

# Los Angeles & SoCal for Children

In *Tyler on Prime Time* (2003) by Steve Atinsky, a 12-year-old gets caught up in the world of TV production after he is sent to LA to live with his uncle, who works on a sit-com. Written by an actual TV writer.

(Tiny) hands down, Southern California has got to be one of the most child-friendly vacation spots on the planet. The kids will already be begging to go to Disneyland, Universal Studios, SeaWorld and Magic Mountain. Get those over with (you may well enjoy them too) and then introduce them to many other worlds.

SoCal's 'endless summer' of sunny skies and warm temperatures lends itself to outdoor activities too numerous to mention, but here's a start (big breath): swimming, bodysurfing, snorkeling, bicycling, kayaking, hiking (mountain or urban), horseback riding and walking. Many outfitters and tour operators have dedicated kids' tours.

Sometimes no organized activity is even needed. We've seen kids from Washington, DC, thrill at catching their first glimpse of a palm tree, and 11-year-olds with sophisticated palates in bliss over their first heirloom tomatoes at a farmers market or shrimp dumplings at a dim-sum palace.

The upshot: if the kids are having a good time, their parents are having a good time.

## ARE WE THERE YET? What to Bring

Sunscreen. Bring sunscreen.

And bringing sunscreen will remind you to bring hats, bathing suits, flip-flops and goggles. If you like beach umbrellas and sand chairs, pails and shovels, you'll probably want to bring or buy your own; all are readily available at local drugstores. At many beaches, you can rent bicycles of all stripes – check local listings for surf and other water gear.

For mountain outings, bring hiking shoes, plenty of food and water, and your own camping equipment. These can be purchased or rented from markets and outfitters near desert parks (see local listings), but remember that the best time to test out shoes, sleeping bags and such is before you take your trip. Murphy's Law dictates that wearing brand-new hiking shoes on a big hike results in blisters.

Whatever you bring, kids always seem to take more ownership of the process if they have their own minibackpacks to carry their own gear.

For short car trips, snacks, books and toys are always a good idea; for long trips, they're essential. From LA to all but the most remote destinations in our book, travel time should be within about two hours (plus traffic, of course). Drugstores everywhere sell inexpensive books and toys to constantly keep the kids amused. An MP3 player loaded with their favorite music will help control fidgeting. Some families travel with DVD players and many public libraries have extensive kids' collections; see regional chapters for library

### TIP!

Don't pack your schedule too tightly. Traveling with kids always takes longer than expected, and in LA you'll want to build in time for distance, traffic and getting lost.

Also, kids are more likely to be engaged if they can help choose the activities. Offer them choices of sights and activities you think would be suitable.

Throughout this book, we've denoted kid-friendly establishments (sights, activities, hotels and restaurants especially) with the symbol , within the parentheses after each establishment's name.

## JET LAG

Jet lag can be trying for adults, and that's multiplied with children. For example, if you're coming from the eastern US and your kids' bedtime is 8pm at home, that means 5pm in SoCal. To avoid meltdown, you'll probably dispense with dinner, baths, stories and 'Mooooomyyyyyy...!' before most locals sit down for dinner. See p74 for info on babysitting services.

It may also mean waking up three hours earlier. If you're at a hotel, check the hours of nearby restaurants or prepare early-morning snacks – many hotels, particularly in outlying areas, have refrigerators just for this purpose.

listings and inquire directly as to lending requirements (some lend only to local residents).

Baby food, infant formulas, soy and cow's milk, disposable diapers (nappies) and other necessities are all widely available in drugstores and supermarkets. Breast-feeding in public is legal, although most women are discreet about it. Public toilets – in airports, stores, shopping malls, cinemas etc – usually have diaper-changing tables.

Important note: always check the weather before setting out. Winter (basically November to March) can be rainy and temperatures unpredictable. All but the heartiest, wet-suited surfers avoid the beach then. Desert winter nights can be near freezing, and even clear winter days won't necessarily be swimming weather.

Still bring the sunscreen though.

## Flying

Airlines usually allow infants (up to the age of two) to fly for free, while older children requiring a seat of their own may qualify for reduced fares. You may want to bring your child's passport or birth certificate copy as proof of age. Generally good weather means good on-time performance at SoCal airports, but the same cannot necessarily be said for other airports on your route, so bring plenty of amusements and snacks. If traveling from overseas, order special kids' meals in advance.

Most airlines 'preboard' passengers traveling with small children. On Southwest Airlines (which has no assigned seating) you can snag seats together and other passengers tend to avoid sitting near the little ones.

## Driving

California law requires all passengers in private cars to wear seat belts, and children under the age of six or weighing less than 60lbs must be restrained in a child-safety or booster seat. If you're not traveling with your own car seats, most car-rental firms rent them for about \$5 per day, but it is essential that you book them in advance.

See What to Bring (opposite) for tips on keeping the kids amused while on the road. Rest stops on SoCal freeways are few and far between, and we wouldn't recommend gas-station rest rooms for bathroom breaks as maintenance tends to be shoddy. However, you're never very far from a shopping mall, which generally have well-kept rest rooms.

## NIGHT-NIGHT

Hotels and motels commonly have rooms with two double beds or a double and a sofa bed. For families who prefer more space, many properties have 'adjoining' rooms (two rooms attached via an internal door). Alternatively, one- or two-bedroom suites may end up being more economical. Most places provide rollaway beds, usually for a small extra charge.

A good general resource is [www.travelwithyourkids.com](http://www.travelwithyourkids.com), which has advice on how to prepare for a trip and handle oneself on the road, although there's nothing specific to SoCal.

Having one parent travel in the back seat while the other drives can let you keep the kids amused with books and games and eliminate the 'He crossed the *li-i-i-ine!*' dilemma.

The Traveling Baby Company (☎ 800-304-4866; [www.travelingbabyco.com](http://www.travelingbabyco.com)) rents equipment, with delivery to Los Angeles, Ventura, Santa Barbara, Orange and San Diego Counties. Figure on \$8/35 per day/week for a Pack 'n' Play or car seat; weekly multiequipment packages are available from \$109.

Whichever room type you want, request it on booking. If you wait until you arrive, you might not get what you want.

Often larger chain hotels offer 'kids stay free' promotions; others include breakfast in the rates. Inquire about these promotions when booking. Some smaller B&Bs don't welcome children.

Some resort hotels, such as Loews Coronado Bay Resort and the Manchester Grand Hyatt in San Diego, offer activity programs for kids, particularly during summer. Fees can be cheaper than babysitting and everyone may enjoy the change of pace.

### Babysitting

If you need a four-hour vacation from your kids and aren't lucky enough to have family or friends nearby in SoCal, here's a list of babysitting services in Los Angeles; if you're outside of LA, ask at your hotel for a recommendation. Rates may fluctuate based on factors such as the number of children and whether the kids have a cold or there's driving involved. Most services prefer at least 24 hours' advance notice.

**Babysitters Agency of West LA** (☎ 310-306-5437; per hr from \$15; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) In business for half a century (formerly Santa Monica Babysitters). Four-hour booking minimum Sunday to Friday, and a five-hour minimum Saturdays.

**Babysitters Guild** (☎ 310-837-1800; per hr \$10-16, plus \$6 transportation fee; 🕒 10:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) The oldest and largest agency in the city (since the 1940s). All sitters are screened, over 21 and fluent in English. Four-hour booking minimum (five hours on Saturdays).

**Buckingham Nannies** (☎ 310-247-1877, 800-393-4844; www.buckinghamnannies.com; per hr \$12-25; 🕒 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri) Uses fully qualified nannies with at least two years' experience. In addition to hourly fees, there's a \$75/150 registration fee (valid three months/one year) and a \$25 daily fee.

### WHINING & DINING

Most SoCal restaurants – not just fast-food places – are easygoing with kids. A good measure is the noise level: the louder it is, the more kid-friendly it will be. Casual eateries in well-trafficked neighborhoods typically have high chairs available and many have specific children's menus, sometimes printed on a take-home coloring book or placemat – our favorite places provide crayons too. Even restaurants without kids' menus can usually whip up something your children will call yummy. Generally, earlier (before 6pm) is better for families with young ones.

If your server has gone to a lot of extra effort on your behalf, a generous tip is definitely in order (20% or more). This will also help endear you to the server for your next visit – get his or her name if you can, and even mention to the manager that they went above and beyond.

Theme parks have dozens of ways to get the kids hopped-up on sugar and salt at expensive prices, and many don't permit picnics or outside food to be brought in. One way to get around this: carry a cooler in the car and have a picnic in the parking lot (though be sure to get a hand-stamp for reentry).

One place kids are generally *unwelcome* is high-end restaurants. Unless the children are exceptionally well behaved, properly dressed and old enough to appreciate the meal, neither the staff nor other diners are likely to be charmed. Think of yourselves too: meals in such places last two hours or more – too long to expect all except the most remarkable little ones to sit without squirming or screaming, especially if it's late and especially if they're jet-lagged.

If all else fails, local supermarket chains like Trader Joe's and Gelson's have pleasing, wholesome takeout.

For information on everything from traveling with kids to how to store their artwork, www.peachheadfamilies.com is a highly regarded local discussion group website.

The website of *LA Parent* (<http://losangeles.parenthood.com>) includes a calendar of events and listings. The print version of this monthly magazine is distributed free in child-oriented places throughout town (the website lists locations).

### LOS ANGELES

America's second-largest city has plenty to please its smaller visitors. This will get you started; see also p157 and neighborhoods listings for more information.

Kids old enough to appreciate movies will love Universal Studios Hollywood (p145); adjacent Universal CityWalk makes a colorful meal stop. Children also thrill at getting their picture taken beside the star of their favorite star on Hollywood Blvd; the hand-, foot- and wand-prints of the young stars of the Harry Potter movies were the latest additions to Grauman's Chinese Theater (p196) when we went to press. For an extra thrill (and no parking fees or traffic) reach both by LA's subway line.

Amusements in mountainous Griffith Park (p143) include the landmark Griffith Observatory, a merry-go-round and Travel Town for younger tykes. The zoo (p143) is popular, though it can't compare to San Diego's. Take more athletic kids hiking for fabulous views across the city and the Hollywood Sign.

Downtown's ethnic neighborhoods allow you to take little sophisticates 'overseas' with dramatic savings on airfares. In Chinatown's Central Plaza (p134), pick up touristy knickknacks or make a wish in a fountain. Stop nearby at Empress Pavilion (p185) for dim sum or a streetside shop for boba tea (with black 'pearls' of tapioca). Mexican-themed Olvera St (p133), LA's oldest street, mixes kitsch with quality. Little Tokyo (p138) makes for strolling and snacking; older kids can learn about the Japanese-American experience at the Japanese American National Museum.

In Exposition Park, the California Science Center (p120) is both great and free, and the Natural History Museum (p119) is, among other things, where Peter Parker (aka Spiderman) was first bitten. To see the cast of *Ice Age* (albeit in their former real-life selves), visit the Page Museum at the La Brea Tar Pits (p110). Parents also lavish praise on the nearby Zimmer Museum (p157) and the new Noah's Ark installation at the Skirball Cultural Center (p118).

For do-it-yourself fun, there are parks in cities around the county, but Pasadena and Santa Monica have some of the best. In Pasadena, start with Kidspace (p157), while Santa Monica Pier (p124) is justifiably famous. See local library listings for story hours and children's collections.

### ORANGE COUNTY

By golly, they're right: it *is* a small world after all. There's more than just Disneyland (p230) to keep kids busy and engaged. Knott's Berry Farm (p249) is more homegrown and lower-key, where Charlie Brown and Lucy sub for Mickey and Minnie; it's a must for older kids during October's nighttime Halloween Haunt.

If your kids are shoppers, OC will tempt them. The Block at Orange (p250) is a contempo-cool mall with its own skateboard park, while in Costa Mesa, the Lab (p269) calls itself an 'antimall,' with vintage clothing and contemporary art exhibits. Kids with exotic tastes will enjoy the shopping and restaurants in Little Saigon (p251).

*Hungry? Los Angeles Family* (2006), edited by Jennifer Chang, steers you to the neighborhood restaurants throughout this vast metropolis – from bistros to dives – that won't torture grown-ups' sensibilities or palates.

For family listings in the *Los Angeles Times*, check out [www.calendarlive.com/family](http://www.calendarlive.com/family). Events for children and families are also listed in the paper's Calendar section in the Thursday and (especially) Sunday editions.

*Fun with the Family: Southern California* (2007) by Laura Kath and Pamela Joy Brice features hundreds of ideas for day trips across the Southland.

### GETTING IN

Children receive a wide range of discounts for everything from museum admissions to bus fares and motel stays. The definition of a 'child' varies – in some places anyone under 18 is eligible, while others put the cut-off at age six. Note that many amusement park rides have minimum height requirements.