

# TRAVEL

## FAMILY TRAVEL

# Autism-friendly destinations abound

## How the travel industry is supporting families with children on the spectrum

LISA KADANE  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

At Surfside Beach, warm waves crash onto powdery sand that stretches for miles. My 14-year-old son jumps each curl of white foam with enthusiasm, hands flapping in excitement. Bennett, who has autism, loves beaches and the sensory stimulation provided by big waves and soft sand.

He could stay in the water for hours.

There are surf breaks backed by windblown dunes up and down the eastern seaboard, but Surfside Beach and neighbouring Myrtle Beach, S.C., are the first officially autism-friendly beach destinations in the United States.

Their commitment to inclusion goes far beyond the therapy provided by immersion in nature, and makes it easier for families like ours to enjoy a vacation.

Many restaurants, hotels and attractions in the area are autism-certified through the Champion Autism Network (CAN). Becky Large, who has a son on the spectrum, started the non-profit organization in Surfside Beach after moving here in 2012.

She realized the travel destination didn't provide much support for local families — let alone tourists — whose children had been diagnosed with the developmental delay.

Autism is believed to affect one in 50 Canadian kids and youth, according to the latest report by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and it impacts how they interact with others, behave, communicate and learn.

CAN began by offering sensory-friendly movies for families, with dim lights and quieter sound, and grew to include measures at restaurants, hotels and attractions. In 2016, the Surfside Beach town council issued a proclamation that the destination was "autism friendly."

"We started inviting all autism families to come play at the beach," says Large. Staff at participating businesses now complete online training to better understand autism, and how they can recognize and support someone with the condition. An autism-friendly hotel would endeavour to check a family into a room far from the noisy ice machine and elevators, for example, while a restaurant could seat them in a quiet booth.

"A person with autism might have a tantrum or meltdown, so a restaurant could prepare to put the food in to-go boxes, before it's even come out," explains Large of the considerations that could be taken.

This effort toward inclusion isn't unique to the Grand Strand, South Carolina's 97-kilometre arc of pristine beaches on the Atlantic Coast. It's part of a larger tourism industry trend, which is also seeing all-inclusive resorts like Beaches in the Caribbean and cruise lines such as Royal Caribbean offer dedicated programming tailored to travellers



An aerial view of Myrtle Beach, in the heart of South Carolina's Grand Strand coast.

KRUCK20  
GETTY IMAGES



The writer and her son, on a meditative paddle along the Waccamaw River.

LISA KADANE

on the spectrum.

In addition to Surfside Beach and Myrtle Beach, cities like Mesa, Arizona, and Palm Springs, Calif., are aiming for destination-wide certification of hotels, restaurants and attractions, too.

Speaking from my own experience going places with Bennett, it's a welcome shift. It's a relief to travel among other families who "get it," and to know that staff understand my kid's quirks and won't give me stink-eye if he has an outburst.

With a growing number of options now available, there are certified autism travel professionals to help families plan and book a holiday.

Victoria, B.C.-based autism travel adviser Angela Faminoff points clients toward destinations that are a good fit for their needs and interests. Since a whopping 87 per cent of families with a member on the autism spectrum don't travel at all, according to a study by autism credentialing agency IBCCES, Faminoff's job is to help families feel comfortable enough to leave home.

"That's where I come in and say, 'Let's look at these places because your child will be embraced,'" says Faminoff, who calls restaurants, hotels and attractions in advance to

make sure they can accommodate her families.

"It takes that pressure off," she says. "It's hard enough to plan your own trip, but when you have a child

### HOW TO PLAN AN AUTISM-FRIENDLY TRIP

**Choose an inclusive place** Both [championautismnetwork.com](http://championautismnetwork.com) and [autismtravel.com](http://autismtravel.com) list destinations, attractions and hotels/resorts that are autism-certified or autism-friendly.

**Book with a specially trained expert** Consider using a certified autism travel professional (CATP) to help plan and book your trip. You can search the registry at [ibcces.org](http://ibcces.org).

**Prepare your child pre-departure** This could entail making a story, or document with words and pictures that tell and show where you'll be staying and what you'll be doing. Include any travel requirements, like COVID testing, so there won't be any surprises. (If wearing a mask in-flight is an issue for your child, you can request an exemption from this rule through your airline.)

with autism or an intellectual disability, that adds an extra layer."

In Surfside Beach and Myrtle Beach, families can get support with a CAN card, which can be requested online and discreetly lets staff know that someone in the party has autism.

We use our card at Johnny D's Waffles and are seated in a quiet corner booth. When it's time to pay for breakfast, the card also gets us a 10 per cent discount. Owner Jamie Daskalis has a 10-year-old son with autism, so it was important to her that her three restaurants participate.

"We let autism families jump to the front of the line and expedite their food, and if they need to bring outside food in, we allow that," says Daskalis, who wants to make it easy for families to dine together. Johnny D's even has noise-cancelling headphones available to borrow if the restaurant is busy and loud.

A number of area attractions are autism-certified, too. We get front-of-the-line privileges at the SkyWheel (kids with autism notoriously hate waiting in long queues), and are soon spinning high above the beach, with views of the ocean, boardwalk and rides that make Myrtle Beach a family magnet.

Ripley's Aquarium of Myrtle Beach holds regular sensory-friendly days and even has a quiet room (with a private view of the shark tunnel), where overwhelmed kids can go to decompress. We visit in the evening when the crowds have thinned out, and we basically have the soothing fish tanks to ourselves.

But more than built attractions, my son loves nature, and this part of South Carolina delivers beyond the beach. On our final day, we head out on a kayak tour to look for critters like the American alligator in the cypress swamp along the edge of the Waccamaw River. Hastings Hensel, a guide with Black River Outdoors, says they get a number of guests with autism and I can see why.

Seated in the front of our tandem kayak, Bennett is calm and engaged during the meditative two-hour paddle beneath cypress trees and swamp oaks dripping with Spanish moss. We spot a bright yellow prothonotary warbler flitting between the branches of a gum tree, a green heron looking for fish, and an osprey circling above its nest. Bennett is even convinced he sees an alligator lurking in the shallows, but it's just a log bobbing in the tea-coloured water.

Still, Bennett's two favourite things in South Carolina? "The alligator and the big waves."

With its fine balance of nature's therapy and autism-certified businesses, it's easy to see why families like ours are coming to play at the beach.

WRITER LISA KADANE TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF VISIT MYRTLE BEACH AND DISCOVER SOUTH CAROLINA, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.

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