

Traveling with Tots

By LIBBY CARTY MCNAMEE

Kiawah Island, S.C.: A happy haven for families



I thought I'd died and gone to Kiawah.

There are so many appealing aspects to this lush and luxurious island it's hard to begin. While this beach, golf, and tennis resort is hands-down one of the most upscale in the country, it's also one of the most family-friendly, refreshingly so. This large barrier island is a modern-day Shangri-La achieving the impossible, a serene and incredibly elegant retreat for families without a hint of stuffiness or pretension.

The Sanctuary Hotel's lobby has more paintings than some museums, breathtaking ocean views, and two curved staircases out of "Gone With the Wind." Even more amazing is that guests can pass through it wearing a tux or kayaking gear and feel equally comfortable. As a matter of fact, my son and I even wore pajamas a few times while getting a cup of coffee on the way to the beach to see the sunrise. The genuine warmth and friendliness of every member of the staff are remarkable. It's like a nice warm slice of Southern hospitality with fried green tomatoes on the side.

After glancing through the activity guide's wide variety of recreation geared to all ages, remind your brood (and yourself) it's okay to simply relax. It is vacation after all! Stroll along any of the 10 miles of pristine beach. Savor the ocean breeze. Watch egrets, osprey, and pelicans fly overhead. You couldn't possibly do all those activities in one trip anyway - or even half of them - which is probably why so many families head there year after year.

The 10,000 acres of this eco-oriented locale are sure to bring out the naturalist in everyone. Nature has been left untouched, and the wildlife is astounding. You can do some family kayaking, explore nature with a photography tour, or enjoy a chartered boat ride. Amazingly enough, the Kiawah River is home to playful pods of Bottlenose dolphins, as well as oysters, fiddler crabs, and fish galore. And let's not forget the numerous alligators in the inland ponds, definitely a noteworthy presence!

The biking options are nothing short of phenomenal with more than 30 miles of paved trails all over the island. Kiawah also offers the unique option of pedaling along the hard-packed beach, an exhilarating ride. The resort has all types of bikes for rent, but our favorite was the add-a-bike. We were able to bike together, literally, because our five-year-old's bike was attached to one of ours. He was thrilled to be a "big boy," and we were thrilled to ride for several miles without any worries.

There are 12 different dining options from haute gourmet to low-key eateries and quaint ice cream shops. Our casual faves were the Town Center Market with its made-to-order casual meals and lovely patio as well as the Cherrywood BBQ and Ale House with its mighty fine pulled pork and local brews. We also enjoyed the exquisite Jasmine Porch, which was just as family-friendly, much to our delight. Also, as you approach the resort, you will pass the charming Freshfields Village with its handy grocery store, shops, and restaurants.

For kids ages 3-11, Kamp Kiawah is a surefire hit and worth the trip for that alone. I'm confident in saying there is no better kids' camp to be found - anywhere. The young counselors are upbeat and enthusiastic, and the kids absolutely revel in the happy vibe. It was definitely the highlight of Sam's trip.

Every day the kids play sports, go to the ocean, and swim in the pool, all while celebrating a special theme, like pirates - aargh! A concerned counselor even called us when Sam's allergies were acting up. Plus it gives you some time to check out their award-winning spa-a-a-a-h.

Once we arrived on the island, we didn't want to leave, even with the option of exquisite Charleston just half an hour away. However, we enjoyed an afternoon there on the harbor overlooking Fort Sumter before heading back to reality in Richmond.

Kiawah is not your cheapest trip to the beach, but you do get the full value of a top-notch vacation. For those on a budget (as most of us are), you could consider going for several nights during the week and stay-cationing the weekend before and after. It's win-win! You miss the weekend traffic snarls on I-95, enjoy the pleasures of this phenomenal resort, and still get

some downtime at home. Another attractive option is to rent a family villa large enough to share with friends and plan a babysitting swap-off. (Now THAT has some potential!) Accommodations run the gamut from hotel rooms to four-room houses and larger. **RPM**

Libby Carty McNamee, a local freelance writer and mother, can't wait to return to Kiawah. In the meantime she's happy to write this article and relive it in her mind. For more information, check out www.KiawahResort.com