

Southwest Adventure: One Week in Arizona with Kids in Tow

By Margot Weiss

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Our last two Christmases have been spent, respectively, stuck in a snowstorm on the way back from Maine and in the emergency room, so when my husband suggested that we avoid family gatherings altogether over Thanksgiving and take our two boys to Arizona, I was thrilled. After a few disagreements (I wanted Tucson; he wanted Monument Valley) we settled on a week-long itinerary intended to cover a great deal of the state but that also allowed for strategic, kid-friendly driving breaks along the way.

As it turned out, November is a great time to visit Arizona. The weather is comfortable during the day and then cools off at night, but best of all, there are no crowds. Not at the Grand Canyon, and not on the roads.

Day 1: Arriving in Phoenix

The downside of spending only a week in Arizona is that you're going to be doing a lot of driving; if you've got restless kids, plan accordingly. I brought my laptop, and my youngest happily watched Dora the Explorer DVDs during most of our drives and on the five hour flight. (Not a peep out of him until the plane stopped on the runway and he started screaming "I DON'T LIKE THIS PLANE! I WANT TO GET OFF!")

Days 1 & 2: Sedona

We planned our trip so that the long drives came earlier in the week and at the end of the week we would have a few days in Scottsdale to relax in the sun. As soon as we arrived in Phoenix we took off in our rental car, heading north on Rte. 17 to Sedona. The drive isn't long, a couple of hours, but it's beautiful. Point out to your kids how the landscape changes as you rise from the deserts around Phoenix to higher, hillier Sedona. They'll be able to see the saguaro cacti giving way to trees as you drive. Make a game of We stayed at a wonderful new hotel in Sedona, the Sedona Rouge, 2250 West Hwy. 89A (tel. 928/203-4111; [www.sedonarouge.com](http://www.sedonarouge.com)). It's not one that I would ordinarily recommend for families, but the staff was so accommodating and the rooms so comfortable, that we had a terrific time. In truth, however, it's the kind of place where you long to be with your partner, curling up in front of the fireplace, snuggling in the incredibly comfortable beds, enjoying the oversize showers (seriously, this shower was bigger than my bathroom at home) or, in my favorite room, number 225, soaking in the Jacuzzi tub with a wonderful view of those fire-red rocks just outside.

The helpful concierge recommended a couple of hikes, and the next day we set out early for Bell Rock, an easy loop (ok, to be honest we didn't make it around the whole thing) that gets you up close to one of those gorgeous rocks. If you're interested in serious hiking, look elsewhere; we did some serious meandering. My older son couldn't resist a bit of spontaneous rock climbing, while the younger treated the sand underfoot as a natural sandbox, picking it up and rolling in it until he looked like a miniature Pigpen, with clouds of fine, red dust puffing out of his clothes as he walked.

In the afternoon we headed to the open-air Out of Africa Wildlife Park, Route 260, three miles west of Interstate 17 at Exit 287 in Camp Verde (tel. 928/567-2840; [www.outofafricapark.com](http://www.outofafricapark.com)), getting there just in time for the feeding (Sun. Wed. & Fri. at 3pm). Following a truck with a galvanized tin bathtub overflowing with various carcasses, we watched the zookeepers as they heaved 20-pound turkeys into the air for eagerly waiting lions, wolves, bears and other assorted carnivores. My favorites were the hyenas, all slouchy hindquarters and scruffy fur. The beasts were well aware of the crowds; one lion neatly caught his turkey, and then struck an attitude with it for photographers, head high, his brownish-black mane waving majestically in the breeze.

While by no means on a par with zoos like the Bronx Zoo, whose strengths lie in their ability to make you feel as though you've entered into the animal's world, the Wildlife Park does offer an unusual opportunity to get close to the primal nature of these hunters (which, face it, is the real reason we all enjoy watching National Geographic specials). Kids under 14 in particular will enjoy this place, but even our 17-year-old was entertained.