

The 10 Best Beaches for Families: 2011

Find out which waterside escapes are real gems for families.

By Karen Cicero

Ranking the Beaches

Simplicity is the beauty of a beach vacation -- the shore is essentially a giant sandbox with free rocks and shells, and the waves are more fun than any pool. But there can be rough spots if you go to the wrong place. That's why *Parents* combed through water-quality reports, closings, and advisories for more than 1,000 U.S. beaches. Naturally, we nixed shores with persistent problems and ones where the water isn't tested. From there, we looked at three other deal breakers: restrooms, calm surf, and lifeguards. Nature trails and other extras helped determine which places made the final cut. These are the 10 best beaches we found, along with our 10 runners-up. All that's left for you to do: Dive into the most kid-friendly beaches under the sun.

7. Coquina Beach Park, Bradenton, Florida

This beach, on the southern tip of Anna Marie Island, near Sarasota, is famous for "coquinas," colorful mini seashells. "Every morning, there's a row of shells on the shoreline for kids to scoop up," says Debbie Meihls, executive manager of the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. Another activity: kayaking. You can rent one on the beach or sign up for a guided eco-tour; either way, you're likely to see dolphins, manatees, and stingrays. Shady Australian pines, warm water (it averages 82°F year-round), and a 1½-mile paved nature trail also make Coquina fun.



Spend the Night

The Tradewinds Resort, just a 1-mile trolley ride from the beach, gives families a seashell guide and loans out buckets, sand tools, and floaties. A great money saver: Each room has a full kitchen. (Summer rates start at \$140 per night for a one-bedroom apartment that sleeps four; tradewinds-resort.com)