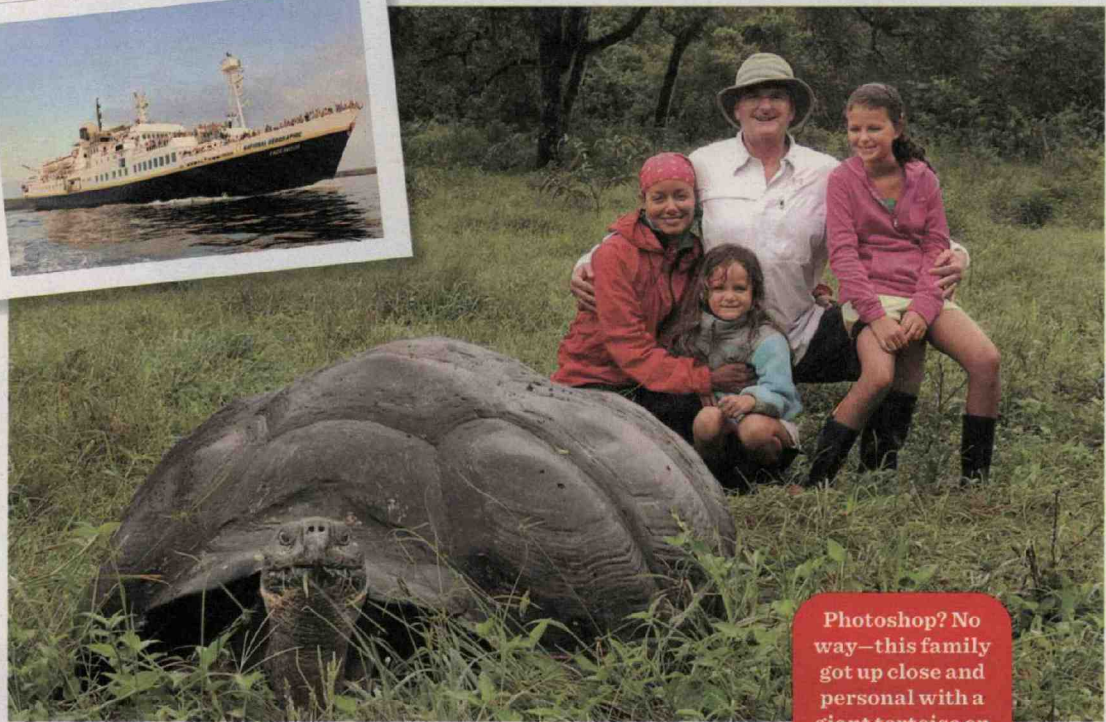


Your New Favorite Family Vacation

Yeah, you could go to the beach or go to Disney—again. Or you can get inspired by three families who planned unforgettable off-the-grid getaways.

AS TOLD TO KATHRYN O'SHEA-EVANS



Photoshop? No way—this family got up close and personal with a giant tortoise on their exotic trip.

Natural Wonders

Elizabeth Halvorsen and her family went into the wild during a one-of-a-kind vacation to the Galápagos Islands.

Both of our daughters, Isabel, 9, and Alex, 6, love animals. So my husband, J. P., and I thought the Galápagos, the chain of volcanic islands west of Ecuador, would be a perfect place for a family vacation. Where else would we see sea lions, marine iguanas and blue-footed boobies (for the uninitiated, that's a tropical seabird with feet of

the brightest blue you've ever seen in nature)? We went with a Lindblad Expeditions cruise because in addition to its National Geographic partnership (experts are onboard), Lindblad offers plenty of family-friendly activities. We knew the girls would like the "junior naturalist" program, which includes scavenger hunts and snorkeling and swimming lessons.

PLAY The ship stops at six islands throughout the eight-day trip. We were free to hike, go kayaking or even

try deep-water snorkeling at each stop. (The staff provides wetsuits and snorkeling equipment.) Every day after lunch the girls raced to the afternoon science experiments led by naturalists. They even trained kids to drive those inflatable boats called Zodiacs and they explored a cove near the ship.

EAT The food onboard is super-fresh and fantastic. It's mostly international, but with an Ecuadorian flair—think ceviche made with shrimp and tomatoes, plantains, fruits like papaya

and mango, black bean soup and local fish. The seafood was the highlight for me, but the girls went crazy for the ice-cream sundae buffet (of course!).

STAY The cabins on the *National Geographic Endeavour* are small but cozy and all have windows or port-holes. We didn't spend a whole lot of time in our room, though; we lounged

by the small swimming pool or on the sundecks after an exciting day.

THE TAKEAWAY The birds—especially the penguins—and sea lions we saw are completely unafraid of humans, so you can walk right up to them. I'll never forget visting Santa Cruz Island, where giant tortoises roam: It was like a cage-free zoo. Those are the kinds of lasting

memories I wanted to create with my family. And we absolutely did.

NEED TO KNOW Be sure everyone takes a camera—being able to get so close to wildlife is a huge privilege.

For more information: [Lindblad Expeditions](http://LindbladExpeditions), 800-397-3348; expeditions.com.



The Hasler family hits the trails.



Saddle Up

Ready to (horseback) ride? Atlanta-based mom Stacey Hasler tells you why a ranch in Madison, Georgia, has been her family's go-to vacation spot for eight years.

I'll admit it: Our family's horse-crazy! My husband, Jim, and I think there's nothing like being out in the country on your horse. So when we were planning our first big family vacation eight years ago, we wanted a place where you can really ride, not just follow the leader. We chose Southern Cross Guest Ranch because, in addition to its beautiful facilities and gentle horses, it truly is a family destination. Now we spend a week there at least once a year.

PLAY Guests typically ride for two two-hour sessions each day. The equestrians at the ranch make horseback riding a cinch, even for rookies. If you've never ridden before, they'll teach you how to do everything (including gallop) and when you're not riding you can mountain bike, swim or play games. It's definitely a ranch for horse lovers though. When our daughters Sydney, 16, and Jessica, 15, aren't riding, they like to hang out with the young foals.

EAT The kitchen is run by a fantastic cook known as Miss Inge—her food rivals any fancy restaurant I've ever tried. The staff serves three meals a day buffet style in a homey dining hall.

THE TAKEAWAY Sometimes the rush of everyday life gets in the way of family time, so taking our annual vacation is like hitting the reset button. We bond by helping one another get our horses ready every morning and then hitting the trails together.

NEED TO KNOW The ranch is just outside the pretty town of Madison, Georgia. There are great antiques stores and more than 100 big plantation homes nearby (some of which are open to the public).

For more information: [Southern Cross Guest Ranch](http://SouthernCrossGuestRanch), 1670 Bethany Church Rd., Madison, GA 30650; 706-342-8027; souihcross.com.

I've never had the same meal twice (the fruit smoothies at breakfast are the best). We like to sit in the back room and watch the horses run by.

STAY We love the fact that every guest room on the ranch is different. When the girls were younger we stayed in the Red River room (it has a bed shaped like a covered wagon and is closest to the pool). In winter we ask for the Cattle Baron or the Charleston because each has a fireplace. And when we go in the spring we book the Savannah room because its porch offers the best view of the sunset.