

A Vacation from Vacations

Give your kids what they really want on a getaway—you. Oh, and a swimming pool doesn't hurt.

BY CATHERINE NEWMAN



Your fantasy family vacations are probably as glossy and silent as magazine ads: The children splash in a turquoise Caribbean while the sun sets in mango ribbons behind them, or maybe they smile enigmatically at the *Mona Lisa* on a croissant-fueled museum tour. Fair enough. But picture this instead: your blurred kids jumping up and down on a king-sized hotel bed, wearing disposable shower caps. Only disposable shower caps. And socks. Trust me—this is as perfect as a family vacation gets.

"Anytown, USA" the ad could read. "A Sight to Remember!" Off camera, their father is the one snapping indulgent pictures while you lie on the floor making check marks next to "scone" and "cranberry juice" on a room-service menu. Everyone is happy. ►►

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HOTEL

- Stay close to home. games, movies, and extra towels.
- Arrive as near to check-in as you can—in fact, find out if you can check in early. Ditto late checkout, which hotels are often happy to accommodate.
- Bring snacks and, for after the kids go to sleep, good chocolate and a nice bottle of wine.
- Don't take a cell phone, PDA, work (not even a *bit*), or laptop—unless it's for movie watching.
- Make sure there's a swimming pool.
- Ask at the desk for takeout menus,



Birdy and Ben, a.k.a.
Thing One and Thing Two.

At least it works for us. Three or four times a year, we drive a little more than an hour to our favorite hotel at the gritty edge of the Berkshires, and we spend one night there. We go during the

off-season, when rates are low and they are often happy to upgrade our room. We bring no cell phones, no laptops, and no friends. And we do as close to nothing as you can imagine.

For instance, what is arguably the state's finest art museum is literally across the street—and we don't even go. Instead, we screw around in the swimming pool for hours. We avail ourselves of the TV, the fascinating wall safe (big enough for two sippy cups!), the enormous beds, and, above all, the utter absence of breakable things and distractions. We read picture and chapter books; we put puzzles together on the floor. We order breakfast, and the

kids munch muffins in their pajamas inside the huge bathtub.

In short, there is time for everything—especially those things we never squeeze into a normal vacation. On those trips, we rush the kids away from the very things that most naturally interest them. We yink them from the hotel pool to drive to the ocean; we pluck them from the rack of tourist brochures because we're off to see the actual sights; there's a wedding to get to and no time for a game of Go Fish on the big bed. From all the "Put your shoes on," and all the "Five more minutes," you'd think it was just a regular school morning. And to top it off, we're dis-

tracted by schlepping and car seats, by the sun or the rain or the likelihood that the guacamole will run out if we don't get the first dinner seating. We've taken a week off, after all, we've planned for months, and we want the trip to be perfect. It's just that our kids might actually be happier if it were a little less perfect.

Hence the one-night local getaway—the ideal vacation from vacations, where the goal is simply to be together and the hotel is the end itself. Our trips are somewhat ritualized—we always take a new board game and we always order in pizza—but the

“do nothing” mandate is easily reconfigured. One morning, for instance, we plan to take a last swim before checkout, but then our son involves his dad in a game of Monopoly (we call it “Monotony”) that winds up lasting more than two hours. So our toddler removes her swimsuit, sits on the rug, and deals out Mexican bingo cards. Later, she and I take a bubble bath and lie around in thick terry robes watching *Sesame Street* while her

brother wanders away from the game to dry his (dry) hair with the blow dryer in the bathroom. With our last hour, we hit the exercise room, where we grown-ups sweat off some of that pizza, while the kids make faces in the mirrored wall.

When we finally check out, it's with such long faces that the woman at the desk laughs. “You poor things,” she says. “Come back soon.” Maybe we could even stay for two nights next time. ●

Catherine Newman and her family like to pile in one big bed rather than going for the suite stuff. For more information about the Porches Inn, Catherine's choice nondestination destination, check wondertime.com.

