

Arizona full of family fun & adventure

've been searching for a family vacation that blends adventure and relaxation within a 3½-hour, non-stop flight from Chicago.

Here's a six-day itinerary to Scottsdale, Mesa and Phoenix for any time of year—though if you visit in the spring, it's a given that you'll have to set aside some time to watch the Chicago Cubs do their spring training.

Day 1

Check into the Hyatt Place Phoenix Mesa (1422 W. Bass Pro Drive, Mesa, phoenixmesa.place.hyatt.com). It's steps from the Chicago Cubs' spring training facility and is ideal for anyone exploring Mesa. The Hyatt has a pool and a large complimentary breakfast daily. We relaxed by the pool for a few hours before driving 15 minutes to an old-school Arizona town called Gilbert, which reminded us of the old western movies. We dined at Joyride Taco House (302 N. Gilbert Road, Gilbert, joyridetacohouse.com), which is a hip Southwestern taco joint (make sure to get the horchata).

Day 2

We checked out the i.d.e.a. Museum (150 W. Pepper Place, Mesa, ideamuseum.org), which is Mesa's children's museum. This museum's focus is on art, and we could have stayed there all day doing creative art projects.

We spent the afternoon at the Arizona Museum of Natural History (53 N. MacDonald, Mesa, azmnh.org) next,

where we learned all about dinosaurs. The best part? Panning for pirate's gold in the museum's courtyard.

For dinner, we visited Organ Stop Pizza (1149 E. Southern Ave., Mesa, organstoppizza.com). We didn't love the pizza, but the music was incredible. Every night, they have a live organist whose organ has nearly 6,000 pipes—and the organist takes requests (Yes! He plays Frozen! And Beethoven!) while the children sing along.



i.d.e.a Museum

Out of Africa Wildlife Park



Arizona Museum of Natural History



Westin Kierland Resort & Spa

Day 3

A half-hour drive from Mesa is Scottsdale where we found our next hotel, the Westin Kierland Resort & Spa (6902 E. Greenway Pkwy., Scottsdale, kierlandresort.com). It's entirely possible to make this your solo destination, as it's got a gigantic pool, a 15-minute-long lazy river, an endless slide, a wave simulator, 10 dining venues, a 27-hole golf club, numerous kids' activities including kids camps where they'll watch your children for you, and a spa.

But there's so much more to see in Scottsdale that simply camping out at the hotel would be a shame.

An alternative to the Westin is the Pointe Hilton Squaw Peak (7677 N. 16th St., squawpeakhilton.com), which has a similar resort feel, but is located in Phoenix (about 15 minutes away from Scottsdale).

Day 4

We drove 1½ hours to the Out of Africa Wildlife Park (3505 W. SR-260, Camp Verde, outofafricapark.com), where they replicate a South African safari experience. You can feed giraffes and camels by hand, feed tigers from tongs and go on a safari where you'll get so close to ostriches and lions and zebras that if you stuck your hands out, they could nibble a few fingers off. It was incredible.

ChicagoParent.com



The Children's Museum of Phoenix

Day 5

On our last full day in Arizona, we lunched at Aunt Chilada's (7330 N. Dreamy Draw Drive, Phoenix, auntchiladas.com). It was a former general store constructed in the 1890s



Aunt Chilada's

from desert stone and railroad ties for the mercury miners passing through the area. Today, it's got some of the best Mexican food in Phoenix.

And then, our children experienced what may have been one of the best children's museums in the country: The Children's Museum of Phoenix (215 N. 7th St., Phoenix, childrensmuseumofphoenix.org). It's a new 48,000-square-foot imagination center. It has tricycles children can ride through a faux-car wash center, plus a pretend flower shop, wood-burning pizza oven, gigantic climbing structure, an art room where kids can paint a huge castle and more.

Day 6

Before heading to the airport, we stopped at the Musical Instrument Museum (4725 E. Mayo Blvd., Phoenix, mim.org), where our girls tried many types of percussion instruments and harps—and we got to see Elvis' outfits, check out a dress that

Taylor Swift wore during a concert and learn about instruments from around the world.

And then our flight left Arizona on time. It was a miraculous vacation.

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