

Bring the Family

BOSTON-AREA EXCURSIONS FOR KIDS AND ADULTS



The Boston Globe

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Introduction

One of the best things about living in New England is the abundance of things to do with kids. The area is simply awash in family fun – from beaches, hiking trails, and ski areas to zoos, museums, and historical sites. It would be easy to fill a year’s worth of weekends with local excursions and day trips of all stripes. That’s the idea behind BRING THE FAMILY, a different sort of family-friendly guide to attractions. In this unique book, which collects the best of the first four years of the Globe’s popular “Bring the Family” column, the paper’s writers visit 52 of their favorite spots with their own kids. Whether in Boston’s most revered institutions or in the great outdoors, these suggestions guarantee fun for all ages, in all seasons.

SUMMER

Stream on

Who: Globe film critic Ty Burr and his daughters Eliza, 13, and Natalie, 11

What: Kayaking the Lakes District

Where: Charles River Canoe and Kayak, Newton <http://paddleboston.com/newton.php>



The thunderheads loomed, the daughters fretted, I held firm: Either this was going to be a cherished family adventure or a Bad Dad disaster I'd be paying off for years. The three of us plus a 25-year-old cousin had rented two kayaks to reconnoiter the Lakes District, that area on the Newton- Weston border where the Charles River widens out into a chain of broad, reedy ponds dotted with islands.

Yes, we got briefly dumped on, but after the initial soaking (and pulling over to the bank when lightning flared in the far distance), everyone was in the proper Lewis and Clark mood. Press on!, said Eliza as the rain let up. Is that a great blue heron?, asked Natalie. The river was deserted, so we felt like pioneers as we coursed downstream toward Waltham, past a stuffed alligator thoughtfully placed on a log by a local homeowner. (It made the girls jump and giggle.)

A side trip under the Woerd Avenue

Bridge brought us into tiny Cram's Cove, almost prehistoric in its greenery; an attempt to cut through E Island on the return paddle met with a close-up muskrat sighting. There were splash wars and the plucking of a water lily for mom back home; after two hours, we pulled back onto the docks at Norumbega with aching arms and a sense of accomplishment. Adventure? Disaster? Close one, Dad, but you win this round.

For your amusement

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee and his wife and three kids, ages 6 to 9

What: Amusement park rides

Where: Canobie Lake Park, Salem, N.H.

<http://www.canobie.com>



Even now, when school lets out for the summer, I find myself mourning the passing of old amusement parks such as Lincoln Park near Fall River and Rocky Point Park in Rhode Island. The newfangled places - Six Flags, I'm talking to you - lack the small-scale charm of yesteryear. Thankfully Canobie Lake Park thrives just over the border in New Hampshire.

Walk through the entrance and you're transported to 1950s New England. Old-fashioned rides like Tilt-a-Whirl and the

Caterpillar, a toddler-friendly rollercoaster, a house of mirrors, a wooden log flume, a slow-chugging train that winds through the grounds - Canobie has it all. And it has actual trees to provide shelter from the sun, protecting our skin and our ice cream cones.

Canobie continues to add new attractions, though, to keep the teenagers coming. There are very high and very fast rides you couldn't pay me a thousand bucks to get on. (Xtreme Frisbee? Xtreme stomachache is more like it.) The water-themed area that opened a few years ago provides cool relief on a hot day, great for small and big kids alike.

But give me the bumper cars any day. We drove to Canobie on a cloudy Tuesday, so the lines weren't bad, allowing us to ride the bumper cars over and over. Amelia and I had a blast chasing down her brothers and broadsiding Mom's car. I almost can't wait until school gets out again next year.

Smoke on the water

Who: Globe features writer Bella English; her husband, Francis; and their son Nick, 16

What: WaterFire

Where: Waterplace Park, Providence

<http://www.waterfire.org>



It's not an exaggeration to say that you have to see WaterFire to believe it. Several weekend nights from late May through October, three small rivers in the heart of Providence are set afire. Artist Barnaby Evans came up with the concept in 1994 to symbolize the city's renaissance, and now WaterFire draws people from all over the world.

The main attractions are the 100 bonfires on platforms blazing just above the water. It looks like the rivers are on fire, with the leaping flames creating an eerie light show. Classical music plays while lucky passengers float by in gondolas and other small boats.

My husband and I stood on a bridge watching the boats and flames while my son and his friend visited the many nearby booths for goodies of all kinds: fudge, pizza, pretzels, cookies, kettle corn, and so on. Later, we saw them a few blocks away listening to salsa music and watching audience members join the dance instructor onstage. When I jumped up there, the boys made a quick exit.

For a special treat, snag an outdoor table at Cafe Nuovo overlooking the river. In a small square nearby, we all had fun posing with the human "statues" - some gargoyles and a lady dressed in all silver, including her skin and hair.

The fire-tenders light the torches just after sunset and stoke them until just after midnight. Even the jaded teenage boys were impressed.

Wheels out

Who: Globe arts reporter Geoff Edgers and his daughter Lila, 6

What: Bike riding

Where: Minuteman Bikeway, Arlington <http://www.minutemanbikeway.org>



I'm one of those wimpy riders who remains convinced that, if I were to take my 1983 Panasonic 10-speed onto the streets, I'd promptly be run over by the 79 bus. So the Minuteman Bikeway, which covers 11 miles from Cambridge's Alewife Station to the Bedford Train Depot, is a huge relief. Since the Bikeway opened in 1993, it's developed a loyal clientele of runners, riders, and dog walkers.

Lila and I take a trip virtually every Saturday. I've attached a trail bike, a one-wheel bike extension, to my bike, so we can both pedal. We have two regular routes. If lunch is part of our game, we head east through Arlington to Alewife and onto a connecting stretch to Davis Square. There, Lila and I head to Mike's Restaurant for a slice (her) and a chef's salad (me). Our alternative plan, when hunger is not an issue, is a trip out west.

We blow through the old shed in Lexington Center and out to a spot where horses graze. We cross the bridge over the highway and eventually make our way to Bedford. Mile markers chart our progress, as do the Lance Armstrong wanna-bes shouting "on your left." (For the record, boys, I'm as likely to wear one of those goofy bike-pant getups as I am to shave off one of my eyebrows.) Finally we head home, huffing and puffing as we challenge, and conquer, the big hill that's just off the trail and leading to our house.

On the waterfront

Who: Globe writer Joanna Weiss, her husband, Dan DeLeo, and their 4-year-old daughter, Ava

What: Watching planes, boats, people, and hermit crabs

Where: Castle Island, South Boston



We enjoy pristine nature as much as the next family - quiet state parks, manicured gardens, that sort of thing. But if you live around the city, sometimes you want your outings to involve a little grit. And for gritty goodness, there's no place in Boston that matches Southie's Castle Island.

We've been taking Ava here since she was a baby, and at every stage of life we've found something new to engage her. First, we walked her stroller along the lengthy promenade that leads out into Pleasure Bay, saying hello to dogs, fishermen, and careening kids on in-line skates. Later, we showed her the cruise liners and freight ships inching through the harbor, and the planes that fly so low, heading into Logan Airport, that it feels as if you could reach up and touch them. She's spent fall days watching people fly kites and throw balls on the hill by Fort Independence. (We haven't ventured into kiting yet, ourselves. It seems a recipe for trauma.) And she spent one memorable summer afternoon marveling at the sparkly tar that connected the promenade sidewalk. "I've never seen this before!" she kept shouting with glee.

There's some nature here, as well, in the form of a rocky little beach. Last summer, we spent a day collecting - and returning - tiny hermit crabs and snails. In every season, there's the playground, which puts our local park to shame. And if you're too lazy to pack a picnic, there's take-out from Sullivan's, purveyor of clam strips, fries, grilled cheese sandwiches, and ice cream.

The best part about Castle Island, though, is the people-watching. Nowhere will you find a better cross-section of urban life, from tiny babies to tanned retirees. You'll find families of every ethnicity, gathered for some unpretentious fun in the shadow of an industrial zone. What could be more natural than that?

The trail to purgatory

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee; his wife, Kelly; and their three kids, ages 7 to 10

What: hiking

Where: Purgatory Chasm State Reservation, Sutton <http://www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/central/purg.htm>



Purgatory Chasm is one of the region's most stunning natural landmarks - and it's surprisingly accessible. The chasm is a quarter-mile-long crack in the earth made by glacial movements during the Ice Age, and conveniently it was created right off the highway. The entrance to the park lies less than a mile off Route 146 in Sutton (just south of Worcester), and the trail into the chasm is just a few footsteps from the parking area.

The most popular hike, the one that goes into the chasm itself, is also the most treacherous, yet it was easy enough for Amelia, our 7-year-old daughter. (I had to lend a hand so she could steady herself only a few times when climbing up or down some of the larger rocks.) The hike descends

immediately toward the chasm floor, providing gorgeous views of the 70-foot-high granite walls, which have trees improbably growing out of them. Hikers must be careful on the trail. One wrong move can easily result in an ankle sprain, skull fracture, or worse. Points of interest such as caves are marked along the way; perhaps the most interesting of these is Fat Man's Misery, a narrow crevice between boulders that most people can pass through only if they turn sideways.

Geological wonder aside, Purgatory Chasm is also a great place for a picnic. After a couple of shorter (and much easier) hikes, we ate our lunch atop the giant slab of granite that greets visitors at the park's entrance. (Though it appears to be nearly vertical from the road, the rock is inclined just enough for kids to climb up and down; Aidan and Liam obliged.) We finished lunch just down the road at West End Creamery, which sells 50 varieties of homemade ice cream, including the best coconut almond fudge I've ever tasted. How convenient.

Hole in fun

Who: Globe style editor Hayley Kaufman; her husband, Chris McNulty; and their three kids, Devin, 14, Nate, 5, and Rachel, 2

What: Hitting a few balls

Where: Granite Links Golf Club at Quarry Hills, Quincy



We took advantage of a sunny Saturday with a trip to the driving range. If you haven't been to the golf course at Quarry Hills, do yourself a favor and go. On the top of a hill near the Quincy quarry, the public links offer unparalleled views of the Boston skyline and Blue Hills. And once you're finished hacking around, you can grab a soda at the snack bar and watch some real golfers on the flat screen.

Let me say right now that my family doesn't golf. Not really. My husband owns clubs and can drive a ball well enough. But the rest of us might as well be teeing off with a Wiffle ball

bat. Heck if that stops us, though. We get a bucket of balls, traipse down to the very last tee of the driving range, and swing till we're exhausted. Because many of our balls dribble off the tee and come to a rest two or three feet away, we use them over and over again. More bang for the buck, indeed.

Once we were finished on the driving range, we walked a few yards over to the putting green, where last weekend a handful of serious golfers carefully and quietly lined up their shots. Obviously, we kept our 2 1/2-year-old off the green out of respect. This was easy enough to do. A sizable patio, dotted with tables and chairs, overlooks the putting green, and Rachel was happy enough to sit by and watch the proceedings.

Nate, on the other hand, kept putting, and putting, and putting. Think about what it's like to take your kids to mini-golf - how they never want it to end, how they'll pull the ball out of the hole if no one's looking and keep tapping away at it. On a public green, a well-behaved kid can putt for hours. And so he did. Dad gave him some pointers, and every once in awhile Nate sunk a shot from three or four feet with his little plastic putter. I doubt he'll be the next Tiger Woods, but he had fun trying.

Queen of the carousel

Who: Globe writer Joanna Weiss and her daughter Ava, 5

What: Going around and around

Where: Flying Horses Carousel, Martha's Vineyard http://mvpreservation.org/p.php/preservation/community/flying-horses?_f=n



When it comes to carousels, 5-year-old Ava generally isn't picky. She enjoys the chintzy merry-go-round at the Marshfield Fair - the one that folds up at the end of the fair and fits in the back of a truck - as much as the meticulously restored 1910 carousel she rode last summer in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. But she now has a special appreciation for the nation's oldest operating

platform carousel, the Flying Horses Carousel in Oak Bluffs.

We stumbled upon the ride on a day trip to the Vineyard recently, on the way from a restaurant lunch to a friend's waiting car. (Ava came along because she wanted to ride a boat, but was consigned, poor girl, to spend the day with grown-ups.) Hearing the carnival music perked her up immediately. And even she could appreciate the beauty of this machine, which was built in 1876 and brought to the Vineyard in 1884. The horses have real hair on their manes and tails. The landscape paintings on the panels are lovingly restored. And while the horses don't move up and down, there's a bigger thrill: the metal rings that hang from a dispenser, dangling within reach as the ride goes past. Ava's arms were too short to grab at them, so I stood by her horse and pulled them out as quickly as I could without falling over.

I didn't bother to explain the fine points of ring-collecting: that the person who gets the shiny brass ring gets to ride again for free. Just collecting the dull metal rings and placing them on the peg atop her horse was fun enough for her, as was the act of tossing her cache into a giant basket when the ride had ended.

On that hot, sticky day, not everyone in the carousel shed was quite so giddy. As we stood in line awaiting our turn, we spotted a teenager slumped against a horse, glumly pulling at as many rings as she could as she rode past. When the carousel stopped, she whined into a cellphone: "I'm so bored." Poor girl, herself. Sometimes, it's better to experience life as a 5-year-old.

Free birds (and goats and an emu)

Who: Globe writer Joanna Weiss; her kids, Ava, 5, and Jesse, 10 months; and their friend Priya Shaw, 4 3/4

What: Cavorting with the farm animals

Where: Winslow Farm Animal Sanctuary, Norton

<http://www.winslowfarm.com/>



You can sing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” to your infant only so many times before you feel an obligation to show him the real thing. At 10 months, Jesse is old enough to point at stuffed cows and shout out his all-purpose noun - “duh” - so one weekend I took him to Winslow Farm in Norton, along with his big sister and her friend.

As petting farms go, this is a lovely one with a particularly appealing mission: to take in animals that have been injured or neglected. Some of the animals show their scars; in one barn, a mostly blind horse stood quietly and allowed us to stroke her nose. But there were plenty of healthy looking animals, too, from a pheasant to an emu to some placid goats. And in true Old MacDonald fashion, one rooster offered hearty cock-a-doodle-doo throughout the afternoon.

What was striking was how many of the animals roamed free among us, accustomed to crowds and enjoying their lives of leisure. Our guide through the grounds, a fifth-grade volunteer, told us many of their names (the big pig is Napoleon, and acts accordingly) and pointed out the ones that were too grumpy to be petted.

For Jesse, it was a visual feast, though not without its frustrations. The farm is remarkably clean - we marveled at a donkey stall filled with mounds of soft, spotless sand - but free-range animals translate into a certain amount of poop on the ground, so I couldn't let him crawl. The big girls, though, got donkey rides and got a kick out of following the geese around in circles until one of them finally honked his disapproval. They got an even bigger thrill from lounging on a wooden swing and playing make-believe on a new wooden jungle gym. This was the first playset I've seen that had a pretend wall phone, and it was a hit. Life on the farm is fun to sing about, but for some kids, there's no place like home.

Path finders

Who: Globe writer June Wulff; her husband, Jim; their son, Cam, 20; and Sarah Crane

What: Walking

Where: Arnold Arboretum

<http://www.arboretum.harvard.edu>



Cam: “Walking is horrible.”

Jim: “Wanna go up this path?” June: “Does it have a name?” Cam: “Does it have an escalator?”

Despite his disdain for putting one foot in front of the other, Cam - and the rest of us - spent a delightful couple of hours in this 1872 jewel of the Emerald Necklace. You can wander around more than 265 acres from dawn to dusk 365 days a year, thanks to benefactor James Arnold and a creation by landscape architect Fred-

erick Law Olmsted and the Arboretum's first director, Charles Sprague Sargent.

Our first stop is the Hunnewell Visitor Center to pick up a map/guide and look at a model of the Arboretum. As always, Jim is in charge of navigation. On this gorgeous afternoon, the place is full of visitors walking, biking, pushing strollers and wheelchairs, rollerblading, running, painting, throwing Frisbees, and accompanying man's best friend - leashed and picked up after, of course.

We pass blossoming magnolias, a sprawling Asian painted maple, and then many trees later we're overwhelmed by the smell of lilacs. Many bushes are in bloom on a well-deserved path of their own. Further along, there's a bride and groom having pictures taken under a tree.

Map guy leads us up Bussey Hill to Explorers Garden, and along the way we hear a French horn off in the distance. We get closer and see a guy playing in front of his music stand. Always eager to go off-road, Jim leads us up a rough path, leaving me and my flip-flops to fall back on poor Sarah. Comic relief at my expense, so what else is new?

Many trees and plants are labeled, and with a nod to technology, you can also take a cellphone tour. So when you plan your visit, bring your phone, but leave the flip-flops (or husband) at home.

Whale of a trip

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee; his wife, Kelly; and their three children, ages 8 to 11

What: Watching whales

Where: Stellwagen Bank

<http://www.captjohn.com>



It had been a long time since I'd gone on a whale watch. My foggy recollection contained frustrations over near-sightings, with tips of flukes disappearing below the surface just as I began to catch a glimpse. So let's just say I wasn't overly enthusiastic when my 8-year-old daughter, Amelia, asked if we could go on a whale watch. She'd been studying whales in school and wanted

to see the real thing.

Acquiescing to this wish was perhaps the greatest decision I'll make all year. The majesty of what we witnessed was stunning.

We bought tickets for a four-hour trip with Capt. John Boats out of Plymouth. Our naturalist/guide, Joanne, gave us a quick tour of Plymouth Harbor before we headed for Stellwagen Bank, where the humpbacks and minke gather and swim. When we reached the bank, we caught site of three humpbacks "logging" - sleeping and floating at the surface. Soon a fourth whale came along, and the dynamic changed. They became active, diving and displaying their flukes, just 20 yards or so from our boat. Cameras went to work.

Joanne knows these whales well. The naturalists who study the humpbacks have been tracking them for decades. The markings on a humpback's fluke are akin to human fingerprints; no two whales have the same markings. So Joanne could tell us the names of the whales we saw and even their relationships to the other whales.

The next group of whales we saw provided the money shots. These humpbacks seemed as though they were showing off for the whale watchers. Though Capt. John's vessels avoid getting too close to the whales, one humpback actually approached our port side, floating right at the surface. It was only 10 yards away - then 5, then right at the boat. The great beast lifted its head and looked right at us, and we stared back, awed.

Whale of a museum

Who: Globe staff member Milva DiDomizio, daughters Claire (13) and Abby (12), and friend Ezra (13)

What: Having a whale of a time

Where: New Bedford Whaling Museum

<http://www.whalingmuseum.org/>



Claire is halfway through Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick," so it seemed like the right time to check out the New Bedford Whaling Museum. On the Sunday afternoon we went, we found a well-presented mix of history, science, anthropology, literature, and art, with dashes of Melville's famous book sprinkled throughout.

Visitors are invited to start with an introductory film, which we missed because the theater was in use. Instead, we admired the gigantic whale skeletons hanging from the ceiling and pondered the question "How Do You Compare to a Sperm Whale?" Ezra, with his best deadpan expression, offered the observation that "whales have more blubber." The exhibit highlighted more subtle differences like the number of bones (206 for humans versus 126 for sperm whales).

We touched baleen, listened to whale calls, learned about echolocation, and followed a detailed history of the whaling industry, complete with the harsh economic realities and its dangerous and often gory nature. For older kids, this is fascinating stuff. Younger kids may ignore some of the historical fine points but will like the hands-on craft activities (the day we went it was origami), spectacular whale skeletons, interactive exhibits, and one of the main attractions - the ship models, including a half-size reproduction of the Lagoda, a 19th-century whale ship that operated out of New Bedford. Climbing aboard is encouraged. The same goes for the model of a fo'c'sle, the part of a ship where the crew eats and sleeps. The crew I brought enjoyed hanging out in the bunks and listening to museum volunteers tell tales of adventure on the high seas.

Stepping into the "Classic Whaling Prints" exhibit was like entering an art museum devoted entirely to seafaring drama. We found several cultures represented, including Dutch, English, French (where Melville's personal favorites reside), American, Japanese, and Inupiaq Eskimo. Although the day was brisk, it was still a pleasure to hang out on the observation deck and enjoy the fresh air and harbor views. Then it was back to checking out the wide variety of cool items on view, among them narwhal tusks, a corset made with whalebone, portraits carved into whale teeth, and more lances and harpoons than you can shake a stick at.

FALL

Trail mix

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee, his wife, and their three kids, ages 8-11

What: The freedom not to follow

Where: The Freedom Trail



It'd been decades since I'd walked the entire Freedom Trail. In fact, though I've visited all its sites at one time or another, I'm not certain I've actually walked the entire 2-mile path from start to finish. Always got sidetracked by something. So it was time to absorb it all again - this time with our kids.

Naturally, three-fifths of us want to start at the Make Way for Ducklings statues. OK, so they're not technically part of the Freedom Trail. It's close enough. And since we're there, we might as well explore the rest of the Public Garden. An hour later, we reach the start of the Freedom Trail: Boston Common. But hold on: Now everyone's thirsty, so we detour up Charles Street to find a store that sells bottled water.

Sated, we're on Boston Common, people- and dog-watching, and then we're in front of the State House. After a family vote (3-2, me on the losing side again) we decide to skip going inside the State House. Instead we head straight for the Old Granary Burying Ground. Now we're talking: An oasis of peace just feet from the bustle of Tremont Street. We linger among the gravestones - Paul Revere's is covered with pebbles and pennies - as we circle the obelisk in the center where Ben Franklin's parents are buried. His parents? So where's Ben Franklin buried, one of the kids asks. Philadelphia. Oh.

OK, we're hungry. Zip: Hey, kids, there's the Old Corner Bookstore. Keep moving! Zoom: Look, the Old State House and the site of the Boston Massacre. Go before the light changes! Finally we're upon it, Faneuil Hall, famous historical site that announces the entrance to the giant food court.

After lunch, we amble over the cobblestones (or are they paving blocks?) of Quincy Market, lazily watching the street performers: a hip-hop dance

crew, a knife-juggling duo, and a droll-humored lad who can't seem to get a laugh or even much applause out of the crowd.

Now where were we? Ah yes, time to walk to the North End. But look at the time. Everyone's legs are tired. Can we go home? Sure. We'll finish this up another day - and start at the other end next time.

True north

Who: Names columnist Mark Shanahan and his two kids, ages 9 and 5

What: Wandering

Where: Boston's North End



We've been to a few "living history museums" with the kids, but I'm always struck by how waxen and unreal they seem. There's a blacksmith and a broom maker, a cooper and a cobbler, but where's the soul?

When I want to step back in time, without contemplating the hardships of the humble wheelwright, I take Julia and Beck for a stroll through

the North End, which combines the best of the old and new worlds.

Maybe I like the North End because before it was Boston's Little Italy, it was home to thousands of Irish immigrants, who got off the boat and flopped in the ratty rooming houses that crowded the waterfront. Kids, I like to say, don't do as your ancestors did.

Thankfully, those decrepit digs have all been bulldozed, replaced by family-friendly amenities like Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park, a grassy harborside oasis with a fountain, and a statue of the park's navigator namesake. Continue on down Commercial Wharf and check out the yachts. That, I tell the kids, is how the other half lives.

There's plenty to see and do away from the water, but you may want to brush up on your American history first. I was asked, for example, who held those lanterns in the Old North Church to signal that the British were marching to Lexington and Concord? Uh . . . Says here it was the church sexton Robert Newman. Also worth a look is Paul Revere's groovy little house at 19 North Square.

If the kids were a little older, I probably would have focused more on the neighborhood's colorful history of brothels, rum-running, mobsters, and, of course, the great molasses flood of 1919. (We did talk about it, but I neglected to mention that 21 people were killed.)

We concluded our visit with a couple of slices at Trattoria Il Panino Express, at the corner of Hanover and Parmenter, and the requisite stop at Modern Pastry. (On previous visits, the kids have enjoyed Pizzeria Regina and Mike's Pastry.) Daddy was just about ready for a nap, but not before a bit more wandering along the narrow streets of Boston's oldest residential district.

Walk in the woods

Who: Globe Magazine staff member Lylah M. Alphonse, her husband, and their five kids, ages 2 to 15

What: An easy hike on a gorgeous day

Where: The Middlesex Fells Reservation, Malden

<http://www.fells.org> and <http://www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/metroboston/fells.htm>



I am not much of an outdoorswoman. I have not camped since I was 13 years old, when a couple of rainy and rocky nights under a leaking tarp put me off sleeping outdoors for pretty much the rest of my life. An adventure up Mount Monadnock a few years ago, before our youngest kids were born, was so excruciating that my husband has vowed never to take me there again, though he and the older kids have climbed it since. So it was with much trepidation (on his part) that he suggested a hike through the Fells one sunny summer afternoon, and there was great surprise and rejoicing when I quickly agreed.

Here's the thing: I might not be one for a hike up a mountain, but I do love a long ramble through the woods, and the Middlesex

Fells are simply gorgeous. There are plenty of trails to choose from, and some of them even accommodate strollers. You don't need special equipment, not even proper hiking boots. We outfitted each of our kids with a backpack stocked with their own water bottles and snacks - our 2 1/2-year-old rode in a pack on my husband's back - sprayed everyone with insect repellent, and were on our way.

The car ride from the boonies where we live to the entry point we picked in Malden took less than 40 minutes; we parked on a street that skirts the 2,575-acre reservation, and started following the orange blazes for the Reservoir trail, a moderate hike along the outer perimeter of the Western part of the Fells. We didn't do the whole trail - just around the Northern Reservoir, to the observation tower at Bear Hill and back, which was perfect for the smaller people in our group. I'd be up for a longer hike next time. I'm not sure my family believes me, though.

Berry good

Who: Globe style editor Hayley Kaufman; her husband, Chris; and their three kids, Devin, 14, Nate, 5, and Rachel, 2

What: Berry picking

Where: Ward's Berry Farm in Sharon <http://www.wardsberryfarm.com/>



Ward's Berry Farm doesn't look like much from the street, just an oversized farmstand next to a sprawling dirt parking lot. But wander a bit further onto this farm and its bounty becomes clear.

In one direction, farm animals frolic. Goats munch hay. Ducks take a dip in a kiddie pool. Cows nose the clover. Nearby sits an inflated "bouncy house" where kids can jump themselves silly before mak-

ing a beeline for the swing-set, slide, and - my personal favorite - half-buried tractor tires, just waiting to be climbed. Speaking of climbing, no one can resist clambering up Ward's hay bale ziggurat, with its views of the lush summer berry bushes.

For all its other attributes, Ward's is really about the berries. Depending on how motivated you are, you can choose a small basket or a larger cardboard basket. We got large baskets for the kids, and we were off. Our first stop was the blueberry patch, where the bushes towered over our heads.

A word of advice: It can be easy for little kids to get too excited, picking berries that are fairly but not completely ripe. Help them resist this urge. Juicy, dark purple berries are everywhere, but they can take a bit of hunting to find. After 10 minutes, I noticed that Nate had filled the bottom of his basket with light purple berries, a few even a bit green. He was proud of them, but I knew they wouldn't make the sweetest blueberry pancakes. So we teamed up, plopping plump berries into his basket at a slightly slower pace. Trust me, it was worth the extra time.

The kids were eager to move on to the raspberry patches, but the truth is they're much more challenging to pick. The stems are thorny and working the delicate fruit off the bushes takes a gentle hand. Rachel was happy just to wander the rows, while Nate hunted intently for the ruby-colored berries. He found a quite a few. Of course, they never made it into his basket.

Children of the corn

Who: G editor Hayley Kaufman; her husband, Chris; and their kids Devin, 15, Nate, 6, and Rachel, 3 **Where:** Jane and Paul's Farm, Norfolk

What: Lost in a corn maze



One of my earliest memories is of getting lost in a maze. It was a funhouse, and I was 3, young enough to believe that if I pressed my nose against the plexiglass and made a wish, the wall would magically disappear and I'd be reunited with my mom. No such luck. Panicked, I stood there, wailing, until help arrived.

To this day, I approach mazes with trepidation, but my kids gleefully plunge in. Last weekend at

the bucolic Jane and Paul's Farm in Norfolk, they couldn't wait to get lost amid the corn stalks. Nate took the lead, his sneakers pounding down one path, then another. Rachel scampered behind him, and Devin dutifully kept tabs.

"Hey, you guys - stay close," I called after them. "OK, Mom," they yelled, giggling. Already we couldn't see them. Which fork had they taken? Wait a minute: Didn't we go this way before? I felt a twinge of something. "They're right over here," Devin hollered.

While I was getting protective, the kids were whooping it up. The maze at Jane and Paul's is just the right size for little kids - big enough that they get turned around and bump into a series of dead ends, small enough so it's not going to take your posse an hour to puzzle its way out.

It's interesting for grown-ups, too. A couple of rises allow glimpses of the quaint main farmhouse, where they sell all kinds of pumpkins and gourds and treats. And the much-trampled routes through the corn are studded with small stones, each a reminder of how much work it is to till a field, how generations of New Englanders have put their sweat and hope into the land.

Nate was out of the maze before the rest of us, jumping up and down with success. The sky was overcast and threatened rain, but the kids didn't care. They made their wish, and my husband and I obliged, starting the maze all over again.

Bewitching hours

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee; his wife, Kelly; and their three kids, ages 6 to 9

What: Getting spooked

Where: Salem



Amelia, our 6-year-old daughter, planned to dress up as a witch for Halloween, so we headed to Salem to do a little research. While some of the goings-on there are too frightening for small children - the spooky attractions go into high gear this time of year - there is plenty to take in with even the littlest kids. There is so much, in fact, that you need to be picky, or else

you'll (a) run out of time or (b) run out of money.

We started with a visit to the House of the Seven Gables. You needn't have read Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic to enjoy the tour, which illuminates a great deal of history. Children will get a kick out of the secret staircase, which winds a narrow path up to the second story.

Nearby are a couple of good choices for lunch: In a Pig's Eye and the Witch's Brew Cafe, which are next to each other on Derby Street. Even better was Captain Dusty's Ice Cream, right across the street, where I had some of the best pumpkin ice cream I've ever savored.

But back to the point: witches. With so many witch-themed attractions, you have to choose wisely. I'd recommend a thorough Internet search before settling on any one place, because there is a lot of overlap. Fearing that our kids would be freaked out by the more intense attractions, we walked across town to the Witch Dungeon Museum, which isn't half as scary as it sounds. A brief reenactment of a witch trial is followed by a trek through the basement, which has been turned into a replica of the dungeon where people accused of being witches were confined in the 1690s. (As it turns out, the actual dungeon was turned into an office building 50 years ago.)

What else? A balloon artist making elaborate animals kept a gaggle of children entertained on a street corner downtown, and we wound up finding Amelia a perfect witch's hat - a huge purple-and-black one, with a spider dangling from it - from a street vendor for \$10. We'll be heading back to Salem one of these days, and not necessarily near Halloween.

The big apples

Who: Globe staff member Milva DiDomizio, daughters Claire, 14, and Abby, 13

What: Apple picking

Where: Honey Pot Hill Orchards, Stow

<http://www.honeypothill.com>

The annual apple-picking trip is still a favorite family activity, even with teenagers. Our scheduled day was drizzly and gloomy, but tradition is a powerful motivator. As it turned out, the weather didn't keep many folks away. Our favorite orchard was packed with smiling families as determined as we were to enjoy a classic fall-in-New-England outing.

We've tried lots of places over the years, and liked most of them, but we keep coming back to Honey Pot Hill Orchards. Why? It may just come down to the doughnuts. If you go on a weekend, you will likely wait in a long line for your white bakery bag of fragrant cider doughnuts fresh from the oven. It will be worth it. Eat them while they're still warm.

The question of whether to snack before or after picking is always a dilemma. This year we opted to pick first, and hopped on a hayride to get to the orchards. A snazzy blue tractor pulled our wagon along wooded, muddy paths while we sat on scratchy hay bales, enjoying the bumpy ride and the sweet aroma of fermenting apples.

Honey Pot offers a dozen varieties for picking, and while they're not all available at once, there were enough to fill our bag with a few different kinds. Finding just the right mix of sweet, tart, spicy, and crisp apples required a lot of pleasant meandering through the large, maze-like orchards. We took our time, climbed ladders to reach the topmost fruit, and were careful to twist, not pull, our prizes off the trees.

Speaking of mazes, there are a couple to play in. The nicely trimmed hedge maze is modeled on England's famous Hampton Court maze. Winding your way through the paths until you find the center, then finding your way out, is fun, but anyone with a touch of claustrophobia should be chaperoned. Same goes for the tunnel maze, an indoor play area featuring three levels of tunnels younger kids (ages 4-11) navigate on their hands and knees.

Kids (even big ones) love farm animals, and mine are no exception. We fed the goats through a machine that carried pellets up to the "goat walk" (a kind of critter climbing structure), visited the chickens and bunnies, and watched the three little pigs lounge in the mud.

If you get hungry, there are hot dogs, burgers, chili, and soft-serve ice cream. The farm also sells apple and pumpkin pies, and homemade caramel apples that are just as good as their cider doughnuts. Before you leave, pick a pumpkin from the colorful selection spread out near the farm store. And don't forget a gallon of cider to make the day complete.

Season in the sun

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee, his wife, and their three kids, ages 9-12

What: Beach-bumming

Where: Town Neck Beach, Sandwich



Our favorite time of the year to hit the beach is not in June, July, August, or even September. Too hot, too humid, too many people, too much noise. Nah, we much prefer the beach in the fall. Always have, even when we lived in the cooler, quieter, less populous state of Maine. Now when we hanker for the sand and surf, we wait out the crowds.

So on a warmer-than-usual October weekend, we drove to Sandwich. Some-

how we'd only recently heard about the famous boardwalk that connects a small parking lot to Town Neck Beach.

The boardwalk itself is worth the trip. It stretches 1,000 feet over a sandy marsh and a creek, and most of its planks are inscribed with names or messages. It turns out the original boardwalk was destroyed in 1991 by Hurricane Bob. To raise money for its reconstruction, organizers sold planks to residents and businesses.

Searching for words underfoot kept our kids entertained. I told them I spotted the word "knucklehead" on one of the planks (true) and challenged them to find it (they didn't). I also told them that I had bought one of the planks myself, using the pseudonym "Salvatore Izzo" (this will come as a surprise to the real Mr. Izzo).

From the boardwalk, you can look out on an expanse of grassy marsh, watch osprey soar, and follow minnows as they navigate the creek. If you're lucky, as we were, you can watch someone jump into the water to retrieve the cellphone he dropped from the boardwalk. (You dropped your phone in the water while jabbering on amid all this, what's it called, nature? That's karma, fellow.)

At the end of the boardwalk, we descended the stairs to the beach. We should have realized, given the 86-degree warmth, that we wouldn't have a beach entirely to ourselves, as we often do in October. Still, only a couple of dozen people were there, either lying in the sun or walking with a partner or dog.

Normally we have to bundle up a bit, too, in hooded sweatshirts or windbreakers. No need this time.

My kids searched for shells, clambered on rocks, and worked on their yo-yo mastery - the sorts of things you can do any time of year, frankly, but which are far more relaxing in the perfect beach month of October. Parking's free, too, off season.

Huddle up

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee and his 11-year-old sons, Aidan and Liam

What: Celebrating the New England Patriots

Where: The Hall at Patriot Place, Foxborough

<http://www.thehallatpatriotplace.com/>



At least one stereotype lives in our household: My wife and daughter couldn't care less whether the Patriots make it to the Super Bowl, while my sons and I shout "Wooodheaaad!" at the television every time Danny runs for a first down. So when Amelia had a Girl Scouts outing one Saturday, naturally I headed to Gillette Stadium with Liam and Aidan.

The Hall at Patriot Place exists to celebrate and glorify the history of our National Football League franchise. It also serves as a good reminder that the Pats were for a long time the patsies of the league.

There's plenty of memorabilia inside glass cases: old uniforms, game balls, and ticket stubs. One of coach Bill Belichick's infamous hoodies (2007) is there, right near the cleats that Patrick Chung wore this season on the day when he blocked a field goal and a punt, and returned an interception for a touchdown. (Glad to see they stay current at the Hall.) Part of the goalpost that was torn down after the Pats beat the Cincinnati Bengals (34-23) to clinch a wild-card playoff spot in 1985 is there, too, for some reason.

A 15-minute panoramic film runs down the highlights from the team's history, climaxing with what we sometimes forget was its improbable 2001 Super Bowl run. The movie overdoses on melodrama, inexplicably equating football players with lobstermen and cranberry farmers, and peppering scenes with quotes from that wise NFL sage Ralph Waldo Emerson.

But it's the interactive exhibits that capture the children's - and adults' - imaginations. You can use the referee's replay booth to see challenged calls, and simulate the experience of kicking field goals from 23 and 45 yards away. We scored zero points despite several attempts. Good thing Adam Vinatieri took our spot on the 2001 roster.

Train to nowhere

Who: Globe reporter Stephanie Ebbert and 5-year-old son, Nick

What: Riding the MBTA subway

Where: Boston



The world looks like a busy, exciting place when you're under 4 feet tall. Escalators, walk-sign buttons, elevators, tunnels, bridges, and trains: Getting there can be more than half the fun.

With that in mind, I took my son for an adventure in which getting there was the fun. We took the T to nowhere.

My son, Nick, who likes to chart his own course, was thrilled to get to chart our course on his own map of the T. He aimed for the Red and Orange lines - convenient, since we had recently seen the movie "Hugo" and I wanted to show him South Station.

There, we got to watch the bustle of trains arriving and departing and buses descending the spiral ramps. But Nick was eager to ride - plus, there was no train derailling and rushing toward us in 3-D, as in "Hugo" - so we got a cinnamon roll and moved on.

Escalators led us to the subway - a two-fer - and Nick felt the whoosh of air moving through the tunnel before the train. He thrilled to get aboard and when the train started moving he refused to sit down - until he almost fell. Then he laughed, along with the people around him.

I should note that this was not the first time my suburban son rode a subway, but every time seems like the first time. He looks like a bedazzled tourist on his first trip to the big city - no game face whatsoever. I just adore that. He will have years to be annoyed by public transportation. He should enjoy it while he can.

Our urban fascination dimmed a bit, though, when we hopped off at Downtown Crossing and a woman rushed toward me, asking me to call the police; two women were fighting in the corridor ahead. She grumbled at a nearby man who wouldn't get involved and who soon began swearing at her for criticizing him. "Ah, life in the city," another commuter sighed. Public transport was rapidly losing its charm.

The magic was restored by two subsequent events: First, two trains arrived in the station at the same time, which - if you are a 5-year-old boy - is really exciting. Second, as our train started moving, the tunnel revealed a stop-motion advertisement that played out like a movie. The point of the ad, which featured a spider, escaped me, but my son found it perfectly fantastic.

"Wasn't that so cool?" Nick said to me. "That's how you make movies. So we just watched a movie." He could ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston, my little Charlie on the MTA.

Up in the air

Who: G writer June Wulff, her children, Elise (23), Cam (20), and Cam's friend Sarah Crane

What: Skywalk Observatory

Where: Prudential Center

<http://www.prudentialcenter.com>



After an ear-popping ride to the 50th floor, there's an eye-popping experience that will take your breath away - and it's a "perfect place for a date," according to Elise. On a clear Saturday, the four of us grabbed audio tours (there's also a kids' version) and walked around the 360-degree observatory perched 750 feet in the air. We soaked up tons of information about Boston, including dirt about the tons of it that created Back Bay and other parts of the city. Who knew

that the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum was built on a former garbage dump and that city sewage was dumped in what is now the Back Bay? Logan Airport was also built on landfill and was called Boston Airport.

The Hatch Shell, the gold dome of the State House, Trinity Church, the Christian Science complex, Fenway Park, the John Hancock Tower, and the neat rows of brick townhouses are visual reminders of Boston's architectural treasures. OK, so 65 windows fell out of the John Hancock Tower, but, remarkably, no one was hurt.

The South End, a former tidal marsh, is the largest neighborhood of Victorian homes in the country and was a jazz mecca where Cab Calloway and other musicians performed. Eagle-eye Cam found a cool rooftop gazebo in the neighborhood, and when Sarah zoomed in on it with her camera we could see a spiral staircase inside and the gas grill tanks off to the side.

Take a break from the eye feast and visit the Skywalk Theater, a video history hosted by Benjamin Franklin. There are also several wall exhibits including "Boston & Its Immigrants," a display with timelines, background music, and narrations about traditions in Chinatown, the North End, and other neighborhoods.

It's a good idea to call ahead and ask if the observatory is closed for a private function. And if you go on a sunny day, bring sunglasses and wear layers because it gets hot inside - a nice problem to have in the middle of winter.

On the go

Who: Globe film critic Ty Burr and his daughters Eliza, 13, and Natalie, 11

What: Checking out Italian sports cars and funky antique autos

Where: Larz Anderson Auto Museum, Brookline <http://www.larzanderson.org>



This was a rainy-day diversion not only for my daughters but my own inner Brookline kid: For decades, I'd held tight to the strange childhood memory of an antique car with a toilet in the back seat. Did I really see that? Did the Larz Anderson Auto Museum exist outside my random long-term nostalgia?

Yes and yes. Located in a castle-like carriage house on the old Anderson estate - wooden placards bearing the names of long-dead horses still adorn the walls - "America's Oldest Car Collection" is one of those small, marvelously eccentric museums that only the very rich bequeath to the public. When we visited, the main room was home to "Passion, Design, Performance: The Art of Italian Style," which translates to Moschino handbags and Valentino dresses scattered between the visiting Ferraris, Lamborghinis, and Maseratis. My daughters dug it all.

Downstairs in the musty brick basement is the antique car collection amassed by Larz and Isabel Anderson, from their first purchase (an 1899 Winston 4-horsepower run-about) to their last (a 1925 Lincoln limo). And there it was: a 1906 CGV Berlin de Voyage (right), the mobile home of its era, complete with fold-down bed and toilet for those long trips to the couple's New Hampshire country estate.

So I wasn't dreaming. The girls goggled and giggled, got a charge out of the primitive electric cars, and wandered through the hushed environs with an appreciation for their sheer quiddity. We were in and out in less than an hour - and now my children can grow up wondering if they really saw a car with a toilet in the back.

Getting pumped

Who: Globe staffer Milva DiDomizio and her daughters Claire and Abby

What: Drinking up history

Where: Waterworks Museum

"A glass of sparkling water has not always been so easy to find." So says one of the exhibits at this museum, which just may give your kids a new appreciation for something many of us take for granted.

The building is the beautifully preserved Chestnut Hill Pumping Station, which provided water for Greater Boston from the late 1800s through the 1970s. The Great Engines Hall houses the triple expansion Leavitt Engine, the horizontal Worthington Engine, and the five-story Allis Engine. All were steam-powered, fueled by coal. They are impressively huge and complex, and fascinating from an engineering point of view. A long time could be spent examining the boilers, cylinders, pistons, and flywheels, and imagining how they worked.

Around the room are photographs, maps, diagrams, and tools that help kids visualize the engines in action and explain what they did and why. The museum, which opened in 2011, has done a great job with the presentation, which includes a film portraying Desmond Fitzgerald, the first supervising engineer of the facility, and ordinary citizens of its time. Boston theatergoers may recognize one of our best local actresses, Paula Plum, rejoicing about no longer having to carry several gallons of water on her back, while the young boy she's with complains that the modern water system means he has to take a bath every week.

The weight of history, the awesomeness of human ingenuity, the dim lighting, and the sheer size of the engines give the place a kind of magical air. With their winding metal staircases and tempting gadgetry, the engines even resemble giant play structures (climbing on them is not allowed, of course). It felt a little like stepping into the film "Hugo," which also combines history, engineering, and the promise of technology during the Industrial Revolution.

The museum's exhibits about our water supply don't just deal with the past. They also address how the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority provides 2.4 million citizens in more than 50 Boston area communities with water from the Quabbin Reservoir. Check the website for information about talks and special programs. The day we were there, an MWRA representative gave a slide presentation about the history of lifting and moving water.

The website also suggests combining your visit with a walk around the lovely Chestnut Hill Reservoir, which is right across the street. The short and pleasant trek took us 30 minutes with no stops. There are plenty of benches along the way for those who need to rest, or simply want to pause to take in the blue skies, watch the waterfowl, and enjoy the light on the water.

WINTER

Tube-ular fun

Who: Globe Magazine staff member Lylah M. Alphonse, her husband, and three of their five kids, ages 10 to 15

What: careening down a snowy hill

Where: Nashoba Valley Ski Area Tubing Park, Westford

<http://www.skinashoba.com>



Standing at the top of the hill, tubes at the ready, my older kids were too psyched to complain about who had been bothering whom just minutes earlier. With 15 lanes and four lifts, the tubing park at Nashoba Valley Ski Area has plenty of room, and an abundance of tubes means that even during the busiest times you rarely have to wait to take a ride.

The slope may look gentle, but you build up some serious speed on those tubes, and your heart hits your throat when your tube hits one of the built-in sculpted bumps. Weather conditions permitting, you can link up your tubes to caravan down the hill in a chain. Unlike old-school sledding, Nashoba Valley's lift makes it easy to get back to the top - attach your tube to the tow rope, take a

seat, and enjoy the ride.

I'll be honest: I huddled on the sidelines - OK, OK, relaxed at the onsite lodge and snack bar - with our youngest two kids, while my husband and our big three took turns bouncing and sliding down the icy hill on the huge tubes. Visitors have to be at least 42 inches tall or 6 years old to participate, and while our 4-year-old made the cut, height-wise, she was not really up for the speedy descents (vice versa for our 2-year-old son, of course).

The tubing park is open seven days a week (tubing under the bright lights at night is pretty cool). Fresh snow (natural or man-made - the park does keep the tubing runs nicely powdered) makes for a slightly slower ride; the park sometimes delays opening because of the weather, so it's a good idea to call before you get in the car for the 40-mile drive from Boston.

Slippery slope

Who: Globe style editor Hayley Kaufman, her husband, Chris, and their two kids Nate, 6, and Rachel, 3

What: Hitting the slopes

Where: Blue Hills Ski Area, Canton

<http://ski-bluehills.com/>



The snow had gotten patchy and brittle, and still my son, Nate, would pull his pink sled to the top of the little hill in our backyard, plant his feet on the plastic, and glide - standing up - to the bottom. It was not a pretty sight. We're not talking about a lot of room here, and he would careen happily for 15, 20 feet, and then - wham! - crash into the deck. My husband and I eyed him warily. We had to

admit he wasn't doing his knees or the deck any good.

It was time to go skiing.

There's no denying that skiing is a schlep. You've got to bundle up and haul gear and wait in lines. And, of course, it's not cheap. To get Nate on the slopes, we shelled out \$30 to rent the equipment, \$30 for a lift ticket, and \$30 for a 90-minute lesson.

So what's the upside? How about making the most of the long winter. If you're going to live in a place like Boston, you either have to stop worrying and learn to love the bombers on the slopes or resign yourself - and your kids - to being inside several months a year. I'll take skiing.

The scene at the Blue Hills Ski Area was fairly adorable. In one cordoned-off space, a couple of dozen kids, ages 4 to 6, lined up for lessons, which more or less amounted to learning how to get back up when they'd toppled over. They also got to side step up a little carpet and "ski" down the "hill." By "ski" I mean snowplow, which is how beginning skiers slow themselves down, and by hill I mean about 10 feet of nearly flat snow.

The kids, in giant coats and plush hats, did their best to stay upright, listen to their instructors, push their skis into a "V" formation, and not run into the side of the rental building. Overall, they did OK. Nate immediately asked when he could ski again. Better yet, our deck may make it another year.

Weapons of major destruction

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee, his wife, and their three kids, ages 8-11

What: Going medieval

Where: Higgins Armory Museum, Worcester

<http://www.higgins.org/>

Halberds, lances, vogues, broad axes, rapiers, fauchards, maces, corsicas, glaives, pol-laxes, roncones, awl-pikes - now these guys knew how to fight.

There was no limit to the number of ways a knight could impale, mutilate, bash, or otherwise maim his enemy. He's wearing a suit of armor? So what. Hold out your roncone, grab his lance-rest with it, and yank him off his horse. Bop him over the head with the other end of your weapon, and - voila! - he's out like a light.

Perhaps it wasn't that easy. But it is easy to imagine what Medieval-era combat was like when you take a trip to the Higgins Armory Museum in Worcester. Housed in a steel-and-glass Art Deco building erected in 1930 by local steel magnate John Woodman Higgins to contain his immense collection of suits of armor and weapons, the museum is the only one of its kind in the Western Hemisphere. Why Higgins went all over the world buying this stuff is anyone's guess, but lucky for us he did.

The Great Hall, the museum's centerpiece, is where the best material is kept. The room itself resembles a Gothic castle, and the pieces are presented with understated class - as though it's no big deal to show visitors full suits of armor from the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Hanging on the wall: a Bavarian saber from 1620. Over there: a suit of German field armor from 1510.

Some of the artifacts are much older: Corinthian helmets from 550-650 BC, a Greek sword from 1200 BC. (I tried to convince my daughter that the ridge on a first-century Roman helmet was a pouch for an iPod, but she just rolled her eyes at me.)

If anything, these amazing pieces are exhibited almost too matter-of-factly. The rarity of such well-preserved, 3,000-year-old artifacts seems lost on the Higgins, which, to my eyes, hasn't been updated much in the 20 years since my previous visit. A few notes on how each piece was obtained would be enlightening (unless, of course, the museum doesn't know where J.W. Higgins procured his finds.)

On the other hand, there's something to be said for wondering about the stories and battles behind each object. I kept returning to the 18th-century mace hanging on the wall at one end of the Great Hall. Oh, to wield that piece of equipment the next time someone cuts me off on the Southeast Expressway.

The art of craft

Who: Globe columnist Joanna Weiss, her daughter Ava, 6, and their friends Ella and Lela Lantigua, 6 and 3

What: Exploring art and craft

Where: Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton

<http://www.fullercraft.org>



Tell a first-grader that you're taking her to an art museum, and you might get a moan of protest. Tell her she'll be looking at arts and crafts, and she might be more open-minded. "Craft" feels more like what we do on rainy afternoons and Sunday mornings: playing with materials, putting things together. So I hoped that was what 6-year-old Ava would see when I took her and some friends to the Fuller

Craft Museum in Brockton.

Just off Route 24, the museum is housed in a contemporary building on a pond, filled with three-dimensional art that looks and feels tactile. Every so often, an object is actually available for touch, so long as you don a pair of white gloves. The museum is small enough for manageable visits, and the layout is open enough to tantalize. Through one window, the girls spied a sculpture of a bird composed of auto parts, and they couldn't wait to see it at close range.

Before they reached it, they saw beautiful blown glass, ceramics, and patchwork art in the spirit of a quilt. But what really struck their fancy was an temporary exhibition called "The New Materiality: Digital Dialogues at the Boundaries of Contemporary Craft." Many of the pieces mixed traditional materials with video and sound. Some were analog, but with digital inspiration, such as Sonya Clark's portrait of Madame C.J. Walker, made from black plastic combs hung on a loom, with teeth removed to make the space darker or lighter. They also loved Mark Zirpel's "Digital Vase 2009": a vase topped with a latex glove, set on a pedestal with a motion sensor. When anyone approached, the glove filled up with air, as if to say, "Hi, kids. This is art."

Fossil watch

Who: Globe film critic Ty Burr and his daughter Natalie, 11

What: Fossils and crystals and funky stuffed hippos, oh my

Where: Harvard Museum of Natural History, Cambridge <http://www.hmnh.harvard.edu/>



This was a nostalgia tour in more ways than one. The Harvard Museum of Natural History was one of the first local institutions I took the girls to upon moving to Boston six years ago - which meant that to 11-year-old Natalie it was a blast from the distant past. For me, the HMNH is a treasure for the window it opens on the history of natural history. It's as if the steamer trunk of pioneering Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz had burst open: There are dusty cases containing rows upon rows of 19th century wild animals - some with stuffing bursting through the cracks of their aging skins. There are glass jars with icky, mesmerizing specimens like the Goliath Frog. There's a dodo skeleton. The carcass of a Lewis's Woodpecker collected by Meri-

wether Lewis himself is temporarily unavailable for viewing, but the hall of crystals and gemstones makes up for the loss, and the glass flower exposition is testimony to art, craft, and weird obsession.

Natalie wasn't too old to get a cheap laugh out of the fossilized dinosaur turd, and she oohed and ahed when docent K.T. Taylor pointed out the oil that still drips from the suspended whale skeleton on muggy days. Taylor explained that many of the animals weren't bagged on Harvard expeditions at all but instead purchased from the H.A. Ward mail order specimen catalog at the turn of the century.

The art of taxidermy has declined (and the skins have dried out) to the point where renovating the displays is impossible, and, in a way, that's fitting. Despite fine current exhibitions on color in nature and meteorites, the Harvard Museum of Natural History is a literally old-school time capsule. It says as much about how we once thought about the natural world as it shows us that world.

Intergalactic

Who: Globe columnist Joanna Weiss, her brother, and her daughter, Ava, 6

What: Visiting the planets

Where: Hayden Planetarium, Museum of Science http://www.mos.org/exhibits_shows/planetarium



As a 6-year-old who is, by definition, vertically challenged, Ava is highly aware of who's sitting in front of her at plays and movie theaters. So when she took her seat at the Museum of Science's Charles Hayden Planetarium, she immediately griped that she wasn't going to be able to see.

"Don't worry," we told her. "Look up."

In the plush reclining seats that fill the auditorium, everyone gets a stunning view

of the 57-foot dome. Alas, on the day we attended, the planetarium's state-of-the-art, \$2 million Zeiss Starmaster projector was on the fritz. We relied on a digital backup system, so I'm not sure what we missed. But what we saw made an impression on a child who is newly aware of what lies beyond her planet.

The planetarium offers several different shows, but we chose "The Sky Tonight," a basic primer of the planets and stars on view in Boston. It was geared toward young audiences and astronomy beginners, with live narration from an enthusiastic astronomer. She called out for answers, made a few jokes, and used some nifty digital magic to outline some of the famous constellations.

But where things really got exciting - for Ava, at least - was when we "left" our perch on Earth, zoomed up for a close view of Saturn and its rings, then continued past the solar system and beyond the Milky Way. Ava swore it was we who were moving, not the screen, and when we stopped short at Saturn, she let out a shriek. (Apologies to the patrons behind us.)

The 40-minute show was perfect for limited attention spans, and we exited to an interactive exhibit on the solar system, featuring scale models of the planets and the sun. The last planet was Neptune, not Pluto. So much for my elementary-school education; this new stuff is up to date.

Tickets to the Planetarium are separate from those to the main exhibit halls, so you could go for a quick visit if you wanted. But we were lured to the museum's other bells, whistles, and cheery volunteers. The stars and planets made an impression on Ava, but so did an exhibit on the workings of the human body, which had her building a "pulse detector" out of Play-Doh, a straw, and a bottlecap. She walked out of the museum with a stack of spoils - and an inclination to study the nighttime sky.

The science of fun

Who: Globe Magazine staff member Lylah M. Alphonse, two of her kids, ages 4 and 2, and a 5-year-old friend

What: Learning about science and having fun

Where: The Discovery Museums, Acton



The dinosaur kind of sneaks up on you.

You're driving along Route 27 in Acton, about 30 miles northwest of Boston, admiring the fall foliage, when you notice the big green dinosaur poking its head over a cream-colored picket fence. Welcome to the Discovery Museums, twin centers for scientific exploration that are so much fun, your kids won't even know they're learning.

Park for free in the large lot behind the Children's Museum, which is geared for kids age 6 and under. It looks like a staid, 120-year-old Victorian House on the outside. On the inside it looks like a sprawling Victorian House as designed and decorated by a bunch of imaginative and artistic kids. A massive chalkboard wall just begs for scribbles, a huge wooden train invites climbing and horn-tooting, Rube Goldberg-like ball tracks take up an entire room - and that's just part of what's on the first floor. Climb the winding staircase to find a jungle populated with wild (stuffed) animals, kid-friendly experiments with light and sound, and a play cafe with plenty to feed the imagination; the third floor houses ship and submarine play spaces, and there are plenty of nooks and crannies to explore as well.

On the other side of the parking lot, elementary-school age kids, tweens, and even teenagers can experiment with hands-on exhibits at the Science Museum, a more modern-looking structure that opened in 1987, five years after the Children's Museum. The Science Museum features thematically based interactive exhibits designed to educate as well as amuse. Kids can get their hands dirty in the Inventor's Workshop, get a feel for what clouds are like by walking through a whirling tornado of vapor, learn about math, communication, light, color, nature, and more - the three-floor, 8,500-square-foot space is full of opportunities for fun.

The Discovery Museums are a budget-friendly double dose of fun and learning. Plus, your kids can ride a dinosaur. What's cooler than that?

From Kyoto, with love

Who: Globe style editor Hayley Kaufman, her husband, and their children, Rachel, 3, and Nate, 5

What: Learning about Japan

Where: The Children's Museum

<http://www.bostonkids.org/>



My son's obsessed with Bakugan action figures, and now it seems his interest has broadened to all things related to Japan. Recently, Nate came home from school and announced he wants to learn Japanese. Later that night, we located Tokyo on the globe and marveled at how far it is from Boston.

Not long after, we headed to the Japanese House at the Children's Museum. Tucked in the back on the

third floor, the house was a gift from the City of Kyoto, carefully reassembled inside the museum.

We took off our shoes and walked across the woven tatami mats that cover the floors. The kids insisted on lying down on a small bed roll, complete with a Hello Kitty pillow, my daughter's favorite. We sat cross-legged around the formal dining table, and peered into the home's golden Buddhist shrine and back yard rock garden. We paged through several children's books, examining the characters and trying to imagine what the stories said from the pictures.

For all the differences between the museum's traditional Japanese home and our side-entrance colonial, there were some similarities. The Japanese house has only one bathroom, too, Nate was quick to point out.

Without planning it, we had visited at storytime. A young museum employee told the assembled crowd the tale of Kenjyu, a little boy who wanted to create a park for his friends. He asked his parents for 700 cedar seeds and planted them in an unused field. Years later, the little town had developed into a big city, and the trees had grown into a lush forest.

A craft table was set up nearby and the kids were shown how to make pretty decorations with washi paper, Japanese maple leaves, wooden sticks, and bits of patterned paper. As a final touch, the teachers wrote all the kids' names on their creations in Japanese. Nate and I hung it in his bedroom window as soon as we got home. Somehow, Tokyo didn't seem so far away anymore.

The art of the library

Who: G writer June Wulff, her daughter Elise (23), and her husband, Jim

What: art and architecture tour

Where: Boston Public Library

<http://www.bpl.org>



There's so much art and architecture to take in during this one-hour tour that you almost forget you're in a library.

We met our guide in the vestibule of the McKim Building on Dartmouth Street, a classical gem completed in 1895 by the architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White. The knowledgeable docent ushered about 20 of us outside on a cold Sunday afternoon to give us background information on the "palace for the people," as the library was called. Modeled after a French library and Roman palazzos, Bostonians at the time thought the granite building looked like a morgue and a cigar box.

Back inside, the entrance hall has 20 types of marble and three sets of bronze doors by Daniel Chester French, the sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial.

Back in the vestibule there's marble from top to bottom - a vaulted mosaic ceiling with marble vines, trellises, and names of famous leaders, writers, abolitionists, and artists, and a floor with brass inlay.

Back outside to the courtyard, which we will definitely revisit when it's warmer, - lunch and tea are available for purchase.

Back inside to the main staircase where two huge unpolished marble lions face each other at the top of the stairs. Our guide explained that the tails are shiny from kids rubbing them because, as tradition has it, if you rub their tails they will come to life (an old wives' tail, ba dum bum). We followed our guide like ducklings following Mrs. Mallard, weaving in and out of the Bates Reading Room where folks with laptops sat at massive wooden tables with green lamps, surrounded by books lining the walls; the Abbey Room with a gargantuan fireplace, and Edwin Austin Abbey's colorful murals titled "The Quest of the Holy Grail"; galleries with photo exhibits; and stunning murals by John Singer Sargent. During restoration in the early 1990s, workers found a cigar butt on a ledge that is believed to be Sargent's.

We clapped (softly) for our tour guide, and Elise made our day: "Being here inspires me to want to be productive. And I wasn't even tempted to check my cellphone."

Dark and delicious

Who: Style editor Hayley Kaufman; her husband, Chris; and their three kids, Devin, Nate, and Rachel

What: Hot chocolate

Where: Bristol Lounge

Hanukkah was almost over, and after several days of giving trinkets to the kids, I wanted to do something special, something memorable. So everybody got dressed up and we headed to the Bristol Lounge.

Oh yeah, right, you're muttering. It's a recession. Taking a 5-year-old to the Four Seasons - what's the point?

Readers, I feel your pain. Which is why we had a modest goal for our visit to the hotel: one sweet, steaming cup of hot chocolate for each of us.

The host showed us to a lovely sitting area, perfect for the five of us. My husband, Devin and I sank into a high-back, red leather banquette while the little kids crawled into swivel chairs. As it happens, we weren't the only family there that day. The lounge was surprisingly full of children, and the din of the brunch crowd kept us from feeling self-conscious when our brood got boisterous.

By the time our server, Emilio, swept up to the table, I knew the outing was going to be a home run. He brought crayons and mazes for Nate and Rachel, and they settled right in. We asked for hot chocolates all around, and he nodded sagely, as if we'd just ordered a bottle of Chateau Margaux and lobster thermidor.

Nate looked around the room. "This place, where we're sitting, is like our own secret house," he said.

The cocoa came in porcelain pots, along with whipped cream in bowls. The kids' faces lit up, and Chris grabbed the camera. Emilio happened to be walking by at just that moment, with a carafe of coffee in his hands.

"Would you like me to take a picture of the family?" he asked. We would.

Not long after, the chocolate nearly gone, Emilio returned again. In his hands he carried toys, nothing big: a tiny stuffed whale and a seal. "Can we let your sister choose first?" Emilio asked Nate. "OK, sure," he answered. Now that's what I call a treat.

Bowled over

Who: Globe correspondent Lylah M. Alphonse, most of her five kids, her parents-in-law, and her niece

What: Candlepin bowling

Where: The Acton Bowladrome

<http://www.actonbowladrome.com>



You don't have to be a "Big Lebowski" aficionado to take your kids bowling. Little kids may find it difficult to lug a regulation ball, let alone manage to get it all the way down the lane, but candlepin bowling — with a softball-size wooden ball and three turns per frame — is easier on little hands and short attention spans. Technically, it's harder to score (the smaller pins aren't cleared away between turns), but my kids and their friends were much more inter-

ested in rolling the balls than adding up the points, anyway.

We live out in the 'burbs, so we headed to the Acton Bowladrome, a.k.a. The Drome, for an afternoon of fun — several times. On one trip, I just took my youngest kids (ages 6 and 4), asked the attendant to put the bumpers up, and watched them squeal with glee as they missed all of the pins over and over again. I brought my 12-year-old son and 11-year-old niece on another visit, and they quickly mastered the lanes. My in-laws came along for the ride another time, and ended up bowling several frames. The Drome truly is a family spot — it's been family owned and operated for more than 35 years, and owner Josh Sundberg recently put in a 1950s-themed burger joint called the Burgerdrome, which has pretty decent food.

Older kids will appreciate the fact that they can play in the arcade instead of watch their younger siblings joyfully roll gutterball after gutterball; parents will appreciate the fact that the arcade uses a card-swipe system, so no coins or tokens are required. The cards even record the number of points earned when you win games, so you can avoid carrying around (or accidentally bringing home) long strings of paper tickets. Carry the card back to the front desk to tally up your score and select from the usual arcade-type prizes — bouncy balls, penny candy, plastic doodads, and the like, as well as boom boxes and gadgets for those who manage to rack up tens of thousands of points.

Prices are reasonable, even if you're driving a minivan full of youngsters. My kids ended up with a fistful of temporary tattoos and a strong desire to come back soon. Knocking things down on purpose, for fun? What's not to like?

One fish, two fish, red fish, Bob fish

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee and his three kids, ages 6 to 9

What: Virtual Fish Tank

Where: Museum of Science

<http://www.mos.org>



The Van de Graaff generator in the Theater of Electricity, the shark show in the 3-D digital cinema, the tricks with lights and lasers in the Light House - we marveled at them all. But wild ponies could not have dragged my kids from the Virtual Fish Tank at the Museum of Science.

It has been open for more than a decade, but to a child see-

ing it for the first time, the room is brand new and wondrous. The front of the room is a bank of TV screens arranged so that they resemble the view from a submersible craft. Cartoon fish swim about, chased by the occasional predator. A computer program allows visitors to create their own fish - bestowing attributes (such as bulging eyeballs) and behaviors (such as shyness or an attraction to bright objects) before "tagging" them with three-letter names and releasing them into the "tank." Once released, your fish behaves according to the specifications you gave it.

Over and over, my children made and released their own fish, watching with delight as they appeared to pop out from a pipe connecting the computer to the "water." They thought it was amusing to give each fish the same name, so if a school of Bobs happens to be swimming around the next time you visit, you'll know where they came from.

From sap to syrup

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee; his wife, Kelly; and their three kids, ages 7 to 10

What: maple sugaring

Where: Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary, Sharon http://www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Moose_Hill/index.php



There is no comparison between cheap, store-brand "pancake syrup" and the real thing: 100 percent maple syrup. It's expensive, to be sure, and once you get a close-up view of the process, you can understand why: It takes 40 gallons of sap - and a heck of a lot of work - to produce 1 gallon of syrup.

Plenty of maple sugar farms around New England offer tours in late winter, when the sap runs. We

took a trip to Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary in Sharon, which bottles and sells its own maple syrup. Moose Hill offers guided tours throughout the day during its sugaring festival, in March. Spots on the 90-minute tours sell out days in advance, so it's wise to make reservations. It's not the only place in the area, though: A list of Audubon-run events around the state can be found at www.massaudubon.org.

Our tour at the sugaring festival took us on a circuitous path through the woods of Moose Hill. Our guide showed us how to identify the particular maple trees whose sap can be turned into syrup, and she demonstrated how a tree is tapped. A pair of Colonial reenactors explained how we first figured out that sap could be distilled into sugar and syrup (though the story seemed more fable than fact) and how a family running a maple sugaring farm would spend every waking hour this time of year hauling buckets of sap back and forth between tree and house. Finally we arrived at the present-day sugarhouse, where we could see - and smell - sap becoming syrup. Samples were offered and consumed, of course.

SPRING

Skipping through sculptures

Who: Globe Living/Arts editor Fiona Luis and her son, Dylan, 4

What: Walking, with a healthy dose of art

Where: DeCordova Sculpture Park, Lincoln <http://www.decordova.org>

The idea of taking a 4-year-old to a museum can be daunting. How long can he last? Might he run into the Rothko, crash into the Cassatt? And what to do if you're in the mood for art while he's agitating to go for a walk?

The perfect solution is the sculpture park at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, where 35 acres of woodlands and lawns provide hours of ambulatory nirvana for a pre-schooler interested in spotting bugs, spelling out signs, and skipping among the large-scale artwork. And it obliges parents who like to slip into teaching mode: Shape, form, color, texture, setting, thoughts, and feelings are writ large on these grounds. Rick Brown's "Butterfly" is geometry come alive. Ronald Gonzalez's "Cones" is form and function made delightful. Fletcher Benton's "Donut with 3 Balls" is food for thought.

But for Dylan, the highlight of the ramble is a section of the park called Alice's Garden. Thirteen of the park's 75 sculptures are nestled among the landscaping on the gentle slopes here, with the likes of "Feral Goose" (Kitty Wales) and a bronze hat titled "A Mile From Any Neighbor From Walden" (Christopher Frost) eliciting giggles. Perched on a rocky outcrop is John Wilson's calming "Eternal Presence," a bronze head that gazes out onto the verdant grounds, commanding a curious 4-year-old to do the same.

For him, Alice's Garden was quite the wonderland.

Where the butterflies roam

Who: Globe Magazine staff member Lylah M. Alphonse and her five kids, ages 1 to 14.

What: Indoor butterfly watching

Where: The Butterfly Place, Westford

<http://www.butterflyplace-ma.com>



We walked into the darkness of the small “airlock” and then into the bright sunlight filtering through the flowers and trees in the 3,100-square-foot glass atrium. My 19-month-old’s mouth dropped open in awe. My 3-year-old, hopped up on “Go, Diego, Go!,” eyed the moving sparks of color and pointed: “Look, Mama! A Blue Morpho butterfly!” (Appar-

ently the graphic artists for the Nick Jr. cartoon she loves are spot-on, because she was right.)

The Butterfly Place opened in 1990, only the fourth butterfly habitat in the country at the time. Older kids with an entomology bent will learn plenty in the observation area, which is set up for a self-guided tour of cocoon- and larvae-filled display cases and a 15-minute video of the life cycle of a butterfly, but the real attraction is the live butterfly habitat, where, if you stand still enough, a fluttering specimen might even land on you.

The habitat is kept at about 80 degrees (optimal for butterfly flight), and during our most recent visit a few newly hatched quail chicks roamed the place like a band of tiny, animated Peeps. With as many as 500 examples of about 50 types of butterflies from around the world, the Butterfly Place is especially appealing to fairy-princess fanatics - we even saw a guest in full princess regalia, complete with iridescent pink wings.

Duck ... duck ... boat

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee; his wife, Kelly; and their three kids, ages 6 to 9

What: Boston Duck Tours

<http://www.bostonducktours.com>



It took eight years of living in the Boston area, but I finally worked up the courage to get on - no, to be seen on - one of those World War II amphibious vehicles known as ducks. See, I’d always considered them rather hokey - fine for the tourists, but you wouldn’t catch a Bostonian riding in one.

So my wife and I used our kids as an excuse to take the 80-minute tour.

Bully for us that we did. It was surprisingly engaging, entertaining, and even informative for native New Englanders. Our driver - Major Tom Foolery - wore Superman pajamas and talked nonstop. He was livelier than any standup comedian I’ve seen, and his humor was perfectly wholesome. More than that, he enlightened us to many, many facts about Boston we hadn’t previously been aware of. I won’t rip off the tour by spilling all the beans, but I will tell you that we heard a story about the Granary Burying Ground that I won’t soon forget.

The kids, of course, loved driving into the Charles River - I mean, how many times in your life are you going to actually drive into the water, intentionally? Several of the children on our tour got to steer the boat, which made their day. When we pulled back into the Museum of Science nearly an hour and half after we’d left, it was much too soon. A credit to Boston’s marvelous history, yes, but also to the sensational delivery of tour hosts like Major Tom.

In Newport, fun for free

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee; his wife, Kelly; and their three kids, ages 7 to 10

What: Kite flying, sightseeing, and strolling

Where: Newport, R.I.



You may have to have a lot of money to live well in Newport, but you don't have to have any money at all to enjoy yourself there. Here's one way to spend an entire day there without spending any cash:

Morning: Go fly a kite. At Brenton Point State Park, there is plenty of free parking and plenty of room

to fly kites. We were frustrated at first by the too-modest wind, which was too light to lift our cloth kites. Finally a stronger sea breeze began blowing in and held our salamander, penguin, and butterfly aloft. The wind can shift quickly at Brenton Point, which is probably why it is such a popular kite-flying spot - on weekends, there are usually dozens of kites in the air. As the wind direction changed, we immediately smelled the difference (it was saltier) and felt the air temperature drop. Once we got tired of the kites - and believe me, it took a long time to get my three kids tired of flying kites - we opened our cooler and had a great picnic of homemade sandwiches and fruit.

Early afternoon: Walk on the edge. There is easy access to the Cliff Walk (below) from the side streets separating the mansions of Bellevue Avenue. We walked for quite a ways on the famed path, with the ocean on one side of us and New England's most photographed houses on the other. Some of the mansions are not fenced off from the Cliff Walk, so visitors can stroll on the lawns. Kelly and I would have enjoyed hiking the entire path, but the kids didn't see what the big deal was and got sick of it sooner than we expected. (It's just a bunch of mansions and water, Dad.)

Late afternoon: Act like a tourist. You can stroll along Thames Street and by all the little shops on the waterfront without spending a dime. If you want to stay frugal, leave the cash and the credit card at home, because you will be tempted by a necklace or earrings. Or someone in your family will be. We're not saying who.

Total cost of trip, not including gas: \$0.

OK, so we stopped for ice cream on the way home. Sue us.

Carnival atmosphere

Who: Globe writer Joanna Weiss; her husband, Dan DeLeo; and their kids, Ava, 4, and Jesse, 7 months

What: Mingling with the tourists

Where: Faneuil Hall



Our family lingered on the edge of a large crowd at Faneuil Hall, watching a fast-talking street performer. Between juggling tricks, he posed a question: "Who here is from Boston?"

My feeble hand went up. (My daughter thinks she's from the suburbs, and my husband was holding the baby.) "Who's from out of town?"

The crowd went wild.

It wasn't the first time we found ourselves vastly outnumbered at Faneuil Hall, a tiny band of locals in a sea of Europeans and Midwesterners. It's ironic, really; when we visit other cities, we try not to look like tourists. In Boston, we're happy to walk their walk. Yes, Faneuil Hall is historical but hokey, another mall with another Gap. But it's also a great, vibrant outdoor spot for kids, a carnival on the cheap.

It was Ava who kept leading us back here, after she discovered her love for the Balloon Guy. There are several competing Balloon Guys, actually, and an occasional Balloon Lady, each claiming a different spot on the cobblestones. Ava doesn't differentiate. They all charge a pittance in tips for elaborate balloon sculptures, a far cry from the twisted poodles of my youth: huge, multi-balloon hats with flowers on top, cute teddy bears on swings. (They still pop just as easily as ever, a lesson in transience for young minds.)

Now that she's getting bigger, Ava is discovering alternate entertainment, such as the kiosk that sells spray-on temporary tattoos. For less than \$20, the whole family - baby excluded - can get inked: Ava has had Hello Kitty and a dragonfly on her arms, Dan once got a bear claw on his bicep, and I traipsed around town for a couple of weeks with a deer tattooed on my ankle.

That's how the outing gets started. Afterward, we roam around people-watching, chatting with strangers with exotic accents, sampling the street performers, ducking into the food court. According to the guidebooks, it's the most obvious day trip in Boston. But it still feels like our little secret.

Where the wild things are

Who: Names writer Mark Shanahan, his daughter Julia, 8, and son Beckett, 4

What: Admiring the animals

Where: Stone Zoo, Stoneham

<http://www.zoonewengland.org>



Living, as we do, next to the Middlesex Fells, our children see more wildlife than they would in, say, South Boston. Critters that have wandered into the yard from the adjacent woods include white-tail deer, raccoons, a skunk, foxes, a wild turkey, snakes, and something that resembled a wombat.

But even all that isn't enough for our 4-year-old son and 8-year-old

daughter, who are huge fans of Jeff Corwin and Animal Planet. They want a lynx, an alligator, or maybe a wild horse to greet them in the morning.

Conveniently, we live just a few miles from Stone Zoo, the smaller of Zoo New England's two wildlife parks. (The Franklin Park Zoo is the other.) We hadn't been in a while, so we wanted to check out Iggy, the 3-year-old white-cheeked gibbon that's taken up residence there.

After stops to see the Mexican grey wolves (they were jogging the perimeter of their leafy, hillside spread), the American bald eagle (he looked regal as ever on his perch), and the yak (what can you say about the poor yak), we wandered over to see Iggy, a transplant from the Bronx Zoo who's moved in between the river otters and the porcupines.

"He's a real crowd-pleaser," said my daughter as she watched the small, butterscotch-colored ape swing from cord to cord. "Is he dancing?" asked Beck.

No, and he wasn't performing, either, I explained. He was being a gibbon, doing what gibbons do. (I also may have muttered something about gibbons living naturally in Southeast Asia, but Beck wasn't much interested in geography as he stared at the ape with the extra-long arms playing peek-a-boo.)

Just as Iggy tired of us, the daily bird show called "Lord of the Wings" was starting. The show, free with admission, featured several birds of prey, including an eagle, a blue-fronted Amazon, an Egyptian vulture, and a barn owl.

Audience members were told several times to stay seated during the 30-minute demonstration lest Bessy, an eagle owl that looked like she'd just consumed a large house cat, mistake you for a meal.

"It's going to eat me?" said Beck.

"Maybe," I said. "But only if it's really hungry."

War games

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee; his wife, and their three kids, ages 8 to 11; and their friends, the Hallman family

What: Exploring a battleship and a submarine

Where: Battleship Cove, Fall River

<http://www.battleshipcove.com/>



If there is a perfect age for exploring a battleship, the boys are at it. When I refer to "the boys," I'm talking about my 11-year-old sons, Aidan and Liam, and their friend Andrew. I'm also talking about their dads, who are 40.

Battleship Cove, which sits beneath the Braga Bridge in Fall River, is a playground for middle school boys - and, in this case, their elementary school sisters. We drove down on a Sunday afternoon and marveled at the fact that we had the four ships practically to ourselves. We also wished we had arrived earlier, because a good half day is needed to take it all in, even at a brisk pace.

The main attraction is the USS Massachusetts, a World War II battleship that attacked Iwo Jima

and Okinawa. From the engine room to the mess hall, everything remains in its historically accurate condition, right down to the plastic scrambled eggs and bacon that still sit in warming pans. The three boys and three girls scampered up and down stairwells and snaked through narrow corridors, pretending to be enlisted men (and women) on the high seas, all while asking questions like "Why were Nazis bad?"

The ships are docked alongside one another, and they're connected by a series of planks, so it's a cinch to get from one vessel to the next. Good thing, because we had to rush through the lower levels of the battleship in order to make it over to the submarine - the USS Lionfish - before the place closed. It, too, has been restored to its World War II condition.

Wandering through the belly of these beasts and lingering over their systems of propulsion and armament, it was impossible not to be impressed

by the know-how it took to assemble such machinery. This is the 40-year-old talking. The 11-year-olds would tell you that it's really cool to point the big guns at their fathers.

What a spectacle

Who: Globe staffer Milva DiDomizio and daughters Claire, 14, Abby, 12

What: Exploring Spectacle Island

Where: Boston Harbor Islands National Park <http://www.bostonislands.com>



Once, millions of cubic yards of dirt were excavated for a highway project called the Big Dig. While costs and accusations mounted, bargeloads of dirt were transported to a small eyeglass-shaped island in Boston Harbor.

Thus began the rebirth of Spectacle Island, a lovely spot for a day trip that's just a pleasant 20-minute boat ride away from Long Wharf. Opened in 2006, the island offers a fun summertime getaway for city dwellers. Once there, you can go it alone and enjoy the hiking trails, picnicking areas, and beach, or check out one of the programs offered regularly on the island.

We joined a tour with Ranger Kim, who clued us in on the island's past incarnations (quarantine station and garbage dump, among others), showed us its edible plant life, and talked about the process of refurbishing it to its present state. Besides learning some history and checking out the plants, the budding naturalists in our group enjoyed looking for insects and birds. We saw cormorants, gulls, and red-winged blackbirds, but keen-eyed bird watchers can see many more, and record them as citizen scientists (the pamphlet in the Visitors Center will tell you how).

Ranger Kim led us to the north drumlin, the tallest point in the harbor at 155 feet above sea level, and then we were on our own. On the day we went, the view was spectacular. We could have chosen to continue on the island's hiking trails, but the beach beckoned. The water was cold but refreshing, and outdoor showers are provided for rinsing off after swimming and sand play.

South Beach, with its wealth of sea glass, pottery shards, and archaeological artifacts, is a great place for beachcombing. Taking found treasures off the island is prohibited, but kids can add their discoveries to the cool collection on display in the Visitors Center.

Speaking of the Visitors Center, the building is a veritable lesson in environmental science. In fulfillment of the goal of being a zero emission park, it boasts photovoltaic solar panels, modern composting toilets, and a water recycling system. It also has a great front porch, where we ate a relaxing lunch serenaded by live jazz.

Some of the island's upcoming programs, like Youth Yoga, Family Fitness Day (happening today), and more jazz, look enticing, but for us, the island itself was enough of an attraction to inspire a return visit.

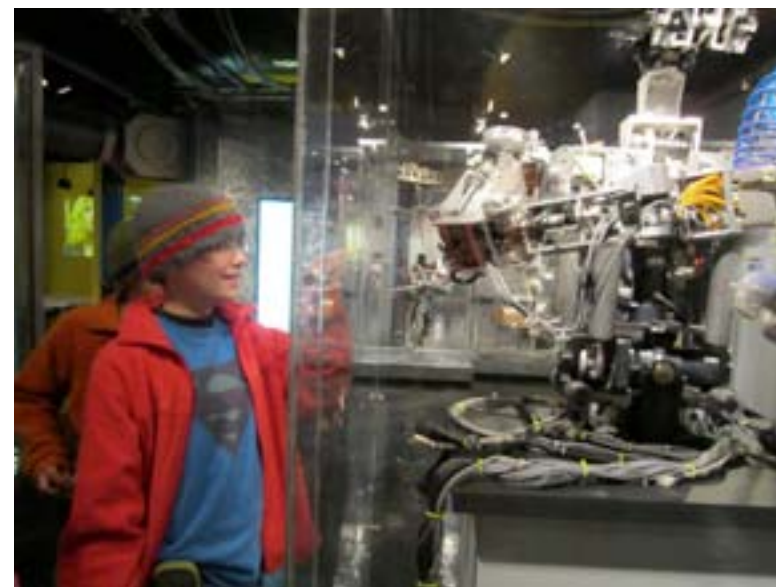
We, robots

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee, his wife, Kelly, and their three kids, ages 9-12

What: Geeking out

Where: MIT Museum, Cambridge

<http://web.mit.edu/museum/>



They're only in seventh grade, but my sons are already dreaming of MIT - not only because they think they'd like to design robots but also because I told them it would be easy for me to hop on the Red Line to Kendall Square and have lunch with them on a regular basis. (What's cooler than having lunch on campus with your parents?)

In any event, we're a ways off from thinking about college. But since

they've got MIT on the brain, I used that as an excuse to take them and their sister to the MIT Museum to check out the robotics exhibit there. "Robots & Beyond: Exploring Artificial Intelligence at MIT" examines the myriad contributions that MIT students and faculty have made in the field since opening the world's first artificial intelligence research center in 1959.

Some of the designs - such as Cog, a huge anthropomorphized robot, and Kismet, a Gremlin-like mechanism designed to mimic human emotion - have serious real-world applications, but manage to be amusing nonetheless. Other pieces don't fit our cartoon notions of what robots are - tools for grasping, performing laparoscopic and remote surgery, and conducting planetary exploration, for example - but still entertain as they educate.

There's much more to the MIT Museum than robots, though. ("Get ready to geek out," the guy at the welcome desk had told us.) We were mesmerized by the room of holograms and the gallery filled with the whimsical kinetic sculptures of Arthur Ganson. My kids were fascinated by one machine that oils itself and another that sends a ball chain on an endless loop through a faucet.

Me, I was hypnotized by the whirring motor connected to a series of reduction gears, the last of which makes one rotation every 13.7 billion years, the approximate age of the universe. I told the kids we couldn't leave the room until we had watched it go around at least once; alas, the parking meter was running out.

Innovation district

Who: Globe writer June Wulff, husband Jim, son Cam, daughter Elise, and Sarah Crane

What: An “industrial-strength museum experience”

Where: Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation, Waltham

<http://www.crimi.org>

We didn't see “Do not touch” signs at the Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation. In fact, staff members encouraged us to touch the steam engines, generators, bicycles, tools, and other inventions that make this place a great family destination.

Before you enter the museum, a short walk on the wooden bridge over the Charles River brings you back to 19th-century Waltham when the mill girls headed to work at the Boston Manufacturing Company textile mill complex.

Francis Cabot Lowell (namesake of another industrial city) went to England, memorized plans for power looms, and returned home to develop the first mill in the United States where everything was processed from start to finish. Young women turned raw cotton into a finished product all within one complex.

“I like this place because you can touch everything” says Cam, who studies a planer and is soon joined by a young volunteer who shows us how the belts, pulleys, levers, and other parts work. The industrial age is well represented in this brick building by a machine that made paper bags, an Orient Runabout car, Orient bicycles, a display from the Waltham Watch Company, a 19th-century fire engine, tools, and a Victorian telephone booth and switchboard that connected folks long before the cellphone. “This is kind of what I imagine Santa's workshop to be,” comments Elise, who enjoys looking at the innards of old watches in the upstairs gallery.

If you want a great way to bridge the generation gap, start with that short walk over the bridge.

Journey to the center of the earth

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee, his wife, and their three kids (ages 8-11)

What: Going into middle Earth

Where: The Mapparium

<http://www.marybakereddylibrary.org>

If you were going to name the seven wonders of Boston, the Mapparium would certainly be on the list. Located in the Mary Baker Eddy Library at the Christian Science Complex on Massachusetts Avenue, the Mapparium doesn't take long to visit - a “tour” lasts maybe 20 minutes - but it will leave you in awe.

Designed by architect Chester Lindsay Churchill and built in 1935 for the Christian Science Monitor, the Mapparium is a three-story globe made up of 608 colored glass panels. Visitors walk through the globe on a bridge and basically stand there, in wonder, as the tour guide describes how it was constructed. Other than a four-year cleaning and restoration that concluded in 2002, the Mapparium hasn't been updated since it opened. So the world as it was in 1935 - with countries that included Siam and Italian East Africa - is what you see there. A brief light-and-sound show helps keep the kids interested.

Because the globe is made of flat glass panels, the Mapparium is interesting acoustically. If you stand at one end and whisper, a person at the other end will hear you as though you were standing next to her. My kids and I had a blast whispering “booga booga” to each other once the official part of the tour was over.

When you're done with the Mapparium, you can explore other parts of the library. The Hall of Ideas, in the building's beautiful neoclassical hall, features a mesmerizing water fountain where quotes and words are projected from high above. The Quest Gallery, which includes interactive exhibits about Eddy's life, compelled my kids to spend way too much time dragging images around on a computer and projecting their “artwork” onto a giant screen.

Creature feature

Who: Globe columnist Joanna Weiss; her husband, Dan DeLeo; and their kids, Ava, 6, and Jesse, 2

What: Hunting for frogs and other critters

Where: Borderland State Park, North Easton

We've always tried to teach our kids that nature isn't gross, but I have to admit that this principle is much easier to uphold in the spring, when our intersection with the natural world extends beyond the silverfish in the bathroom sink. Now that bugs are running around outside where they belong, they're available for nonstop entertainment. Jesse will spend hours staring at the ants that swarm the walkway. After one rainstorm, both kids spent a fruitful evening transferring snails from the sidewalk to a rock.

There's more to see in a park, of course, and even more in a pond. So we were thrilled to discover that at Borderland State Park, on the Sharon/Easton line, you can go on an in-depth critter-hunting expedition. At the ranger's office, we borrowed a "ponding kit," which is essentially a small collection of tools: two nets, two guidebooks to pond life, a large plastic bin for scooping water and muck, and a small plastic container with a magnifying glass on top. We carried it down a hill and soon arrived at Leach Pond, a pristine-looking spot lined with rocks and surrounded by vernal pools.

We had come a little early in the season - the weather was so great we couldn't bear to be inside - so the abundance of spring life, the bountiful nymphs and tadpoles, hadn't much materialized yet. Still, it took surprisingly little time for Ava to spot a frog in a vernal pool. Eventually, we managed to catch it in a net, where it sat cooperatively for several minutes before jumping out and swimming gracefully away. After that, Jesse kept shouting, "I see a froggie! Do you see a froggie?" Alas, it was wishful thinking.

We did, however, see some beautiful ferns, some small deceased fish that had likely been used for bait (but still got the kids excited), and, in a different vernal pool, some tiny fairy shrimp. When I first scooped them up to show Ava, I thought they might be tadpoles. Through the magnifying glass, they looked more like a cross between a crustacean and a potato bug, with bulging bellies, weenie heads, and tiny, waving legs. They were not the loveliest creatures in the world. But they definitely weren't gross.

The end

Who: Globe features editor Steve Greenlee; his wife, Kelly; and their three children, ages 8-11

What: Nature walk

Where: World's End, Hingham



The 251 pristine acres that jut out into Hingham Harbor and the Weir River constitute one of the Boston area's finest natural jewels - and one of my family's favorite spots to spend an afternoon. We visited World's End for the first time several Mother's Days ago, and its quiet beauty keeps drawing us back.

We find something new each time we return. We start out by ambling along the carriage roads and trails but inevitably veer off when something distracts us. So much exists here: verdant fields; abundant woods; shoreline covered with shale, seaweed, shells, and the carcasses of horseshoe crabs; egrets sunning themselves in the coves; red-winged blackbirds alighting in the forest;

parents hiking with kids; runners with iPods; young couples walking corgis, pugs, and Great Danes; elderly couples holding hands.

What a shame it would have been had any of the original plans for this land - a 163-house subdivision; the United Nations headquarters; a nuclear power plant - come to fruition. We are indebted to the visionaries who stepped in and saved it for us 43 years ago.

This place is growing on our kids as they grow up. When we started coming here, they complained about the length of the hike. Now they look forward to what's around each bend. Last weekend they lingered along the beaches at the causeway and the sandbar - skipping rocks across the water, watching the tide push the water toward the shore, photographing one another. Near Planters Hill, we spotted what at first looked like a duckling at the edge of the woods. But so far from the water? No, wait! It's a baby turkey. And look - there are two of them. No, four! No, a dozen! And then we saw the mother, walking slowly into the woods, calling her babies away from the humans. Off they went. But it was OK. We will be back. And when we return, we will find something new.