

SUMMER FUN



Andrea and Holt Ardrey enjoy scuba diving day trips with their children



A trip to the Houston Zoo is both fun and educational

Summer Staycations with Style

Katy Families Enjoy Vacation Time at Home

Written by Natalie Cook Clark



Children can experience the wonders of nature at the Houston Arboretum



The Houston Zoo's Kipp Aquarium showcases spectacular sea life

The Miller Outdoor Theatre's free, family-friendly shows are sure to please



History comes to life at the Miller Outdoor Theatre



Summer is here, but do not panic if you have yet to nail down your family's summer vacation. More and more Katyites are deciding to stay home and meander around town for summer fun, instead of battling traffic and the stress traveling can sometimes bring. While a staycation is easy on the wallet, this low-key vacation option also makes scheduling family time much easier. Families with multiple children often have to juggle several different summer camps and activities, so a long family vacation may be out of the question. With a variety of local summer activities both in Katy and Houston, families are finding great ways to spend time together close to home.

A Trend with Staying Power

At favorite spots all around town, businesses are taking notice of the visible increase in popularity of summer staycations. "Last summer, we saw an increase in attendance from previous summers," says Alicia Mendez of Forbidden Gardens in Katy.

Many summer camps around the area, including in Houston, are also seeing the benefits of families choosing to stay in town for vacation. "Our summer camp enrollment is above average," says Lori Hutson, director of public relations and volunteers at the Houston Arboretum and Nature Center. "People are spending money, but they are staying closer to home."

With no hotel needed, families can enjoy day trips to many popular Houston hotspots – a trend that is growing by leaps and bounds. "We can attribute our increased attendance last year at least in part to the staycation phenom," says Brian Hill, director of public relations for the Houston Zoo. "In 2009, in fact, we set a record for August attendance."

Sunshine and Simple Pleasures

Many families look for ways to have fun during a staycation, while introducing their children to a unique, educational experience. Forbidden Gardens does just that as it takes you back in time to ancient China. The museum is outdoors, so it can be a lovely spot to enjoy on a beautiful summer day.

With Katy's clear, blue summer skies, even something as simple as just spending time together outside picnicking or throwing a football can create lasting family memories. "Sometimes, just going to the parks can be the best thing," explains Katy mom of three, Stephanie Kennedy. "We are lucky to be in Katy where there are many pocket parks that can sometimes be the best kept secret for an afternoon family outing." Last summer, the Kennedy family got creative and found fun, exciting activities to enjoy around their Katy home. "We wanted to teach our children the importance of giving



Experience life in the prehistoric ages at the Houston Zoo's new dinosaur exhibit



Forbidden Gardens offers a unique glimpse into Chinese history



Fireworks light up the Miller Outdoor Theatre



Unique animals greet visitors around every bend at the Houston Zoo

back to the community, so we made it a game,” Kennedy explains. Each child was instructed to find 20 toys that they no longer played with. This activity alone took a whole day. Once they had their toy bags filled, they went to the local Purple Heart and learned the importance of helping local charities by making a donation. “Yes, at first they grumbled, but in the end they felt really great about the activity, and I feel that this taught them an important life lesson,” Kennedy shares.

Destination Day Trips

Katy families are fortunate to be a short drive from many of Houston’s great destinations that are both entertaining and educational. Katy mom Stephanie Knight and her family have been driving the short distance from Katy to the Houston Arboretum and Nature Center for four years now. The family loves to tour the

trails and take in the scenery. “We are fortunate to be a part of the Houston metropolis,” says Knight. Like Kennedy, Knight is also a fan of helping her children find fun and educational summer activities. At the Houston Arboretum, families can learn together about the importance of nature and conservation. “My children don’t feel like they are at school, but they are being educated,” says Knight. Her 13-year-old daughter is now too old to participate in summer camp, but she has developed such an appreciation for the program that she is now seeking a volunteer position.

If your family is looking for something fun and entertaining to do this summer, be sure to check the schedule for Miller Outdoor Theatre. Houston is the only place that has a fine arts program of this nature that is free all year! “Since it is free, that is exceedingly attractive to a lot of people, but people also like what they see and



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Staycations are a great way to enjoy the lazy days of summer.



See the beauty of native plants and animals up close at the Houston Arboretum

then they are more likely to take a chance on something new,” explains Cissy Segall Davis, managing director for Miller Outdoor Theatre. Families can enjoy the outdoor theater and take in great performances of a wide variety.

You can also check into local groups to find close-to-home vacation destinations that your family can enjoy while meeting other Katy families with like interests. Sea Sports Scuba of Katy helps Katy divers plan local dive trips. Many people are finding that they can participate in a sport they love while staying nearby. Holt and Andrea Ardrey and their boys love to scuba dive and have found ways to pursue that fun near home. “We’ve really made it a family event, which is fun,” says Andrea. There are many popular Texas dive spots within driving distance of Katy. Many locations such as Blue Lagoon in Huntsville and Mammoth Lake in Clute offer great

lake diving and campsites perfect for a short day trip.

Activities Galore

Katy families have it made when planning their summer staycations. From planning at-home activities with your family and taking in a local Katy hotspot to driving to one of Houston’s many destinations and venturing on a quick day trip, you are never without countless options. Whether your family wants to save money or you are pressed for time, deciding on a staycation this summer can help you enjoy the warm weather and the real reason for vacations – quality family time. KM

NATALIE COOK CLARK is happy to be back in her hometown and loves her job as a freelance writer. She lives with her wonderful husband, Stephen, and dog, Oscar. She is expecting her first child this July.

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