everyone. Soft adventure travel is a fun and active way for families to visit another part of the world, slow down the pace of modern life and get closer to nature, yet not risk sacrificing comfort, good food or nice accommodations. There are options for every family's interests. Biking, river rafting, walking/hiking, spa vacations, dude ranches or expedition/small-ship cruising are a few of the most popular choices.

Unlike hard adventure travel, which requires physical fitness, mental strength and technical expertise, **soft adventure travel can be experienced by almost anyone of any fitness level.** If you are a "scaredy-cat", do not worry! These trips are about fun and adventure, not thrill-seeking. Participants can use these trips to visit far-flung destinations or explore closer to home around North America. The days are filled with discovery and only as much physical activity as desired. And you don't have to sacrifice a gourmet (kid-friendly, if necessary) dinner, a good drink and a charming inn, luxurious hotel or luxury camping for a long night's sleep. Many of the suppliers have special family trips or special tour guides, whose sole function to entertain and educate the children on the trip. It allows families to see new cultures and landmarks, spend quality time with each other and enjoy the outdoors. The only requirement is a sense of adventure and an open mind!

Biking is a great way to see the countryside! It is one of the best ways to really see the world, especially Europe, where even the biggest cities have bike lanes and drivers are accustomed to sharing the road with cyclists. The biking tour suppliers bring the bikes, the mechanics, support staff, and a support and gear wagon to help riders along the way. It is entirely acceptable to ride less than the full day's itinerary, or you can complete the entire day's route. If the bike gets a flat tire, the guest sits under a tree and watches the scenery -- someone else fixes the flat! There is always time to have a picnic lunch, visit a historical or cultural sight along the way or meet with the locals. At the end of the day, the bike disappears with the support staff and guests are free to rest, relax and enjoy their evening. Riding a bike is NEVER this easy at home!

On foot is also a wonderful way to see experience a destination and walking/hiking vacations can be enjoyed by families with members of

several generations, personal interests and fitness levels. Again, the relaxed speed of walking allows for stops along the way to enjoy cultural or historical sights, shopping in a small hamlet, or browsing a village's farmer's market. You might get caught in an Irish traffic jam as a farmer moves his sheep between pastures! Walkers and hikers are also likely to meet locals along the way and those meetings provide a great opportunity to start conversations and to learn the everyday lives of the average citizen. Hiking requires more physical fitness, but it is a wonderful way to experience nature and climb to some of the world's most remarkable natural views. At the end of the day, guests retreat to a gourmet meal and a comfortable sleep. Walking and hiking are among the best forms of exercise and are a leisurely way to see the world -- just bring your feet and good shoes!

If you are more inclined to the soft part of soft adventure travel, why not **consider a spa vacation for your family?** Spas are more pampering and family-friendly than ever. Spas are no longer entirely geared to weight loss and minimal, healthy meals and excessive exercise. Spas are located all over the world from Asia to the Caribbean to Europe and throughout the United States. More spas are becoming family-friendly, offering activities and treatments for teenage daughters and mothers, men's vacation spa programs, senior-friendly treatments, Mommy & Baby activities, pampering for the mother-to-be and new mothers or teen spa vacation programs. Spas have been known for being expensive, but spas in more destinations are creating affordable packages for families with modest budgets. A spa might be the perfect place to escape from the harried daily life of today's families.

Could you use a splash of cold water on your face? **River rafting** might be the perfect solution. It is an adventurous way to get a different perspective on some of the world's greatest rivers, especially the **Snake River**, the **Rogue River** and other waterways of the Western United States. Camping fans will enjoy luxury camping and healthy, delicious meals with fewer bugs and dirt than the average family camping and river vacation. Plus you leave the task of shopping and packing the car to the experts! No experience is required and trips include special guides to challenge and entertain the children while parents relax by the campfire. River rafting is a wonderful alternative to the family vacation in the car and might be the refresher needed by adventuresome parents and kids.

Ever feel like running away and becoming a cowboy? Why not do it for a week or two? Dude ranches have an easy-going and relaxed atmosphere, but without the chores and hard work of becoming a full-time cowboy. A week on a ranch offers close-to-nature activities for

all ages and interests. Dude ranches are an excellent option for families, multi-generational travel and family reunions. Ranchers are generally down-to-earth, cheerful and friendly and their very nature is to guide their guests to see the best parts of ranching life - from swimming to fly fishing to river rafting day trips, horseback riding, cookouts, dances under the stars, mountain biking, sitting by a stream and reading by the campfire. By the way, the ranch staff does all of the cooking, cleaning and ranch chores -- guests enjoy the easy part of life on a dude ranch!

As many cruise ships become larger and larger, small-ship cruising has become increasingly popular. These cruises visit every continent and corner of the world, including Antarctica, and include the rivers of Europe, China and Russia. These voyages have hundreds instead of the thousands of passengers onboard, unlike the larger ships. The smaller ships are able to maneuver into smaller ports and allow passengers to enjoy closer, more intimate experiences during their cruise. Small-ship cruises are more casual in atmosphere and dining styles. The focus of these cruises is the destination, not the ship. Instead of nightly shows, casinos and formal nights, these cruise lines have special programs with naturalists, biologists, local artists, historians, geologists and other experts. The ships provide specialized recreation equipment, such as Zodiacs (inflatable speedboats), kayaks, snorkeling or scuba gear, to allow passengers to fully experience their destination. On many cruise lines, shore excursions are included in the price of the cruise and often, special family departures are offered with family pricing and special family and children's activities. Small ship cruises are a way to see an exotic location, combined with education, fun and adventure.

As life gets busier and adventures become more a part of our "reality," soft adventure travel offers fun, escape and discovery to all corners of the world for people of all ages without having to leave behind the creature comforts of good food and a soft, comfortable bed.

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