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Designer
Rachel
Gordon at
Rainbow
Row

Charleston

An insiders' guide to the Holy City

Words **LISA KADANE**

TRAVELING *on the* SPECTRUM

FOR NATIONAL AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH,
A WRITER AND HER SON VISIT MESA, ARIZONA,
THE FIRST AUTISM-CERTIFIED DESTINATION IN THE COUNTRY



MY 12-YEAR-OLD SON AND I plod along a rocky trail on horseback through Tonto National Forest in southwest Arizona.

When we stop to perch on a ridge overlooking Saguaro Lake and the red rock face of the Bulldog Cliffs, it suddenly starts pouring rain. Usually, I'd laugh at the absurdity of a downpour in the middle of the Sonoran Desert, but my son, Bennett, has autism, and, like today's weather, his neurodevelopmental condition can reveal itself in unpredictable ways. A simple thing like rain might be mundane to the average family, but it can spell doom for ones like mine. We know how quickly a moment can spiral from calm to catastrophic and derail a vacation with a montage of dirty looks from those around us. I'm now terrified Bennett will start screaming for the rain to stop and spook his horse.

But his sturdy steed is reassuringly tethered to our guide, Kevin Patterson. Bennett doesn't seem to mind a little water and gamely ducks his head to avoid hitting sodden paloverde branches that droop over the trail.

"How're you doing, Bennett?" asks Kevin, turning around in his saddle to make eye contact.

"Good."

"Are you having fun?"

"Yeah."

Kevin is head wrangler and stable manager for the Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch, and he takes the weather and Bennett's one-word answers in stride. It seems a small gesture, but Kevin's repeated attempts to engage with my son distract him from the rain and give me a warm fuzzy feeling—he's trying. All too often people ignore my son once they realize he's different. Despite the steady drizzle, we ease into a comfortable rhythm along the trail. Kevin points out ironwood trees and saguaro cactuses, and tells us to steer clear of the jumping cholla, a cactus that seemingly launches itself at passersby, pricking jeans or boots if you get too close.

After the ride, we warm up by the fireplace inside the cozy great room at the Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch. A year earlier, Bennett refused to enter our lodge in the Grand Canyon because he was terrified of all the taxidermy. But now, after showing him photos of the ranch in the weeks leading up to our trip, Bennett's fascinated with the deer and javelina heads mounted on the walls.



The writer and her son, Bennett, horseback riding in Tonto National Forest. Right and previous page: Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch

THE SAGUARO LAKE GUEST RANCH IS one of nine properties in Mesa, Arizona, that have recently trained staff in autism awareness and sensitivity. More than 50 of the city's businesses, including attractions, restaurants, the parks department, and even the police force, have also undergone autism certification through the IBCCES, an international credentialing agency. The nearly yearlong effort has turned Mesa into the first autism-certified travel destination in the U.S.

Mesa's initiative was born out of a vacation-gone-sideways experienced by Marc Garcia, CEO of the city's tourism board. A few years ago, he was travelling in Southern California with his son, who has autism. Instead of playing it safe with beach days and condo dinners, the Garcia family attempted a packed itinerary of museum visits and restaurant meals, which overwhelmed his son.

"It was a really bad week for Mason. He had meltdown after meltdown and we got those stares—those really uncomfortable stares, the mumbled whispers," the tourism CEO recalls. "And this wasn't necessarily coming



Kits containing earplugs, weighted lap pads, sunglasses and fidget toys help sensitive individuals cope with sensory stimulation.

from other guests at the hotel or at the restaurant or at the attraction. It was from hospitality industry professionals—people in my business who ought to know better.”

It was an aha moment. He realized front-line staff need a basic understanding of autism, the fastest growing developmental disorder in the United States, affecting one in 59 children. The main goal of the training has been to not just educate hospitality workers about the condition, but to also cultivate empathy toward travelers with sensory or cognitive differences.

Now, with major resorts (Sheraton Mesa Hotel at Wrigleyville West, Hilton Phoenix/Mesa), museums (i.d.e.a. Museum, Arizona Museum of Natural History), outdoor tour

companies (Riverbound Sports, Longbow Golf Club) and several accessible playgrounds, Mesa is well-positioned to attract travelers on the spectrum.

“We want to be a destination known as totally inclusive and accommodating to all disabilities,” says Garcia, who hopes more cities will follow suit. “I’d like to see us lead the way.”

I can relate to the Garcia family’s story. My husband and I, along with our teenage daughter, have been traveling with Bennett since he was little. We’re all too familiar with fellow travelers giving us side-eye during crying jags on the plane, and in numerous restaurants when Bennett repeatedly (and loudly) demanded French fries. During a trip to Disneyland when he was 6, he experienced an epic meltdown after the nightly parade and a laser light show sent him into sensory overload. Many children with autism process sensory input differently, by either over- or under-reacting to sound, light, touch, taste or smell, and Bennett is no exception. We wished our fairy godmother would show up, wave her magic wand and make us all disappear.

Since his autism diagnosis at age 4, I try to preempt these moments by preparing Bennett for our travels in advance. I show him videos and photos of where we’ll be going and what we’ll be doing. But now that we’re in Mesa, it’s reassuring to see how training and support on the other side makes a difference.

Once we’ve warmed up after the horseback ride, Bennett and I drive to an indoor amusement center called Jake’s Unlimited south of downtown Mesa. There’s almost as many lights and bells as in a Las Vegas casino here, and I’m worried Bennett will run for the exit. But during my research, I decided the lure of rides, air hockey and a buffet with pizza would outweigh my son’s aversion to loud video-game consoles. (It did!)

Because there are a lot of sensory triggers here, Jake’s Unlimited is in the process of implementing a rating system for different parts of the facility, along with kits containing earplugs, weighted lap pads, sunglasses and fidget toys to help sensitive individuals cope with the sensory stimulation.

“Our initial thought was that nobody with autism would want to come here—we thought the lights would be a huge problem,” says sales director Bryan Maxwell, as we steer clear of the noisy arcade segment. “Now, we have groups with autism coming in all the time.” >



Left: Penguins swimming at OdySea Aquarium. Right: Sensory-friendly signs at Phoenix Zoo



Eighteen miles north in neighboring Scottsdale, OdySea Aquarium also recognized how its built environment could pose challenges for guests with autism. After undergoing autism certification, the facility adjusted the volume in the exhibit spaces and transitioned the lights to fade out rather than abruptly flash off. The aquarium also turned two of its multipurpose rooms into quiet rooms where visitors can go for a sensory break.

“You take for granted how something you’re desensitized to might be a trigger for someone else,” says aquarium education director Jessica Peranteau. “Now, not only do we have the knowledge, but we also have the ability to offer a solution.”

When Bennett and I visit the aquarium one afternoon, we spend a long time watching the penguins, Bennett’s favorite marine animal, as they chase each other through the water in mesmerizing arcs and circles. We steer clear of the Stingray Touch Pool because Bennett says they’re “too slimy.” I take a chance with the rotating aquarium, where families sit in a moving theater that simulates a submarine dive and travel past shark and sea lion exhibits. But within two minutes of sitting down, the piped-in sounds of water pressure and sonar beeps start to agitate Bennett. “I want to leave!” he yells.

Before I can locate the theater exit, a staff member quickly leads us to the nearest door and we regroup in one of the quiet rooms. Bennett plays with fidget toys in one, and watches, enthralled, as sharks and rays glide past a giant aquarium wall in the other. I sigh in relief.

ADAPTATIONS LIKE THESE ARE potentially game-changing and could be just the incentive a family needs to hit the road. Travel is supposed to be a bridge that connects cultures, educates kids about the world and brings families closer together. But for parents raising a child with autism, travel can be a barrier. In fact, 87 percent of families with a child on the spectrum don’t travel at all, according to a study by the IBCCES.

Part of the reluctance to board a plane or a train is that break with routine—most kids with autism prefer structure to spontaneity. Another fear is the journey into the unknown,

Eighty-seven percent of families with a child on the spectrum don’t travel at all.

where an unusually long line at an amusement park or loud sounds and bright lights inside a theater might trigger a tantrum. But even worse are the responses from people who don’t understand why your child is misbehaving and believe he or she should know better.

To keep Bennett happy and on his best behavior, I’ve become an expert at planning ahead. For this trip, I researched activities that would balance sensory regulation in the great outdoors—horseback riding, kayaking and hiking—with built attractions like the aquarium and indoor amusement center.

In the city’s recently published Autism Travel brochure, there’s a listing of Certified >



Autism Centers across Mesa to help families with this legwork. Some of the attractions and parks have developed “sensory guides” so parents can decide if a museum or playground is right for their child based on its impact to the five senses. Through these tools I realized the loud and menacing animatronic dinosaurs inside the Arizona Museum of Natural History would scare Bennett. Instead, we opt for the Phoenix Zoo, which has designated quiet areas and provides us with a sensory bag packed with fidgets and a set of headphones.

I also created a “social story” about the trip with simple text and images to read with Bennett in the weeks leading up to our departure. I’ve found this kind of front-loading is crucial to a successful holiday. Basically, Bennett knew we’d be horseback riding—rain or shine—so he went with the program.

But little things on the ground have smoothed our travels and tugged at my heartstrings. I’m floored when Marc Rosen, the chef at the Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch, cuts Bennett’s dinner into bite-size pieces because he lacks the fine motor skills to do it himself. I feel immense gratitude when a respite provider from Copa Health takes Bennett to Riverview Park to play with him on the climbing structure and spinner. This gives me an hour to enjoy an adult lunch, and Bennett returns with a big smile.

Left: Red twirling chairs at Mesa Arts Center
Right: Bennett on the Vista Trail hike in Utery Mountain Regional Park

*The chef cuts
Bennett’s dinner into
bite-size pieces
because he lacks the
fine motor skills to
do it himself.*



Other than the downpour on our first day, the sun shines bright during the remainder of our time in Mesa. Together, we hike the Merkle Trail, a wide, accessible loop in Utery Mountain Regional Park. We lean in to read the interpretive signs about cactuses and the geology of the surrounding mountains.

Bennett has saved most of his smiles for this hike—he loves being on foot in the desert landscape, testing cactus spines with a tentative finger and chasing plump quails down the trail.

We veer off the easy path and hoof it up the Vista Trail. At the top, we see the Superstition Mountains in the distance, separated from us by a forest of saguaros, paloverde trees and mesquite bushes that almost seem too green to be considered part of the desert.

“From the air, it all looks brown,” our guide, Kevin, had told us during the trail ride two days prior. “But you get down into it and it’s full of life.”

It’s unexpected, kind of like my son, who has been quiet most of our time in Mesa. But I know him well enough to know that silence doesn’t signal apathy. He’s just taking it all in. Once we return home, he can’t wait to reminisce about the penguins and scary submarine sounds, list all the animals we saw at the zoo and tell his dad and sister how we went horseback riding through the desert in the pouring rain. **AW**
visitmesa.com/autism-travel