



# Surprise, Support and Delight

Travel providers welcome back families with kid- and teen-friendly amenities and offerings. BY HOLLY RIDDLE

With travel restrictions lifting and COVID-19 vaccines becoming available for younger children, family travel is back — and providers anticipate demand will only increase as time goes on.

“Families are ready to travel,” said Jen Campbell Boles, founder, Explore More Family Travel, an independent affiliate of GTN, a Virtuoso member agency. “The uptick in booking requests began in fall 2021, with the approval of the vaccine for children 5–12, but slowed down during the Omicron spike. However, bookings have skyrocketed in the first two months of 2022. Until this pandemic, we’ve

never had travel taken away from our society. Not only are people stir-crazy and ready to go, but there is also the realization that they need to go when they can because we never know what tomorrow can bring.”

When families do take that long-awaited trip, they’ll find offerings and amenities evolved over the last few years, and more travel providers than ever now cater to their sometimes most discerning audiences: children.

Air travel proves a challenge for parents with young children, but two international airlines might make the process a little smoother, thanks to new kid-g geared amenities. At the airport, [Emirates](#)’ new offerings specifically cater to unaccompanied minors; the airline allows children as young as 5 to fly solo. A newly upgraded unaccompanied minors lounge at Dubai International Airport provides video games, snacks, free WiFi and even kid-friendly restrooms. On board, Emirates now offers young flyers complimentary take-home toys and bags commemorating the recent Expo 2020 Dubai event.

[Etihad Airways](#) likewise launched a new Little VIP program in partnership with Warner Bros. World Abu



Dhabi that introduces in-flight amenities to its smallest passengers. The program provides complimentary children’s gifts to infants and children up to 13 years old, with items ranging from fleece blankets to backpacks and board games, all with designs inspired by the Warner Bros. family of characters. In addition, an enhanced in-flight menu features kid-friendly favorites like pasta and meatballs, waffles and pancakes.

Warner Bros. has made a splash across the travel industry in general recently, with new kid-friendly offerings. Beyond the new partnership with Etihad Airways, the world’s first Warner Bros. hotel, [WB Abu Dhabi, a Curio Collection by Hilton](#), opened in late 2021. Kids will get a kick out of ordering room service from their favorite cartoon characters, and they’ll be even more delighted when breakfast in bed is delivered via none other than Bugs Bunny.

The whimsy continues at properties like [Pullman Maldives Maamutaa Resort](#), now boasting the first and only dive center in the Maldives to offer official Professional Association of Diving Instructors mermaid courses — a new program from PADI available to children as young as 6 at properties all over the world.

“Becoming a PADI mermaid is something that anyone as young as 6 years old can do. It is also a program that requires no previous

experience whatsoever. Families can go on an amazing holiday in nearly every corner of the world and literally come back as certified mermaids. Learning new skills together, exploring the underwater world together and saving our blue planet together — these are once-in-a-lifetime family experiences that will never be forgotten,” said Julie Andersen, global director of brand, PADI Worldwide.

However, for children who may want a hotel experience that’s slightly more challenging and a little less mythical, [Mantis Founders Lodge](#) in South Africa recently introduced its Bear Grylls Survival Academy Experience for Kids, part of the Founders Lodge Kids Conservation Warriors program. Children learn how to collect water, build a shelter, start a fire, tie knots, what they can and can’t eat in the wild and more — all while parents enjoy a little alone time.

Whatever kid-friendly experiences parents seek when booking their next stay, though, adventure travel opportunities are a safe bet for a fun time for the entire family, as Kasey Morrissey, president and head of operations, Austin Adventures, can attest.

“There’s real excitement in experiencing new things together,” she said. “With adventure travel, you get to enjoy a bit of the unknown — what’s around the next corner, what’s the difference between a black bear and a grizzly — and the ‘rush’ of pushing your personal limits with

**Catering to Kids:**

(Left to right) Games and TVs at Emirates’ unaccompanied minors lounge at Dubai International Airport; Pullman Maldives Maamutaa Resort’s mermaid lessons; guestroom at WB Abu Dhabi, a Curio Collection by Hilton; and children learning to start a fire and encountering nature as part of the Founders Lodge Kids Conservation Warriors program at Mantis Founders Lodge

PHOTOS: © EMIRATES AIRWAYS. © ANNIE MACKANESS. © DCT ABU DHABI. © MANTIS COLLECTION



**Wild Times:**  
Austin Adventures' Yellowstone & Grand Teton (above) and Grand Canyon (right) family vacations

PHOTOS: © AUSTIN ADVENTURES



space away from a parents' king room, outfitted with bunk beds, chalkboards, games and sound machines. Guests in the suite also enjoy access to a kid-friendly, sleepy-time, in-room dining menu filled with sleep-promoting snacks.

the people you care about the most. From rafting the Yellowstone River to hiking a mountain to bike riding in the backcountry, adventure travel really is about everyone experiencing the new together."

As travel brands, including Austin Adventures, look to meet the demands of family travelers this year and in the future, Morrissey noted "going the extra mile is no longer just a bonus, it's a must."

She said, "Surprising, supporting and delighting each member of the family helps provide a uniquely memorable experience for everyone. [Austin Adventures] has an extensive and selective guide onboarding process that ensures our guides are not only well-versed in all things adventure travel but are prepared to wow at every opportunity."

Beyond amenities and programming, how can hotels better serve families and, more specifically, children to, as Morrissey said, "surprise, support and delight"? Some are revamping guestrooms.

At [JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort & Spa](#) in Orlando, Florida, for example, a new family suite offers children their own private



But not only hotels reimagine a more kid-friendly guestroom. [Royal Caribbean International's](#) newest vessel, *Wonder of the Seas*, boasts the cruise line's largest Ultimate Family Suite yet, large enough to fit a family of 10. The two-level Ultimate Family Suite concept first debuted in 2018 aboard *Symphony of the Seas* and comes outfitted with an in-suite slide, in-suite cinema and private game room with the latest video games. While the kids play, the adults can hide away in a separate master suite.

Divisions of space like those offered in the Ultimate Family Suite and at JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort & Spa could be just the thing families are craving after a few years cooped up together.

"After spending more time than usual under one roof during the pandemic, today's family is looking for more than the traditional hotel room with two beds. Parents need to put the kids to bed and still have space to connect as a couple. However, these families also want the service provided by staying at a hotel or resort that staying at a vacation rental does not provide," said Campbell Boles.

Jessica Griscavage, board member, Family Travel Association, and director of marketing, McCabe World Travel, agreed. She notes families want space and to spread out, away from crowds. "As the villa and the home rental market have increased, I think we will also see a more significant demand for suites and connecting rooms in hotels, for added space and comfort. I have also seen an increase in the demand for

cabanas, for families to have their own space at resort pools and beaches," she said.

Travel has long provided a way for many families to connect and bond. Now, more than ever, those connections and bonds are necessary as families rediscover their love for travel after what could have been a two-year hiatus for some. Luckily, favorite travel providers remain as ready as ever to cater to family travelers' unique needs — especially when it comes to their youngest customers.



**Designed to Delight:**

Royal Caribbean International's Ultimate Family Suite on *Wonder of the Seas* (top), and JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort & Spa's loft family suite (bottom)

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