

Atlanta for Kids

By KIM SEVERSON APRIL 29, 2015



Credit Ted McGrath

The South loves families, and [Atlanta](#) is a shining example of a city dedicated to amusing children. A traveling family with a car and the will to navigate the city's sprawling freeway system can consume a steady diet of lush parks in what some call "the city in a forest." There is a well-regarded zoo and a botanical garden. You'll find rivers, water parks and plenty of Coca-Cola products in the city that is home to the company's headquarters — all of which are especially welcome in the Southern summer heat.

But where's the sport in that? A much more engaging and enriching vacation can be had as a civil rights tourist in a place that once called itself "the city too busy to hate."

Some in your crew might find the idea of walking the same streets as a young Martin Luther King Jr. and delving deep into museums dedicated to African-American history not as much fun as a few days of Disney World. But ignoring the complaints will pay off with a deep and moving dive into a story of racial struggle and triumph, with heroes and villains and, ultimately, a better understanding of a child's place in the world.

Exploring a city on whose streets the civil rights movement played out is a rich gift for a child. A trip framed by a sophisticated look at black history will pay off for years, especially when it comes time to fielding questions about racial justice and the realities of American politics.

Lesson Plan

Building a day based on the 2.7-mile path of the city's new \$98 million electric [streetcar system](#) allows you (and the stroller!) to move easily around downtown and the heart of the historic district dedicated to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.

Until it was shut down in 1949, the streetcar served the Sweet Auburn district on the eastern edge of downtown. The strip of shops and churches made up what was once the wealthiest African-American street in the nation.

The most comprehensive place to begin a civil rights tour is the National Park Service Visitor Center at the [Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site](#), where you can sign up for tours of [Dr. King's birth home](#) a few blocks away and get an overview of the civil rights movement that is tailored specifically for children.

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From there, you can take a short walk to the house, a two-story Queen Anne-style home at 501 Auburn Avenue. Then walk back toward the visitor center (ideal for a bathroom break). Across the street is the [Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change](#), which his wife, Coretta Scott King, established after Dr. King was assassinated on a motel balcony in Memphis.

Outside, a large reflecting pool surrounds the couple's tombs. Inside, the displays are a little run-down, but they contain some appealing personal artifacts, like Dr. King's traveling Bible, his work boots and even bottles of his cologne.

When the going gets tough (and so humid it feels as if a wet duck is sitting on your face), it will be time to head to the original [Ebenezer Baptist Church](#), where Dr. King and his father preached and where his funeral was held.

The wooden pews, walls and pulpit were restored to historical accuracy a few years ago. It is cool inside and often not crowded. It's a nice place to sit in a pew and listen to Dr. King's speeches, which run in a loop over the church sound system.

A stark but fascinating look at the early African-American experience is a short two stops away on the streetcar at the [APEX \(African-American Panoramic Experience\) Museum](#). Be warned that the museum has several life-size reproductions of the conditions slaves endured, including how people were packed into slave ships. Some young visitors might not be prepared to see them, but it is easy to steer them toward the low-tech but rich displays about African culture, including a deep look at prominent African-American inventors. You can learn everything from how a black engineer came up with the traffic light to how Michael Jackson created some of his coolest special effects for video to the inspiration behind the Super Soaker water gun.

Snack Time

Families who can never decide on one restaurant will be overjoyed at the offerings found inside the [Sweet Auburn Curb Market](#), which has its own stop on the streetcar. Inside the large warehouse, you can wander past meat shops, produce stands and restaurants. Children can eat Italian pasta and cheesy Venezuelan arepas or spicier Jamaican meat patties. The Metro Deli Soul Food hot bar, with a reliable rotation of fried chicken, greens and barbecue, is perhaps more thematically appealing, but there are also plenty of healthier options.

A hidden but favorite respite for a little refreshment is a couple of blocks past Dr. King's birth home. The tiny, colorful [LottaFrutta](#) offers the magic child-friendly combination of Latin-style fruit cups and grilled sandwiches with meat and cheese.

A couple of blocks even farther east is the new [Krog Street Market](#), with Xocolatl Small Batch Chocolate, and Grand Champion Barbecue, which presents an opportunity to eat excellent Southern barbecue, both brisket and pulled pork. Nonmeat eaters will like Yalla, a falafel stand, or the offerings at Craft, a Japanese izakaya restaurant. Parents in need of a little fortification will find plenty at Hop City Beer and Wine.

Recess

At this point, children will either need to run around or sit down. It might be a good time to make your way by foot to the Atlanta BeltLine, a reclaimed ring of trails and parks that connects to the area near the Krog Street Market.

The BeltLine will eventually connect all of Atlanta in what has become a civic improvement project as beloved as the High Line in New York.

A hike along the trail will get you to the [Historic Fourth Ward Park](#), 680 Dallas Street Northeast, with its splash park and a new playground with a bouncy surface and lots of climbing toys and unusual swings. A bonus is a nearby artificial lake with ducks for feeding.

If a walk or a drive isn't on the agenda, rent a bike at [Atlanta Beltline Bicycle](#) along the beltway and ride all the way to [Piedmont Park](#), which is essentially Atlanta's Central Park.

Atlanta is a festival-happy city, and the odds are good you might find one in full force at the park. There are also two top-flight playgrounds, including the only one designed by the sculptor Isamu Noguchi in connection with the High Museum of Art, the city's premier art institution.

If the weather or the energy level of your children makes a day outdoors less appealing, take the streetcar all the way downtown to the massive tourist-industrial complex that centers on Centennial Olympic Park and is the part of town that attracts by far the most tourists.

The streetcar stops at the entrance to [Centennial Olympic Park](#), 21 acres designed as the heart of the 1996 Summer Olympics (and also the site of the fatal bombing during the games). The park is a hub that connects some of the greatest hits for families. I have never gone wrong taking my own child or visiting families to the nearby [Georgia Aquarium](#). Crowds can sometimes be daunting, but the chance to smile at beluga whales and see a rare whale shark up close is worth it. The Georgia Explorer exhibit, with touch tanks and sea turtles, is especially good for kids. There is also a dancing dolphin show, if you're into that kind of thing.

Other pro tips from the area: If your children are in the mood for a branded media experience, head to the steel-and-glass architectural wonder that is the [CNN Center](#). The global news operation rings a mall whose atrium is several stories overhead. The CNN tour features a ride on what has been billed as the world's longest free-standing escalator. And as a bonus, snap a souvenir shot of your child behind the anchor desk.

Where to Set Up Base

Downtown Atlanta is filled with plenty of hotel space. Still, it can feel isolating at night when the city seems to shut down. Better to book a room in Midtown, which has more street life, is walking distance to Piedmont Park and offers easier access (by cab or car) to the [High Museum of Art](#), 1280 Peachtree Street NE, and the [Center for Puppetry Arts](#), 1404 Spring Street NW, which is the best in its class and offers both terrific shows and a puppet-making workshop.

How to Feed Picky Eaters

Atlanta is chain heaven, so it is likely there will be something even the pickiest child will like. And since the city is so dependent on car travel, drive-throughs abound. But the new Southern food revival has elevated many of the city's independent restaurants and expanded its farmers' markets, including a good one on Saturdays at the [Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum](#), 441 Freedom Parkway.

Unlike a lot of cities, there are not eating opportunities on every city street corner, so pick up some fresh fruit or an extra order of barbecue or fried chicken when you have the chance.

Where to Find a Potty

The South loves its families, so it is a rare store or restaurant that won't let a child use the restroom. Churches abound, and ducking into one is always a reliable restroom option. Don't forget to fill your water bottle, while you are at it.

Which Must-Sees to Miss

Avoid the marketing hype of the World of Coca-Cola and the worn Children's Museum. You may find the former disappointing, and a visit will just add more sugar to your children's diet. The latter is more like a play space than an educational experience and the exhibits are sometimes broken.

Where to Take a Field Trip

The City of Decatur, population about 20,000, shares a boundary with the city. It's essentially the Brooklyn of Atlanta, but with fewer hipsters and more strollers. The center of town is called "The Square." It serves as a base camp for eating, play and shopping, which should include a visit to the [Little Shop of Stories](#), a great bookstore that is a regular stop on the book tour circuit for some of the best children's authors in the nation.

Families looking for a really local experience should head to the Decatur Toy Park at the corner of East Ponce de Leon Avenue and Nelson Ferry Road. It's owned by a church and is the repository for seemingly every plastic wheeled vehicle and playhouse outgrown by the city's toddlers.