Singapore

By CRIS PRYSTAY
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With its clean and green environment, Singapore is a great place for kids. There's lots to do, with a range of activities suitable for teens right down to my one-year-old toddler, Nikita. The biggest challenge is deciding how much a family can pack in on a short holiday.

Day One

9 a.m.
Go by taxi to Sentosa Island, Singapore's main beach area. Free buses and trams loop the island, giving easy access to different attractions. There's a host of fun things for kids to do here, including a luge ride, a trapeze (don't worry, there are harnesses and a safety net), a minigolf course and three beaches: Tanjong, Siloso and Palawan. All three have showers and locker rooms. Some of the attractions are a little far apart, so it's a good idea to log onto Sentosa's Web site and download a map, then figure out what you want to hit and in what order. Most of the activities are a bit too advanced for our toddler, so we headed to Underwater World -- a great place for both babies and bigger kids. At the entrance, there's an interactive stingray feeding pool -- $3 buys a box of fish parts for hand-feeding the rays. Next, we caught a flat travelator that takes you through an 83-meter-long clear acrylic tunnel past several pools of tropical fish, rays and sharks indigenous to Southeast Asia. Schools of large silver trevalli and leopard sharks swim beside you and overhead -- seemingly so close you can touch their bellies. I'm a scuba diver and you see all the marine life -- up close -- that you'd see on a dive trip to Asia's teeming tropical reefs. Nikita liked it so much that we got right back on the travelator for a second trip through the tunnel. There are other exhibits, but this is the highlight. The entry ticket also admits you to the dolphin lagoon, which is three tram stops away.

If you want to splash out an extra $150, you can book a swim-with-the-dolphins session for your child (it's open to kids 6 years and up). They'll learn some hand signals, swim with the dolphins, and even be able to hold
onto a fin for a ride. Underwater World also has a "dive with the sharks" experience, which costs S$95 and is open to anyone 12 years and older. These sessions must be booked in advance.

12:00
We were hungry, so we headed out onto the beach in search of food. The nearby Rasa Sentosa Resort has several restaurants; we settled on the Trapizza, an Italian restaurant next to a circus trapeze ride attraction. The pizzas we ordered were tasty and reasonably priced. The restaurant is right on the beach, so older kids can go for a dip or try out the trapeze while parents have a drink on the terrace.

2:00
If you've come to Sentosa by cab, a fun way to leave is by cable car. Make your way to the Imbiah Lookout station by bus or tram to catch the cable car (S$10.90 for adults, S$5.50 for kids). For a little extra money, you can get a cable car with a glass bottom, offering an even more exciting view of the island and harbor.

2:30
You could spend a whole day at Sentosa, but for most visitors to Singapore, shopping is on the agenda. Orchard Road is the main shopping district, and while this is boring for most children, there are a few places to divert their attention while you do a bit of browsing.

Paragon shopping mall has a small indoor playground on the fifth floor, which is where the toy shops and kids clothing stores are located. There's also a money changer, ATM and grocery store on the basement level, tony designer shops on the first floor, and midrange clothing stores on the third and fourth levels -- so you can cover a lot of ground in one place. To boot, there are dedicated nursing rooms on the third and fifth floors. Across the road is Ngee Ann City, a large mall that includes the Takashimaya department store, which has a spacious nursing and changing room on the third floor, next to the children's clothing section. The mall also houses the massive Kinokuniya bookstore and a range of clothing shops that cover most price points.

4:00
This time of day is perfect for a picnic in Singapore's Botanic Gardens: The searing heat is starting to wane and the leafy trees provide plenty of shade. The gardens just launched a dedicated children's garden, which is open to kids under 12 (and their parents, of course). The area includes a sensory garden, where kids can learn about plants by smell and touch; a treehouse built around banyan trees and equipped with slides and ladders; and a shrubbery maze that is continually reconfigured with movable gates. The highlight for my toddler was the fountain splash park, so bring a swimsuit and a towel. Warning: It is hard to find changing tables here, despite this being a garden aimed at
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younger children. After struggling to change Nikita's diaper on a bench in the women's bathroom, staff told me the washroom for disabled visitors is equipped with a changing table (although there is no sign indicating that on the door). The Botanic Gardens is large and has a few entrances; if you are approaching the park from Orchard Road, the closest entrance is the Tanglin Gate, and the new Jacob Ballas Children's Garden is at least a 20-minute walk from there, on the Bukit Timah Road side of the park. If you're cabbing it, you might want to ask your driver to drop you directly at the Children's Garden, which is on Kheam Hock Road, just off Bukit Timah Road.

6:00
If the kids are up for a trip out to dinner, try the Newton Food Centre. Located a five-minute cab ride from Orchard Road, this fixture is easy to get to. Hawker food is part of Singapore's culture, and eating here offers a real slice of local life.

Our favorite dishes here include barbecued stingray (ask for less sambal, a type of chili paste, if your kids don't like hot food), Hokkien mee, a mild, velvety noodle dish served with prawns that everyone will love (the ubiquitous sambal is served on the side so you don't need to mix it in), and, of course, satay. Even fussy kids enjoy chicken satay, which is cooked on skewers over coals and served with a peanut sauce. Make sure to order fresh coconuts to drink.

Seafood dishes are expensive at Newton. For crayfish and Singapore's signature chili crab, it's best to go to the East Coast Seafood Centre (both Jumbo Seafood and No Signboard Seafood are excellent restaurant choices). The dining is relaxed and casual, so come in your flip-flops and take the kids for a stroll along the beach before dinner.

If you've got a tot who needs to go to bed by 7 p.m., or kids who wrinkle their noses at anything new or exotic, you might want to consider staying at the Trader's Hotel. Ah Hoi's Kitchen, the hotel's poolside cafe, serves a range of Singaporean classics, so at least mom and dad can sample the fare. Ah Hoi's is a local institution, so you can be sure you aren't getting a bland tourist version of the real thing. The hotel has other restaurants (and room service) that provide Western fare for kids who are unadventurous on the food front. Traders Hotel is on Cuscaden Road, just off the top of Orchard Road, and is a short cab ride to the main strip of malls, such as the Paragon, and walking distance to the Botanic Gardens.

Day Two

9 a.m.
Tours are often dull affairs for children, but Singapore's "Duck Tour" is different. It takes place in a vehicle that can travel on both land and water and goes on an hour-long ride that covers the colonial civic district -- then plunges through some trees into the water for a harbor tour.

11:00
Just before lunch, we took a quick taxi ride to Tanglin Village, a set of newly renovated heritage buildings on Dempsey Road. This strip has been home to warehouse-style teak-furniture stores for years, but a host of trendy cafes and bars has opened in the past year. For families, it's trade-off time: Parents get to shop and the
kids get to play. The first stop is Go Go Bambini, a zone featuring a multilevel playscape complex that is heaven for kids between the ages of 2 and 11. For kids under 2, there's a small padded play area and a pit full of balls to play in that my toddler loves. There's a restaurant inside Go Go Bambini, complete with a kids' menu, so everyone can eat lunch here -- and mom and dad can sip some wine while the kids play. Once the kids have burned off some steam, check out the teak-furniture stores and oriental carpet shops as well as the art galleries that are clustered here.

3:00
It was time to go Singapore's Zoo, which is famous for its "no bars" landscaping (animals are kept in natural and green compounds, hemmed in by cleverly crafted ravines instead of bars or mesh). The animals are close and easy to see. Shortly after you enter the zoo, look out for the orangutans that swing through the branches over the walkways. You can also take the kids for an elephant ride, near the orangutan exhibit. One exhibit that is a must for all children, including babies, is the Fragile Forest. Gentle animals, such as lemurs, tiny mouse deer and bright blue pheasants, wander and fly freely in this large enclosed leafy compound. (Tip: Look carefully in the shrubbery, at knee height, as you walk around the main path). There are also several butterfly feeding stations that draw myriad exotic butterflies within eye level of toddlers. At Children's World, there's a large playground with swings, slides and a splash park -- a great way to cool off from the tropical heat -- so bring swimsuits and towels. Feeding time for many animals is around 4:30, so late afternoon is a good time to visit. At about the same time, handlers bring the orangutans down for photo sessions. The zoo closes at 6 p.m., then reopens later for a Night Safari, which is a fun experience for older kids.

6:30
If your kids are up for another meal out, but you want air conditioning and affordable prices -- and maybe to squeeze in some last-minute shopping -- the food court at Wisma Atria, a mall on Orchard Road, is worth a visit. Unlike a typical mall food court, there's a range of Asian fare in mini-restaurants, each with its own seating, that line one side, alongside food court-style stalls. Look for the stall selling Hokkien mee: It's one of the best in Singapore. You can also get burgers and other grilled food here.

--Cris Prystay is a Singapore-based writer.

Write to Cris Prystay at cris.prystay@wsj.com

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