



PROP STYLING BY LAURIE RABB

THE **GIFT** OF TRAVEL

There are must-have gifts and then there are must-have *experiences*. Consider these destinations the Tickle Me Elmos of travel: hot spots and cool activities that'll please the pickiest people on your list, including you.

BY KAREN CATCHPOLE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRAEME BOYLE & LAURA GARDNER



Little ham

WHAT An *American Idol* audition (OMG!)

WHERE Orlando, Florida

WHEN Starting in February

WHY Um, have you *met* your child? The unforgettable day starts with voice lessons and ends with a singing debut in front of a live audience; she'll be all dolled up thanks to hair and makeup. Simon Cowell is nowhere to be seen (thank goodness—the thought of stage moms must've scared him away). But almost everything else about **Disney's Hollywood Studios'** newest attraction (1500 E. Buena Vista Drive, 407-934-7639; admission \$75, \$63 for children under 10, no extra charge for audition experience) is the same as *American Idol*, including the stage—



an exact replica of what you see on television. Disney World producers act as judges, and top performers advance to a nighttime finale. The grand prize winner of the day gets a guaranteed audition reservation for the real *American Idol*. That means no line—though it won't prevent anyone from getting stage fright.

while in town

> **Chow down** on tasty Chinese food at Ming Court (9188 International Drive, 407-351-9988; kids' meals from \$7). You may be tempted to

rockstar sibling

WHAT Two music-filled days

WHERE Asheville, North Carolina

WHEN December 12 and 13

WHY All music fans and their mothers hit up summertime music festivals, and why not? They happen practically every weekend. A much cooler idea: Christmas Jam (xmasjam.com, \$55 per night), which is celebrating its 20th anniversary with more than seven hours of music each night from dozens of artists, including the Allman Brothers Band and Travis Tritt. Profits are donated to local Habitat for Humanity projects. The festival has raised more than \$650,000—enough to build 12 homes. There's even a street in town named after concert creator and Gov't Mule guitarist and vocalist Warren Haynes.



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while in town

> **Eat a Southern breakfast** of biscuits and gravy at **Early Girl Eatery** (8 Wall St., 828-259-9292; entrées from \$8). Then come back to this comfy café for more local fare, like a grilled pimento cheese sandwich for lunch

or sweet potato black bean cakes and fried green tomatoes for dinner.

> **Give your ears a break** at daytime festival events (xmasjam.com), which include art exhibits featuring concert posters and rock-and-roll photography.

> **Crash** in one of 33 individually decorated rooms and suites at the **Haywood Park Hotel** (One Battery Park Ave., haywoodpark.com, 800-228-2522; doubles from \$229), a three-minute walk from the concert venue. Keep your eyes peeled—Christmas Jam musicians are known to stay here.

wrap this A **Trunk tee** emblazoned with any Beatles album cover (bloomingdales.com, \$62), part of a Bloomingdales holiday homage to the Fab Four.



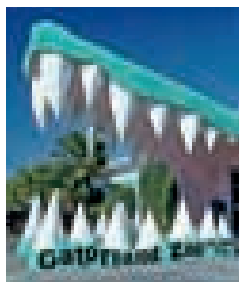


order off the kids' menu, which offers packaged boxes full of vegetable lo mein, rice, a fortune cookie and an entrée like barbecue pork or chicken tenders.

➤ **Sleep over** at the kid-centric **Holiday**

Inn Main Gate East (5711 W. Highway 192, Kissimmee, holidayinnme.com, 407-396-4222; doubles from \$79). Your child can sleep on a bunk bed, watch the Disney Channel on the big screen in the theater room, or play pinball and air hockey in the game room. Plus, children under 12 eat free, and the hotel operates a free shuttle to the main Disney parks.

➤ **Get back on stage** by wrestling an alligator at **Gatorland** (14501 S. Orange Blossom Trail, 800-393-5297; admission \$23, \$15 for children ages 3-12, free for ages 3 and



under). Enter the 60-year-old park through the signature gator mouth and walk straight to the Rookie Wrestlin' show, in which adults and kids can safely sit on the back

of a real live alligator, under the watchful eye of an adult wrangler.

Wrap this The handheld **Celestron SkyScout personal planetarium** (special holiday price \$199, myskyscout.com), for your budding star. Point it at the sky and learn what constellation or planet you're looking at, along with scientific data and historical facts. Warning: Once you try for yourself, you might steal it from your kid.

THE STORY BEHIND THIS STORY:

Rachael's all about giving away experiences. Take it from her husband!

"Rachael's family gave me a present I can't wait to use: a gift certificate to **Skip Barber Racing School** (multiple locations, skipbarber.com, 866-932-1949; programs from \$449). This is every red-blooded male's dream. You learn accident avoidance and threshold-breaking in a controlled environment, so when you're out on the road you can handle dangerous situations without panicking. You also get to drive a superfast, cool car—without worrying about getting a speeding ticket! This is the perfect gift for those loved ones who have the need for speed!"

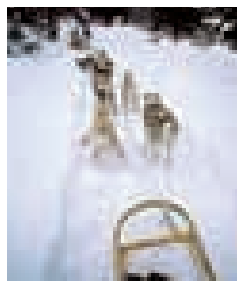
—John Cusimano

for
my

OUTDOORSY BEAU

WHAT Nonstop winter action
WHERE Jackson Hole, Wyoming
WHEN The last week in January

WHY Action-packed Jackson goes buck wild at the end of January. There's the kickoff of the largest dogsled race in the West (wyomingstagespot.org; free, January 30–February 7), and the four-day Winter Carnival (jacksonholewintercarnival.com; January 29–February 1), a huge outdoor party with bonfires, fireworks, music, a chili supper, a beer tasting, snow-tubing, ski clinics and a wildlife-themed film festival. Make your base camp at the butte-top **Spring Creek Ranch** (1800 Spirit Dance Road, springcreekranch.com, 800-443-6139; doubles from \$170 per night with a four-night minimum).



The price includes two lift tickets for three days of skiing at **Jackson Hole Mountain Resort**.

The concierge can also arrange more adventures, like wildlife safaris, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, heli-skiing, ice-skating or even dogsledding. You know, in case the race was inspirational.

while in town

➤ **Layer up** at **Teton Mountaineering** (170 N. Cache St., 307-733-3595), a two-story

emporium bursting with all the fairly priced clothing and gear you'll need on the mountain.

➤ **Sip some wine** at **Spring Creek Ranch's** bar; you can choose from a dozen glasses for under \$10. You'll be 1,000 feet above Jackson, and the view shows off the stunning Grand Tetons.

➤ **Dine** at **Masa Sushi** (3345 W. Village Drive, Teton Village, 307-732-2962; rolls from \$5), where chef Masa Kitami, a Tokyo native, and his wife, Kay, serve fish so fresh, you'd never know you were landlocked.

Wrap this An **America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Recreation Lands Annual Pass** (\$80, nps.gov), which gets the entire car, up to four people, into every national park in the country for a year.





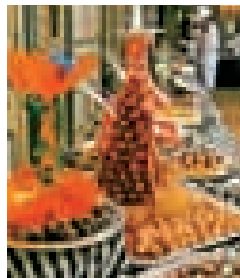
for my foodie folks

WHAT A wine-me, dine-me weekend

WHERE Colorado Springs

WHEN January 30-February 1

WHY People come for the food—and they're not disappointed. The **Broadmoor Hotel** (1 Lake Ave., broadmoor.com, 866-837-9520) is home to Colorado's only AAA Five-Diamond restaurant and is marking its 90th birthday with a "Salute to Escoffier" weekend (\$898 double occupancy for two nights, includes



entrance for two to welcome reception, cooking demo, wine seminar, dinner and brunch), named for the legendary French chef. Hotel head bartender Robert Leavey will show your parents how

to whip up a Smashing Pumpkin cocktail, made with whiskey and fresh pumpkin, and executive pastry chef Rémy Fünrock will demonstrate how to make a flaky dessert like crêpes suzette—an easy task for this member of the World Pastry Cup Team USA. (We're not making that up.) And of course,

they'll eat—at the cocktail reception and brunch, for starters. But the main attraction—what Escoffier might have called the *pièce de résistance*—is Saturday's buffet dinner, where 200 people will gorge themselves on dishes like veal cheeks with risotto and venison prosciutto. Each of the five courses is served in a different dining room, with French wine and champagne pairings and live music. When purchasing, tell the staff that you read *Every Day with Rachael Ray*, and your folks will receive complimentary entry to Saturday's wine lunch, which would otherwise cost them \$45 each. Good deal, but the rest of the package is a definite splurge: Ask your siblings to chip in.

while in town

> **Take a leisurely drive** through hundreds of towering sandstone formations in the divinely named **Garden of the Gods** (1805 N. 30th St., 719-634-6666; free, 5 a.m. to 9 p.m.).



> **Feel like an ant** while staring up at the **Cadet Chapel** (2346 Academy Drive, 719-333-2025; free, Monday to

DON'T LEAVE YOURSELF OFF THE LIST!

These destinations have your name written all over them, whether you need...

SLEEP

You deserve a visit to New York City's **Yelo** for the 20/20 treatment (\$65). It combines 20 minutes of reflexology, a 20-minute power nap and aromatherapy, all in an ambient-lit room with reclining chairs specially designed to slow your heart rate, which helps you sleep. (315 W. 57th St., yelonyc.com, 212-245-8235)

WINE

You deserve an affordable getaway among the vines in Paso Robles, an easier, breezier alternative to Napa that's smack between San Francisco and Los Angeles. For \$269, you'll get a night at the century-old **Paso Robles Inn**, breakfast for two, a private wine lesson and a day of local wine-tasting, including luxury transportation and lunch for two. Take advantage of special reduced-price menus during Restaurant Month in January. (1103 Spring St., pasoroblesinn.com, 800-676-1713)

PAMPERING

You deserve a day at Las Vegas' **Qua Baths and Spa**, which offers a \$45 day pass—pricier than most, but worth it. There are Roman-style baths at three different temperatures and an ice room with man-made falling snow. End the day with a mug of collagen-boosting white peach tea—served by a tea sommelier, of course—and a rinse beneath four showerheads. (Caesars Palace, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S., quabathsandspa.com, 866-782-0655; day pass from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.)

Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., weekday guided tours every half-hour, made of 17 distinctive spires shooting 150 feet into the air.

> **Day-trip it to Cripple Creek.** Drive 45 miles southwest and you'll find a good ol' Wild West gold-mining town; descend 1,000 feet to tour an abandoned mine. Or just gamble in one of the town's cowboy-themed casinos.

Wrap this The latest edition of Jane and Michael Stern's iconic **Roadfood** (\$22, Broadway), which lists more than 700 of the country's best places to eat, both in big cities and remote corners. Your folks will eat right no matter where they go.



win it! Treat yourself to a "staycation." One lucky winner will win an Aveeno spa package, including Aveeno products, a down bathrobe, slippers, a footbath and body oils, valued at a total of more than \$500. Enter to win at rachaelraymag.com/giveaway. See page 18 for rules.