

HOT DESTINATIONS TO ESCAPE THE WINTER CHILL

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ORLANDO, Fla.

BY KATHRYN DORRELL



A trip to Florida's theme parks is a dream vacation for many Canadian families. But I'm a nature girl who avoids line-ups, and even kiddie rides render me green and nauseous for days. So I was a bit amused to find myself cuing up with my daughters for a photo with Spiderman at Universal Studios in Orlando last May.

I had recently experienced that bitter-sweet epiphany that eventually

strikes every working mom: time was flying by and I needed to savour these golden years. At ages six and nine, Sophie and Olivia were at that perfect stage: old enough to travel with ease and still eager to hang out with mom. I seized the moment, and we escaped on a four-day girls' getaway where the only task on my to-do list was spending some precious time with my daughters. (If only everyday could be so simple!)

There are plenty of cheap places to stay in Orlando but I wanted to feel spoiled and not spend our limited time

on long treks to the parks. While the Portofino Bay Hotel was a splurge it worked well for us. It has a fantastic pool, a serene, old-world feel that was a lovely respite from the busy parks, and we could take a scenic water shuttle to Universal Studios.

What really helped make the trip work for all of us was the mix of theme park activities and excursions to lesser-known attractions in Orlando. We hit the parks in the mornings before it got too hot and Olivia was game to try out all the wild rides. One of our most enjoyable experiences was an hour at a charming playground at Disney Hollywood Studios based on the movie *Bug's Life*, where we ambled about like insects, crawling through oversized tin cans and dodging spurts of water.

Two of our treks outside the parks included a visit to Wonder Works, an interactive science museum where we dipped our hands in water, which was the temperature of the ocean the night the Titanic sank, and Farris and Foster's chocolate factory, where we made chocolates on a conveyor belt just like in the episode of "I Love Lucy." These relaxing afternoon outings helped prevent Sophie and Olivia from becoming exhausted, and I was pleased that they liked them as much as the theme parks.

While I did survive several rides with the kids (even two roller coasters, albet for the under 10 set) the most memorable was gliding through the wetlands of central Florida on an airboat, catching a glimpse of baby alligators, osprey and an assortment of other wildlife. Olivia, Sophie and I decided as soon as the experience was over that it will be high up on our list of things to do if we ever make it back to Orlando.

If you go:

> Boggycreek Airboat Rides:

www.bcairboats.com

> **SeaWorld:** try out the educational tours such as the Arctic Expedition.

> **Disney Hollywood Studios:** watch for the expansive Harry Potter component to the park opening in late 2009.



ADVENTURE
Getaway

BELIZE

BY PAULINE ANDERSON

The Lodge at Chaa Creek – a two-hour car ride from Belize City – is an ideal spot to experience the country's lush rain forests, Mayan culture and breathtaking coral reefs. I stayed in a quaint thatch-roofed cabana with an outdoor private shower (and, thankfully, no television, telephone or computer). I was sure to rise early for the best chance of spotting some of Belize's brilliantly-coloured birds, including parrots and toucons.

There is plenty to do on this 365-acre natural reserve: programs that teach young kids the importance of protecting fragile environments; mountain biking; horseback riding; a butterfly museum; and a canoe or exhilarating tube ride down the Macal River. There is also a medicine trail where visitors can learn about the health-enhancing properties of many local plants.

From my base at Chaa Creek, I took a day trip to the 2,000-year-old Mayan ruin of Xunantunich (which means Stone Lady) and climbed to the top of the highest temple – 130 feet above the main plaza – to absorb the breathtaking view



of the Cayo district below. Another day, I explored the botanical gardens at nearby duPlooy's Jungle Lodge.

A favourite excursion was a short plane ride to one of the many coastal Cayes (Ambergris Caye has the lovely town of San Pedro), where you can scuba dive or snorkel off one of the best coral reefs in the world. Under brilliant blue skies and in crystal clear waters, I discovered an absolutely stunning underwater universe. Before leaving the caye, I stretched out on the beach and drank in more of Belize's abundant sun, sand and sea to take home with me.

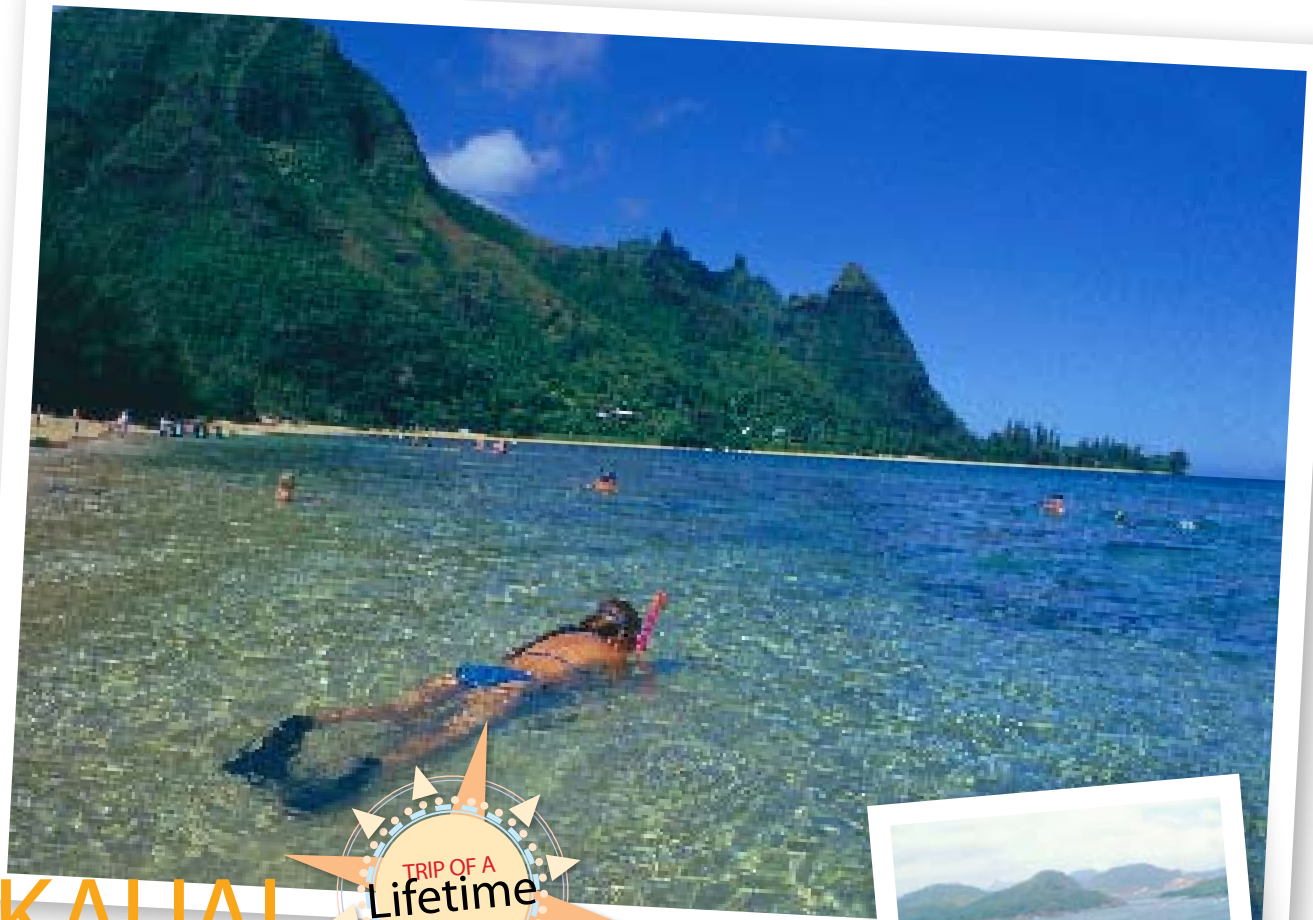
If you go:

> Lodge at Chaa Creek:

www.chaacreek.com.

> Belize Tourist Bureau:

www.travelbelize.org/cult.html



KAUAI

BY DOUG O'NEILL

The pilot's friendly banter, just audible over the whirl of the helicopter's propeller, guided passengers' eyes to the panoramic island views of K'aua'i below. The rugged crags and cavernous valley gorges of the 3,000-foot deep Waimea Canyon revealed themselves in a slow-motion kaleidoscopic release as our aircraft executed a series of graceful 360-degree rotations over what has long been dubbed "The Grand Canyon of the Pacific." We were also rewarded with a birds-eye view of the long-dormant Olokele volcano before soaring offshore above the Pacific ocean, where we took in the full breadth of the Na Pali Coast.

Known as the Garden Isle, Kaua'i is the northernmost of the main Hawaiian islands; an oasis of lush vegetation dotted with bridges and winding roads connecting some of the world's most isolated beaches. It's also a mountainous island, best navigated by a combination of air, land and water

transport. A family outing to Kipu Falls includes all three means of travel: visitors kayak three kilometres up the Hule'ia River, disembark for a short hike to find themselves, at trails end, airborne on a zip-line adventure.

A popular form of water travel on K'aua'i is a riverboat cruise up the Wailua River to the Fern Grotto, a historic cave cloaked in over-sized ferns and perpetual mist. For a combination wind-and-water adventure, visitors can travel with Trevor Cabell and Travis Bonnel on their beloved Kuupaaloo, a 45-foot traditional Hawaiian sailing canoe. Though you'll be drenched by ocean spray, up-close encounters with dolphins make it worth your while.

Another way to appreciate the nearly-inaccessible (by ground) and beautiful 20-kilometre stretch of Na Pali coast is by water. Day trips with Capt. Andy's Sailing Adventures pretty much guarantee you'll see sheer cliffs and volcanic rock along the picturesque coast line – not to mention a few humpback



whales. A bonus: most boats drop anchor at a tropical reef where snorkelling (for beginners to advance) becomes your passport to underwater ecosystems.

Hiking trails on the island run the gamut from the relatively easy three-kilometre Kuilau trail, which offers romantic views of mist-topped Mount Wai'ale'ale in the distance, to the more challenging 15-kilometre Kalalau Trail. It's just one more way of getting around K'aua'i Island. Aloha!

If you go:

- > www.napali.com
- > <http://www.islandhelicopters.com>
- > www.islandsailskauai.com
- > www.outfitterskauai.com



ROATÁN

BY DONNA PARIS

We knew what we didn't want for our girlfriends' getaway: no packed agenda, shopping-till-we-drop

or day-long eating sessions at a buffet. My friend and travelling companion, Miriam, was keen on an eco escape: not hard-core, but simply a place where people aren't checking their PDAs mid conversation and where you can drink your morning coffee while dunking your feet in saltwater. That's how we ended up in Roatán, an island off the coast of Honduras in Central America.

Thirty-five miles long and about two three miles wide, the island has only one main road and no street lights. We hired Freddie, a local cab driver, to take us all over the island, where we were awed by sandy beaches, clear water, lush jungle and a coral reef (designated a UNESCO World Heritage site), second largest only to one in Australia. Because Roatán is a small island, you can't hide much, so we saw the other side of life here, too, including some of the small shacks that people call home.

We stayed at two places, both environmentally friendly, but with different approaches. Located on West Bay beach, Infinity Bay is Roatán's newest development. (It was still under



construction when we were there.) The resort helps protect the coral reef just offshore by treating sewage before it goes in the water, and, in the future, water will be heated by solar panels.

Midweek, we headed to Anthony's Key Resort to a cabin on the water's edge with no TV, phone, Internet or air conditioning - just fans and floor-to-ceiling louvered screens that take advantage of ocean breezes. Family owned, the resort caters to divers, but the snorkelling is out of this world, and the employees are some of the friendliest people I've ever met. Bonus: Kids can enjoy island field trips, a dolphin camp, and earn their junior scuba diver certification. In all, Roatán is a beautiful place in the sun. And even now, when I buy my morning coffee, I'm tempted to order it to go - with an ocean view.

If you go:

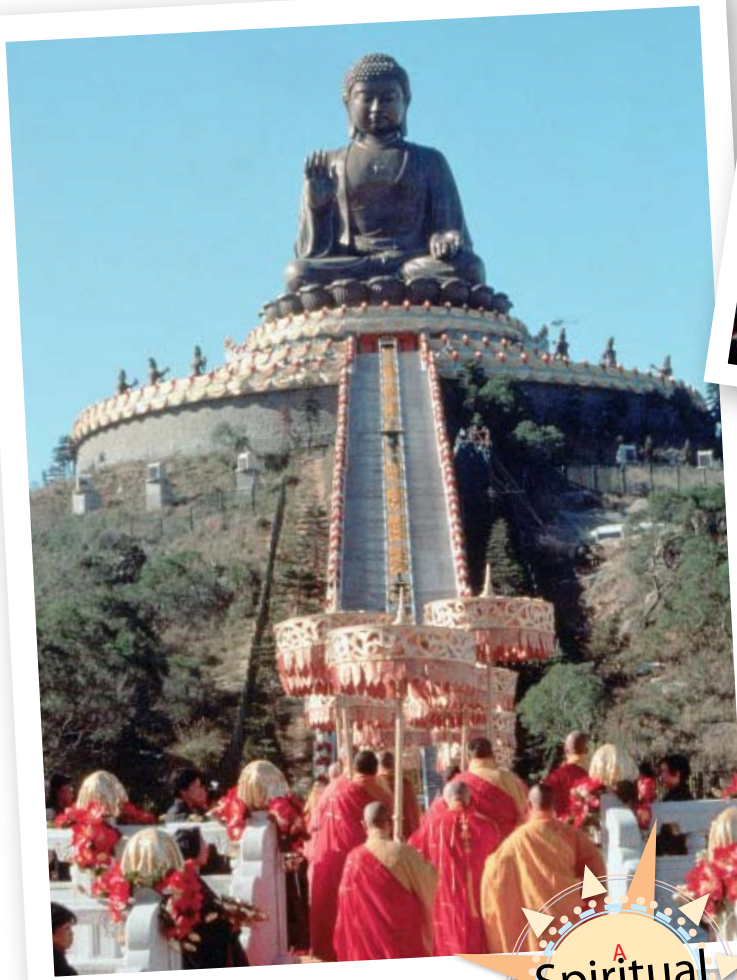
- > Infinity Bay Resort, www.infinitybay.com
- > Anthony's Key Resort, www.anthonyskey.com
- > www.honduras.com

7 WAYS To Land Great Online Travel Deals

Thousands of winter-weary Canadians will scour the web this winter in search of sunny getaways. Here's how to get a real steal.

1. Spur-of-the-moment savings require an open mind. "You have to be super flexible," says Allison Eaton, communications manager with Flight Centre North America, one of Canada's largest travel agencies. How so? Let the dollars decide your destination.
2. Search budget airlines, which often offer great prices.
3. If you have your heart set on a special destination, Eaton says book ahead. Many websites offer great fares, but the price tends to rise as the departure date nears.
4. If it's convenient, fly from the nearest American airport. It can be a lot cheaper - especially to American destinations.
5. You may really want to get away in January but if you wait until the off-season, you might save enough to go again next year.
6. Make sure you buy your ticket outright. If you're just reserving the flight, the fuel surcharge may go up, even if the ticket price doesn't.
7. Be sure that the price you see online or in a travel catalogue is the price you pay. If fees, taxes and fuel surcharges are tagged on, you could end up shelling out more than double what you were expecting. Booking with a registered agent should ensure taxes and fees are included in the advertised price. For example, the Travel Industry Council of Ontario (TICO) symbol on a website indicates it is reputable

- James Doyle



A
Spiritual
ESCAPE

HONG KONG

BY DOUG O'NEILL

I had a curious epiphany one morning last May while flipping through the complimentary reading material as I breakfasted at the Shangri-La Kowloon Hotel overlooking Hong Kong's busy Victoria harbour. A slick glossy magazine informed me that visitors to Hong Kong with enough dough could have their pick that month of live performances by Elton John, James Blunt, Kenny G, and the stage-stomping "We Will Rock You." Not too shabby offerings, indeed. Then I reached for the South China Morning Post whose front page featured a photograph of Buddhist monks taking part in a public bathing ritual to mark Buddha's birthday. It hit me: everywhere you go Hong Kong, despite the hustle and bustle of the Tsim Sha

Tsui shopping district, the clamor of the Star Ferries, container ships, junks and sampans jockeying for space in the harbour, and the seemingly tireless hawkers in the nighttime Temple Market, the spiritual side of Hong Kong is never far away. In a place teeming with cosmopolitan diversions and dominated by skyscrapers, it's surprisingly easy to find a soulful escape; a pocket of calm.

Temples are plentiful throughout Hong Kong, and are often just a few metres away from the street chaos you wish to escape (or the subtropical heat, depending on the season). Man Mo Temple, at the intersection of Ladder Street and Hollywood Road, is one of the oldest and most beautiful and dates back to the 1840s. Coils of incense burn

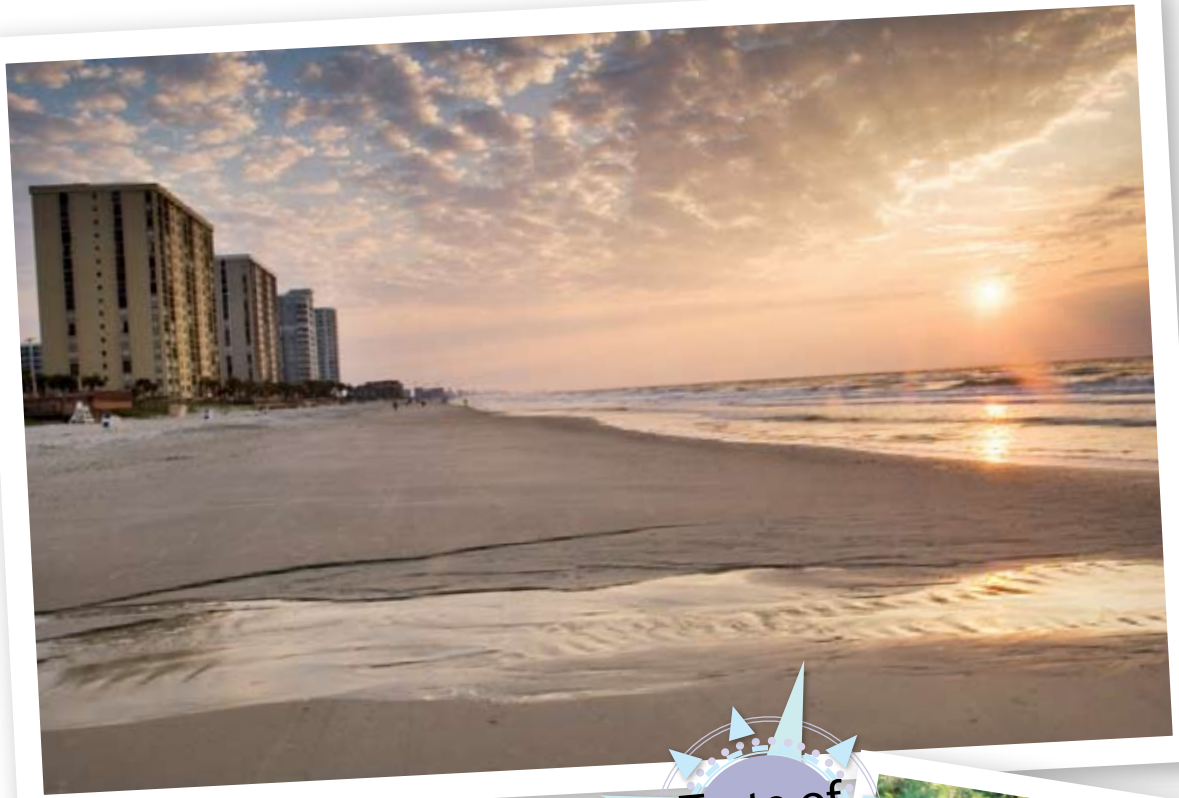
all day long in honor of Man, the god of literature, and Mo, the god of war. Wong Tai Sin Temple, in Kowloon's Wong Tai Sin district, is renowned for its legion of fortune-tellers. It's named after the Chinese deity who is believed to punish evils, heal the wounded, and rescue the dying. While there, soul-seekers can meditate awhile in the peaceful Good Wish Garden, modeled after the manicured grounds in Beijing's summer palace.

Even dining out in Hong Kong can offer soulful solace. In the Shangri-La Kowloon where I stayed, guests can indulge in the decadent chocolate fountain in the hotel's Café Kool, or sit down to a traditional Cantonese feast in the award-winning Shang Palace. But for a venue a little more overtly spiritual, plan on a vegetarian lunch at the Chi Lin Nunnery. The Buddhist nunnery, built with imported Canadian Yellow Cedar, echoes Tang Dynasty architecture, and its extensive gardens, which contain a Zen-style lotus pond rock garden, are ideal for a postprandial stroll to reflect or admire the statues of Buddhist gods.

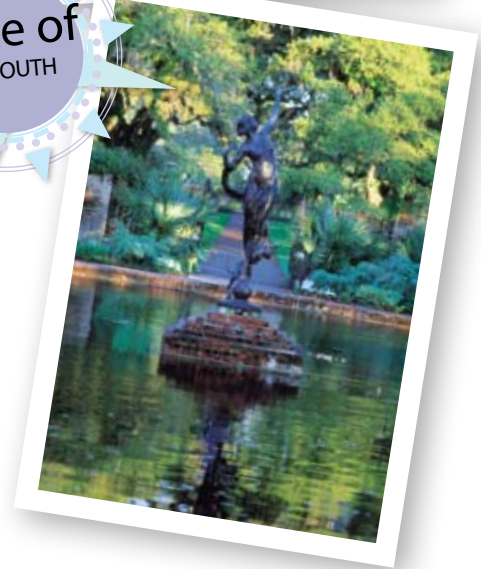
For a truly pastoral, rural escape, consider a 30-minute ferry ride to Lantau Island, where you can swim at Cheung Sha Beach, explore the rustic Tai O fishing village, visit with the monks at Po Lin Monastery and admire the giant Buddha, before walking the Wisdom Path. It's all good for the soul.

If you go:

- > www.discoverhongkong.com
- > www.cathaypacific.com/ca
- > <http://www.shangri-la.com/en/property/hongkong/kowloonshangrila>



Taste of
THE SOUTH



MYRTLE BEACH

BY TINA ANSON MINE

In many provinces, March is a bleak time of quiet desperation – snowstorms and steel-grey skies make you want to flee for warmer climes. So this year, I headed down to the temperate sands of Myrtle Beach, SC, for the Canadian-American Days festivities and an early taste of spring.

On the beach, I ditched my shoes, revelling in the warm, gritty embrace of the sand on my toes. Later, I wandered along the strip of waterfront hotels, many of them pastel brick-and-block phantasms of mid-century modern cool. The street wound down from luxurious to tatty, ending in a row of grizzled tattoo shops and a greasy spoon that served an amazing cornmeal-crust catfish sandwich.

My days were filled with touristy attractions – everything from the shiny new Hard Rock Park to a classic car show to the stunning Ripley's Aquarium. But my favourite sites were older, laden with history and farther afield, in Conway and Litchfield and on

Pawleys Island. Brookgreen Gardens was an oasis of green, its stunning sculpture collection tucked in between foliage and fountains. Litchfield Plantation stood at the end an allée of gargantuan, gnarled oak trees bearded with Spanish moss. The wind-scoured dunes on Pawleys beckoned with waving sea grass, and the twisting narrow roads offered views of docks perched among reeds on one side, and weathered clapboard summer houses on the other.

Meals brought the ultimate pleasure: shrimp atop creamy grits, sweet hush puppies slathered with raspberry butter, crunchy fried green tomatoes, velvety she-crab soup, Key lime pie enrobed dark chocolate...all of them true tastes of Southern culture and hospitality.

If you go:

> Canadian-American Days:
www.canamdays.com

Looking for a Cheap Trip?

Try these sites.

- Redtag (www.redtag.ca)
- Expedia (www.expedia.ca)
- iTravel2000 (www.itravel2000.ca)
- Flight Centre (www.flightcentre.ca)
- Air Canada special offers <http://www.aircanada.com/en/offers/>
- Sunwing airlines (www.sunwing.ca)