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By Eileen Ogintz

Taking the Kids -- When Everyone Else is Back in School

So what if you're toting a stroller and diaper bag or home-school assignments, while everyone else is waiting for the school bus and arranging car pools.

You and your kids can fly down the alpine coaster at Park City Mountain Resort (www.parkcitymountain.com), party with the "Sesame Street" gang at Beaches resorts in the Caribbean (www.beaches.com), explore nature with Appalachian Mountain Club guides in New England (www.outdoors.org) or learn crafts (ever see a barrel being made?) in Pigeon Forge, Tenn., (www.mypigeonforge.com), the gateway to Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The best part -- besides the great deals everywhere -- "There are no lines at anything," whether you are heading to a theme park or a new museum exhibit, says San Diego mom and blogger Sugar Jones, who is homeschooling her 7-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son this year so that they can continue to travel, learning as they go at butterfly gardens, museums and mountaintops. (Follow their adventures at www.SugarJones.TV.)

See how much fun science can be at Kid City, designed for young children at San Diego's Reuben H. Fleet Science Center (www.rhfleet.org/). Also in kid-friendly San Diego (www.sandiego.org), your kids are the ideal age for Legoland, the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park and SeaWorld, not to mention the beach. A number of museums in Balboa Park -- where the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center is located -- have special programs for young kids and, of course, there's the park's miniature railroad and carousel. SEA LIFE Aquarium just celebrated its first birthday and is especially geared toward younger children. Look for discount tickets at Costco.

You'll find plenty for young kids at museums and aquariums around the country. Visit the Monterey Bay Aquarium's "Splash Zone" (www.mbayaq.org), join a family program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (www.metmuseum.org) or check out the new Ryan Education Center at the Art Institute of Chicago. The kids will love the new Curious Corner interactive games (<http://www.artic.edu/aic/education/CC>). (I'm a fan of www.citypass.com for deeply discounted admissions to major city sites and museums that also enable you to bypass the lines.)

While her older brother settles back into school in Colorado. I'm going to introduce my 4-year-old cousin, Hannah Sitzman, to the wonders of the Big Apple, that irrepressible book character Eloise who lives at the Plaza Hotel (www.fairmont.com/THEPLAZA), Broadway (buy one get a second ticket free to *ShrektheMusical* in September

(www.shrektember.com) and even a special children's tea at the Russian Tea Room (www.russiantearoomnyc.com). (More about our girls' adventure in a future column.)

Go within a tank of gas from home (www.expedia.com/drivegetaway) for travel ideas, AAA's www.fuelcostcalculator.com to figure out how much it will cost to get there or hop a flight (nonstop with young kids whenever possible) or Cheapflights' Kids Airport Diversion Guide (<http://www.cheapflights.com/promos/kadg/>). (Look for flight credits, like the Fantastic Flight \$150 credits just announced for flights to St. Croix (www.visitusvi.com). Air Tahiti Nui continues to offer kids-fly-free deals (www.airtahitinui.com).

Wherever you go this fall, don't over plan. You've got plenty of time for naps and pool fun at places like the Great Wolf Lodges (www.greatwolf.com), which offer indoor water parks and special deals for those with "Wolf Pups." Or find a playground by checking out (www.kaboom.org) to find play spaces where you are visiting.

Relax -- and save even more -- if you opt for a place with a kitchen. (Look at the deals from www.homeaway.com where you'll find Orlando condos and Cape Cod digs starting at under \$100 a night. You can find city apartments too everywhere from New York to Paris. Get a condo in Park City, Utah for well under \$100 a night (www.parkcityinfo.com). Campgrounds and RV parks are continuing to plan activities and special events throughout September, October and even into early November (www.gocampingamerica.com).

Go with family or friends and you'll not only save more by splitting costs, but you might be able to split child care so you get some adult time. (Check out **www.sittercity.com** for a network of experienced babysitters, complete with references for wherever you are going.)

Seek out a family-friendly bed and breakfast (www.bnbfinder.com) near a local attraction -- like the Lafayette Inn in Easton, Pa., near the Crayola Factory or a family-oriented festival, like the Children's Book Festival that will be held in the Cayman Islands later this fall (www.camanabay.com).

Want to play in the leaves? Throughout foliage season, the Appalachian Mountain Club (www.outdoors.org) offers kid 2-for-1 lodging discounts for two kids when they're accompanied by an adult at all five of its lodges located around national forests and state parks in New Hampshire and Maine. Seek out a state park (Georgia has five, for example) or a national park (www.nps.gov) near your home and see what special family programs they might be offering.

Look for free nights (www.floridasgulfislands.com), free kids meals and camp (www.thebreakers.com) in Palm Beach where you can also take advantage of free greens fees, tennis, fitness classes and more. Look for deals touting free attraction admission too like at the Seaport Hotel in Boston (www.seaportboston.com) where you can get tickets

to the Boston Children's Museum and the restaurant is transformed for an early dinner with plenty of toys.

Look for special programming and pricing for young families, too. Beaches' (www.beaches.com) four Caribbean resorts welcome pint-sized vacationers with a special Fall-O-Ween funhouse, costume parties, Little Tyke dance parties and drive-in movies. You can give back, too, by bringing a gently-used children's book for local kids or joining special eco projects, receiving as much as 65 percent off the cost of your stay. Aston Hotels in Hawaii (www.AstonHotels.com) promise kids stay, play and eat free with free admission to top island attractions and meals at local restaurants. At Smuggler's Notch in Vermont (www.smuggs.com), meanwhile, day care is half price, you can get a free night and there are all kinds of activities from guided hikes to mini golf to an indoor Fun Zone.

See you on the beach. I'll be the one writing giant E's in the sand.